



I want to tell you a story about an encounter I had at a hotel bar in Lancaster California. I appreciate that at first it doesn't appear to have anything to do with System Safety. Trust me, I think you will agree that perhaps there is an important lesson for us and the Society.

On the first day of May I started on a long, slow trip along some of the backroads of America – just to see what I might see. On the fifth day after leaving my home near Sacramento I finally made it to Palmdale where I got a room in the Doubletree hotel.

After checking in and resting a bit I went downstairs to get a glass of wine and see about getting dinner. The bar was quite stark and “sterile” feeling. It was all white - white walls, white bar top, white tables. The room was empty except for two guys sitting at opposite ends of the bar eating dinner and staring at their cellphones. A baseball game was playing on the television, but nobody was paying attention. There was no opportunity to start up a conversation or even make a friendly gesture. Rather dejected, and a bit lonely after five days on the road, I realized I was exhausted and it was best to just have a glass of wine, eat a simple dinner, and go to bed early.

Before I could finish my dinner a big, older gentleman (Whitney) came in and took the middle seat at the bar. He ordered a drink and dinner – then sat up straight, leaned back and started singing! He just flat belted out a song about how to care for a woman. I have been in a lot of bars over the years, but this was the first time that I had seen anyone launch into full-throated song.

After finishing the song, Whitney indicated that he wanted us to sing a few of the backup notes while “we” try it again. Even though I am usually the shy, quiet type I took up the invitation and joined him (not well, but enthusiastically). He paused his singing to give directions to the three of us, indicating who should take the bass lines, who would sing the middle ones and who would take the high notes. I was assigned the middle register because I would normally take the bass and he said that wouldn't be any fun to do what is normal. He moved us all to places in our voices that were uncomfortable for us – and then we all sang! None of this was “normal.” It wasn't pretty, but it was fun.



After our singing finally died down, he quizzed the guy at the right end of the bar about his background. It turns out that this guy was from Ireland, is a part time music producer and full-time engineer working in the aerospace industry. The two of them talked to each other about the position of “producer” in the music industry. I was having a hard time understanding what they were talking about so asked them to explain what a producer is and what they do. That really ignited an interesting discussion.

As Whitney described the role, the producer of a song is the one that guides all aspects of the production, from the initial concept, creation of the lyrics, selection of music, the performers, the details of the performance (pace, style, clothing, lighting, room details, microphone selection – everything), financing, obtaining copyright protection – everything. Whitney explained that Michael Jackson was an example of a performer

that was successful because he was also the producer. He was in total control over all aspects of his productions, getting everyone to do exactly what he needed them to do to achieve his vision.

As an example of “producing” the bar experience that we were in, Whitney “redid” the bar/lounge image. He “put” imaginary poles on a table in the middle of the room and populated them with imaginary pole dancers, he added an imaginary lap dancer to spice things up a bit, and he changed the color scheme and blocked the windows so kiddies wouldn’t see in. Basically, he completely changed the vision of the place just by playing with a few ideas. Perhaps that vision isn’t exactly what the hotel management would like in their family-friendly hotel – but it was an interesting game in that moment and he did a good job of illustrating the possibilities.

Whitney said that he could “produce” me to sing. I scoffed at the possibility of this. I am not known for my musical prowess. He then asked me to sing a note. I just picked one and sang a note. He said to go higher, then a little lower, and a little longer – and finally said, “There, you got to my vision and you now can do that part. I can now concentrate on other parts of the production.”

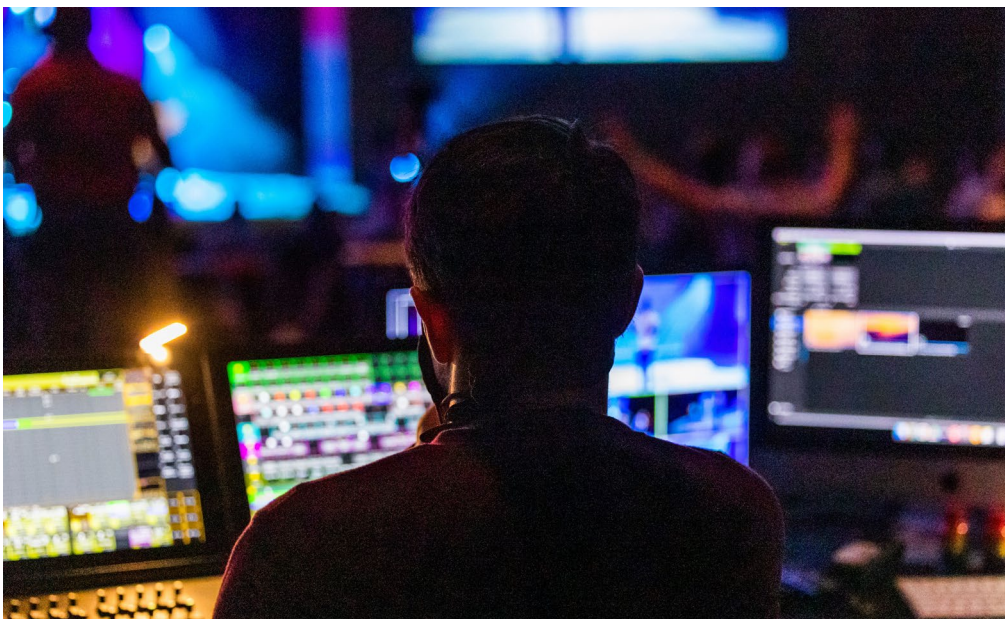
It dawned on me that he was describing what I do when I am “teaching” newly hired engineers in my consulting firm how to be system safety engineers. I tell them what is expected, let them try, and then come back to adjust their efforts until they “get it” – at which point I can turn my attention to other concerns. However, in order to do that I first have to have a clear vision of

the entire business, and their roles and responsibilities within it. I need to know the whole thing, and then I can “produce” an effective business.

In running my engineering consulting firm I am being the “producer” of our services. I had been thinking in terms of being a manager – but it is much more than that. A manager would be tasked with implementing certain parts of “the vision,” but not everything. That is my job as the “producer/owner.” All of the parts of the “show” (the business, finances, staffing, scheduling, services and relationships with our customers) are important and need to be guided for best results. I also realized that is what is missing in the System Safety Society’s management. We don’t have a “producer” that can communicate an appropriate vision, who knows how to help others help him/her achieve that vision, who can ensure that all of the necessary parts are in place and working properly.

It became clear to me that if we are to achieve our shared vision of System Safety in the world we need to find an effective “producer” to guide our individual actions. We need a visionary who has the vision, knowledge, funding and authority to take us forward into the “production” of the System Safety Society.

By the end of the day I was totally blown away. I had started an evening of absolutely nothing, and then something happened... something that has changed my understanding of my life, something that will stay with me far into the future. Lessons come from mysterious places if you just relax and let them happen. 🍷



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