

"The Reflective Practitioner Revisited: Promoting High Reliability through Affirmative Engagement"

Abstract:

Donald Schön's "The Reflective Practitioner" was a clarion to begin the dismantlement of the positivistic picture of professionalism, including management, as formulaic application of deterministic techniques. His contributions were interwoven with advances in understanding of change theory by Kurt Lewin, culture as explored by Edgar Schein, systems thinking from Jay Forrester and Russell Ackoff, action science by Chris Argyris, and others whose insights have strong connections to High Reliability Theory. Indeed, HRO's own Karl Weick's well known question 'How can I know what I think until I see what I say?' further enlightened the idea that reflection is an essential skill for achieving resilience and reliability.

This presentation speaks to a journey by the U.S. Department of Energy to explore High Reliability as a reflective framework to inform improvement interventions. In contrast to requirements or prescribed improvement initiatives, the DOE HRO journey is strongly tied to affirmative approaches which encourage leadership supported collective engagement through reflecting on high reliability theory and practices in order to tailor new organizational frameworks that serve to guide cultural, cognitive, structural, process and behavioral alignment. Fundamentally the DOE HRO endeavor is about shifting from historical mechanistic management models and compliance based mindsets, to re-interpreting historical strengths within the context of explicit theoretical frameworks intended to give meaning and purpose to systems, processes and behaviors. Within such a context both tacit and explicit knowledge can be combined through human adaptation and prescribed routines into a holistic repertoire of collective knowledge that becomes the recognized source of reliability, resilience and innovation.

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