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Presentation Abstract

**Mapping the Failure Landscape:
Process Deviations, System Breakdowns and Unsuccessful Trials as Sources of
Improvement, Problem Solving and Innovation in Teams**

This session explores the scope and meaning of failure as an essential element of safety and learning in high reliability organizations. Most managers subscribe to the idea that organizations should not have failures, but if they do, they should learn from them. However, when failures are ignored, denied, or misunderstood, as is often the case in organizations, fruitful learning does not occur. Prior work has documented social and psychological barriers to the fundamentally social process of learning from failure in organizations. Most important, when managers believe (explicitly or tacitly) that failure is unacceptable, productive discussion of it is unlikely to occur. Not only does this belief inhibit learning, it originates in faulty assumptions, notably the idea that failure is in fact avoidable - an assumption that is easily challenged. To do this, I offer categories with which to understand the full range and implications of organizational failures, with implications for management action. I explore the varied meaning of failures in three organizational contexts - routine operations, complex operations, and R&D - to suggest strategies for fostering organizational improvement, problem solving and innovation.

Keywords: Decision making, error identification, and error management