

The Problem with Deferring to Experts
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Principle

The proposed paper considers practical constraints on a laboratory's ability to migrate decisions in response to unexpected operating contingencies. It is suggested that a bureaucratic structure and an (arguably necessary) emphasis on audits can leave little room for 'deference to expertise.'

Situation

The relationships of large organizations carrying out diverse, complex activities with their regulatory agencies and certification bodies, while not necessarily adversarial, tend to be very documentation oriented. A similar relationship may prevail between the elements of the organization having the task of maintaining documentation and monitoring compliance and parts of the organization having other priorities. Hirschhorn, writing in Roberts' 1993 collection, points out that the political analogy suggested by the term 'checks and balances' is an apt description of the stalemate that can develop with the organization.

Methods of implementation

In order ensure compliance with regulatory requirements and uniform application of measures (e.g., consensus standards, established good practices) to protect people and the environment while carrying out complex and sometimes hazardous work, laboratories have developed management systems that are intended to serve as an overarching set of rules to which the procedures and, ultimately, the work must conform. Owing to their importance to safety and the achievement of the institution's mission, adherence to the 'rules' becomes equated with the organization's competence in operating the laboratory. Laboratories are also required to develop an integrated safety management system, which carries its own requirements for documentation, assessment, and development of performance measures. At the same time, they may seek to gain and maintain registration to environmental and safety standards – another documentation-intensive activity.

Results

The response of what Hirschhorn might call a 'means-centered' organization to actions taken under unexpected circumstances is illustrated by the investigation of a recent event. A potentially 'overdutied' breaker was operated by a worker who was not aware that the "Danger" posting on the breaker prohibited its operation. (The posting, which read "ENERGIZED WORK PROHIBITED," was meant to keep anyone from operating breaker until the hazard could be assessed). The violation and the reason for the conservative posting were recognized by the time it was necessary to reclose the breaker, and the cognizant expert was consulted to determine the actual hazard level and level of protective equipment required to carry out the action. The reclosing of the breaker (by a worker wearing a higher level of personal protective equipment than was required by the established guidance) was deemed to have again contravened procedure, despite the hazard having been assessed and a conservative control having been applied. During the discussion of how the persons involved could have reclosed the breaker, having realized that their actions in opening it were contrary to requirements, the lead investigator remarked that "we tend to defer to experts...and that's a problem."

Conclusion

Hirschhorn suggests that hierarchical organizations attempting to deal with increased risk are faced with a choice between greater delegation of decision making to those closest to the work or a regression to a

bureaucratic style in which authority resides in 'rules rather than roles.' For some organizations, however, this 'choice' may be constrained by the way in which they are organized and overseen. What can an organization that 'lives by the book' do to avoid being inclined to 'die by the book?'