

Leadership and Safety in Events

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In 2024 I was running the build for a major international tour. The stage was going up around the clock, crews working 24 hours a day, because half the components we needed were stuck in customs and we were already chasing the calendar from behind. We got it built. Then the engineer walked the structure, and it didn't pass.

The show was nearly on top of us, tickets sold and crew booked, on a schedule that had no give left in it. In the room were people with more authority over that event than me, all asking the same thing. What would it take to make it work.

There's a particular kind of pressure in that moment. It doesn't shout, it reasons with you. It points at the calendar and the people who've travelled, and it asks you to be practical. The pressure to find a path to yes is enormous, and most of it comes from good people in a hard spot.

I knew the structure and I knew the numbers. None of that mattered as much as the fact that the people leaning on me weren't being reckless, they were being human. They could see the cost of stopping clearly, and the cost of carrying on was still invisible, because it hadn't happened yet. That's the trap: the risk you can see always feels bigger than the one you can't.

Here's what took me too long to understand. The standard isn't yours to trade, and it doesn't matter who's asking or how senior they are. A stage either holds the load or it doesn't, and an engineer either signs it or they don't. Your job isn't to find the clever route around that. Your job is to protect it.

I haven't always held it. Earlier in my career I was better at finding the workaround than holding the wall. I told myself I was being pragmatic, but really I was frightened of the conversation. Saying no to someone who outranks you is uncomfortable in a way that sits in your chest. Saying yes and hoping is easier, right up until the moment it isn't.

That time, I held it, and holding it was expensive. We took the whole stage down, the one that didn't pass, and rebuilt it with an Australian stage shipped in piece by piece from all over the country. It cost time we didn't have and money nobody wanted to spend. The new structure didn't carry a single person until it met the standard. The show happened, later than planned, on a stage that was actually safe. Nobody remembers the delay now. They'd have remembered the other version.

The thing nobody warns you about leading on site is this. The most senior person in the conversation is often not the most informed one. They own the commercial risk and you own the physical one. Those are not the same job, and the second one does not bend to rank. Authority over an event is not authority over physics, and the load doesn't care who signed the contract.

So how do you hold the line when you're the one being leaned on?

Decide where the line is before the day arrives. Write down what would make you stop, in plain words, while you're calm and nobody's pushing. A standard you set under pressure is just an opinion that folds, while a standard you set in advance is a decision you're keeping. That sheet of paper does the hard work so your tired brain at 05:00 doesn't have to.

Then, when the pressure comes, separate the two questions everyone blurs together. "What would it take to make this work?" is not the same question as "is this safe?". Answer the safety one first, cleanly: yes or no. Then, and only then, talk about what's possible inside that answer. Be as flexible as you like on the how, never on the whether.

And say it out loud, early, to the people who outrank you. Not as a threat and not as an apology, but as information they need to make their call. Most reasonable people, given a clear line and a clear reason, will work with you. The ones who won't have told you something useful about the next job, and better to learn it now, on a stage that's still empty, than later with a crowd in.

None of this makes the moment comfortable. It just means you've done the thinking before you're standing in the dark with everyone looking at you.

Safe first, then smart, then shiny. In that order, every time. The order is the job.