Michael Burke: Making Safer Workplaces, One Person at a Time

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Michael Burke, Lawrence Martin Chair in Business and professor of management, is one of the nation's leading experts on workplace safety training.

Few people can lay claim to as dramatic an origin story as something you might see in the pages of a superhero comic book. Yet that is exactly what happened to Michael Burke, Lawrence Martin Chair in Business and professor of management at Tulane's Freeman School of Business, in the summer of 1975. Just 20 at the time and needing to support himself through college, Burke had taken on a summer job as a laborer transporting gravel to various worksites throughout upstate New York. On that fateful day, Burke was assigned to a transport driver named Steve who had never before driven a large Brockway truck that he was tasked with driving. Instead of proper training, Steve had received a scant 15-minute practice run by the company building before being sent out with Burke to make the delivery.

The two had just reached the top of a mile-long hill when the truck slipped out of gear due to user error. Though designed to lock up while out-of-gear at a low speed mark, the truck's failsafe didn't engage due to the truck's load being over limit: The truck was carrying an estimated 12 tons that day — two tons more than it was designed for, another safety oversight on the part of the hiring company.

"At various points, I considered jumping out of the truck," Burke recalls with a chuckle. As they rapidly approached an intersecting four-lane highway at the base of the hill, the driver was able to steer the truck off the road. As the truck went off the road, it dipped and a snow plow rig mounted to the front of the truck plunged into the ground like a shovel. This brought the truck to an abrupt stop, but the inertia caused much of the gravel load in the back to spill forward and bury Burke and his companion in the truck's cab. Fortunately, the accident was immediately noticed and help promptly arrived. It took about an hour to dig them out, and Burke suffered a busted kneecap while Steve's injuries were a bit more serious, but both lived to tell the tale.

"That led me to think about workplace safety as an important issue," says Burke with almost comedic understatement. The memory of the accident stayed with him until, 20 years later, an opportunity to get involved in workplace safety training and research presented itself.

"Can I do something that could prevent even one accident like with Steve?" Burke remembers asking himself. He felt that if the answer to the question was a "yes," it would be a worthwhile path to take.

From Irish-Style Family Debates to Organizational Behavior

While the accident planted the seeds of Burke's passion for workplace safety, many formative experiences that inform his research and teaching today go even further back to his working class, Irish-Catholic upbringing. Burke's immediate family was part of a larger constellation of many aunts, uncles and relatives, and with the exception of Burke's father and one aunt, nobody in the family had gone to college. As a result, Burke and his cousins were strongly encouraged early on to prioritize education.

Burke also relates how, in the summers, every week after Sunday mass, the extended family would get together, inevitably resulting in fiery, passionate debates

about the politics of the day. This left a lasting influence on Burke in two ways.

“I’m not shy about engaging in really tough academic debates, scientific debates, and presenting my ideas,” he admits, referring to how his family’s relational dynamics influenced him. But seeing his aunts and uncles, with their diverse personalities and perspectives, debate their viewpoints also helped him realize the importance of positive work climates. “You had to pay attention to others and you had to disagree in an acceptable manner,” he affirms, and then adds playfully, “especially after a few drinks!”

His later experiences playing key roles in workplace safety and health training and research with the HAMMER Federal Training Center, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), and the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) further confirmed the importance of knowing how “to work with various constituencies which had very different views on the issue and get them all on board to where we could move forward and gain a successful outcome.”

Rooting for Underdogs and Taking Chances on People

At Tulane, Burke has a reputation for being a highly personable, high-touch instructor who’s always happy to engage with students outside the classroom. He credits mentor figures from his own student days for presenting him with a model he has aspired to emulate.

“Nam [Raju] was probably the one that had the biggest influence on me,” he states, referencing the late Nambury S. Raju, an influential professor of I-O psychology who helped shape important developments in the field. Burke fondly describes Raju as “very personable, taking people under his wing, not treating them as just students you see in class only.”

Burke is also a big believer in taking chances on people. Again, he attributes this to his formative experiences as a student with various faculty. He relates a story in which, upon getting accepted into the graduate psychology program at Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT), he didn’t have the financial means to attend. Hoping to secure the aid he needed, he drove several hours from Indianapolis to Chicago just for a 30-minute meeting to discuss financial aid. The then-chairperson of the psychology department and then-director of the I-O psychology program, impressed by Burke’s resolve, decided to take a chance on him and offer a generous aid

package.

Today, Burke retains that same mindset of wanting to give people chances. He once had a student, for example, who had failed one of Burke's courses and was later eventually dismissed from the university for not meeting its academic standards. Burke later ran into this student by chance, whereupon the student mentioned that he wanted to get back into academics. "I'll write you that letter," Burke told him, without hesitation. His letter helped the student get into a university in Ohio where, this time, he ended up doing well.

"I'm always rooting for the underdog," says Burke with a smile.

High Touch Inside and Outside the Classroom

Burke's high-touch philosophy goes beyond cultivating more personable relationships with his students.

"I've tried to be so-called 'high touch' in the sense of being close to students," he says, "but also in the sense where they're involved in very much interactive exercises and materials to bring the information more into the practical world and have a takeaway from the classes that I teach."

This pedagogical approach has been informed by a lifetime of workplace safety and training research wherein a key insight has been that active, engaged and hands-on methods of safety and health training are more effective than other, more passive methods.

"I try to look at the effectiveness or efficacy of more engaging or hands-on forms of training," he explains, "which is consistent with how I also conduct myself in the classroom from more of an interactive, experiential-based type of coursework."

When asked what he would like his legacy at Tulane to be, Burke says he'd like to be appreciated "for being a researcher who tried to do impactful research that would gain visibility for the school. And to be known as someone who cared about the students and worked closely with them to advance their knowledge and their careers."

Given that a 2006 paper that Burke published with his Tulane graduate students in the *American Journal of Public Health* became the basis for federal guidance documents and policies for workplace safety and health training, including during

the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems his research has indeed been impactful. And as for caring about students and their success, there’s a certain former student who was able to go back to school thanks, in part, to a recommendation letter from Burke who would surely testify to that.