{TITLE} A lesson in success from the hubris of Hollywood

**{Intro} You can learn more about water by studying ice and steam – than studying water itself. The same is true for successful people, writes Dr Ben Laker**

{Body}

We can learn more by studying success and failure than focusing on the norm. So if you want to learn how to be truly successful over time, study the number one outlier: Hollywood.

Hollywood is a strange, inward looking place. Last year, I joined PwC’s US Board Chairman Brian Cullinan for the 89th Academy Awards. Cullinan won’t be returning in 2018 due to “Envelopegate”, but I am.

My problem? I no longer recognise Tinseltown.

Hollywood is reeling. Without a moral compass, it is lost at sea, drifting deeper into uncharted waters with no script, no direction and no final destination. Whilst I accept that America’s greatest export is built on scandal, recent sexual abuse allegations are so seismic they threaten to capsize the unsinkable.

‘Post-Weinstein’ (or PW), the period following *anno domini*that oversaw the great awakening, has shone a light on what I consider the biggest ignominy of all: longitudinal institutional apathy.

Today’s poster-boy of longitudinal institutional apathy is Kevin Spacey. During his 11 years at The Old Vic, 20 individual allegations of inappropriate behaviour were raised. The actor’s star power, which the theatre described as a ‘cult of personality’ contributed to repeated failings; his stardom and status prevented people, particularly junior employees and young actors, from speaking out.

But longitudinal institutional apathy is not exclusive to Hollywood. It is everywhere, it is entrenched and it is embedded. Take former Barclays boss Bob Diamond, who presided over the Libor scandal, or former RBS boss Fred Goodwin, effectively blamed by the Government for starting Britain’s worst recession since the Second World War. Just like Spacey’s reign at the Old Vic, these two ‘super bankers’ behaved with zero concern for repercussions, which ultimately led to their downfall.

So what causes this emergence of terminal hubris? And how can we mitigate against it?

**Balance success with fear of failure**

If you’re going to be the best at what you do, you’ve got to be confident in your skills and talent. But, importantly, this means it is also necessary to keep your ego in check to avoid the alienation of one’s audience or peers. When an individual starts believing their own hype and acting on that instinct, it can affect their actions and decision-making in a most serious way.

My latest research at [Transform Performance International](http://transformperformance.com/), alongside bestselling authors Ian Mills and Mark Ridley, suggests that **success requires a moderate fear of failure because it is the balance of such fear with the desire to excel**. Without this balance, individuals feel they are bulletproof, with nothing to lose or nothing to prove, and this leads to arrogant, reckless or self-absorbed behaviour such as that presented by Spacey and Co.

Their perspective creates compromises and gaps that can only be papered over for so long before the house of cards collapses. Our findings are consistent with The Harvard Business Review, which classifies these types of executives as Surgeons. My 2016 research published alongside Thinkers50’s Alex Hill and Liz Mellon concluded that “Surgeons are both decisive and incisive … they’ve always enjoyed winning and strongly believe that you win if you’re fit, train hard and have the right attitude.” But Surgeons break rules, take risks and sense no boundaries; they are a law unto themselves. They only focus on the here and now, and don’t have time to look at anything else. They may talk a good game, but cause more problems than they solve.

The key to success is moderation: just enough desire, and just enough fear. That’s how high-performers fly. Like a rocket on the launchpad, if you don’t apply enough forward thrust (desire), gravity (fear) will keep you on the ground. When you calibrate these so that desire is stronger than fear, you gain higher altitude. You don’t want to rush into orbit too quickly or the capsule might shake apart. But you don’t want to rise too slowly or you won’t achieve escape velocity. Keep the rocket’s ascent balanced with just the right trajectory and velocity to rise above the world. And be sure to remember the tale of Icarus; don’t fly too close to the sun.

**— Dr Ben Laker (pictured, at the 89th Academy Awards in Hollywood) is co-author of**[***The Salesperson’s Secret Code***](https://lidpublishing.com/book/sales-person-secret-code/)**. Follow him on Twitter @**[**DrBenLaker**](http://www.twitter.com/DrBenLaker)