

# Leading Connection Development and Knowledge Flow to Increase High Reliability Organizing Implementation Effectiveness

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**Situation** – What causes people to put their hearts into their work and perform at their highest levels of ability for long periods of time? What is it that some leaders and their organizations get about how to relate to people that others just don't? A lot of them don't!

*Research by the Gallup Organization conducted in the USA with over one million employees concluded that since the year 2000 about seventy-five percent just survive at work. So less than three out of ten are really engaged in what they do.*

But some are actually thriving at work! Why is it different for some? The tools of Organizational Learning, Leadership Development and High Reliability Organizing are effective ways to begin connecting people and engaging them in their work. Since 1980 I have learned that:

**Fundamental to success in HRO implementation are the connection of people and the trust necessary for optimal knowledge flow.**

In more recent times I primarily work with the U.S. Wildland firefighting interagency community. Since the tragic year 1994 with 32 firefighter deaths, almost half in one event at the South Canyon of Storm King Mountain in Colorado, this community has been much more interested in learning about the human factors affecting our efforts. Students of fire have become students of organizational psychology, leadership development, organizational learning, and continuously seeking “high reliability.”

Many units in high risk industries will use the audits provided in the Managing the Unexpected books (2001 and revised in 2007) to discover where they are at in regard to **mindless vs. mindful behaviors** and learn where they have significant opportunity to improve in one, or maybe several, of the 5 principles explained there. Weick and Sutcliffe also provide many ideas on how to build the skills needed to increase HRO. Some units are able to move forward with this information but others seem to get stuck at this point because:

**Fundamental to success in HRO implementation are the connection of people and the trust necessary for optimal knowledge flow.**

People with a strong sense of connection are more cooperative, empathetic, enthusiastic, optimistic, energetic, and better problem-solvers. Build the “**Connection Development**” elements of **vision, value, and voice** in your organization. These will combine to meet fundamental human needs in legitimate ways. (Stallard 2007)

Leaders learn how to see what devalues people and needs to be deleted. There are several straight forward ways to increase human value where **people begin to trust each other and share ideas.**

Cultivating “**Knowledge Flow**” increases connection and people begin to **make better decisions, increase creativity, and inspire innovation** so they start thriving in a healthy environment.

## **From Mindlessness to Mindfulness**

A precursor to the MTU books of 2001 and 2007 is another author on “Mindfulness,” Ellen Langer, publishing **Mindfulness** in 1989, and **The Power of Mindful Learning** in 1997, both with De Capo Press of Cambridge, MA.

She describes that, “To treat information as context-free, that is, independent of circumstances, places us at risk for mindless thoughts, decisions, and behaviors. Placing information within context leads to mindfulness.”

Is the HRO information people are bringing to their unit arriving in the context of a fertile learning environment where people are connected, engaged, and knowledge flows? Many people search for HRO because they intuitively know that their unit is dysfunctional in several ways. Is there some foundational work that needs to be done first, or together, with the HRO implementation efforts, to give this organizational growth opportunity a fair chance of success?

## **Mindlessness**

“Mindlessness develops from **automatic behaviors, repetition**, and use of a **single perspective**.” (Langer 1989)

Most realize that **automatic behavior and repetition** have a negative influence on our thinking. Though they both allow us to perform several tasks simultaneously, **they move our attention toward the structure of the situation rather than content and context**. Structure then gains an inordinate influence on thought compared to content and context.

CONNECTION ISSUES - Limited thinking also develops when we act from a **single perspective** or point of view. Disconnected people may not solicit alternative ideas, or if they do, only request **specific** help “Tell me what to do,” rather than the more generalized and open-ended question “Can you help me?” where people come together to work through a problem together.

“Mindlessness develops from the pursuit of **outcome over process** and the **belief in limited resources**.” Pursuit of outcome, “Can I?” or “What if I cannot?” creates an anxious preoccupation with failure at the expense of exploration, creativity and positive effects of critical thinking. Decreased creativity contributes to belief in limited resources, “What can they do to help me?” More common with novices in high risk situations is the fatal belief “If I have not seen it then it cannot happen.” (Langer 1989)

TRUST and CONFIDENCE ISSUES - Mindlessness develops when we disregard the **power of context** and become **trapped by categories**. The power of context can impede information flow when we discount information because of who is giving it to us. We may consider information

only as an answer to a question. Almost like functional fixedness (a wrench functions as a wrench and cannot be used as a hammer), without the specific question the information has no value. We omit other points of view and other ways to look at a problem are lost. We create categories with distinctions that may or may not be artificial or subjective but which lead us to use rigidly for problem solving.

Mindlessness has costs to individuals and the organization. A focus on outcomes will **narrow our self-image** to a limited number of things we do. We accept our labels, “I am *just* the medical student,” “I am *just* the firefighter,” and do not see that we have the qualifications to identify, report, or engage a problem or situation. Becoming trapped by categories also permits us to **incrementally change** the way we act which can result in normalization of deviance or drift in quality, safety, and reliability. In one form, it results in unintended cruelty, “If you do not understand what I ask, you are not smart.” In another serious form it **creates loss of control** when we attribute failure or crisis to a single cause. Fixing that cause does not resolve the crisis or make the problem go away. We give up or accept the new circumstances as inevitable.

### **Nature of mindfulness; applications in creativity and work**

As stated by George Patton, GEN, US Army, “Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity.”

Mindfulness welcomes new information, becomes inclusive of **the process used and the environment** actors are in, rather than only on the outcome. Worry about the outcome of a child’s behavior, house fire, military battle, or investment can lead one to automatic behavior that rigidly follows rules and draws on one’s own or an authority’s perspective. However, **focus and peripheral sight** of what is actually happening can increase one’s control of the situation and help us change our interpretation of the context we experience. This inclusive approach often allows the reframing of problems resulting in creative recombination of resources and innovative solutions. Multiple points of view enhance our efforts and how we view the situation together. Mindfulness then develops. (Langer 1989)

New information, process, situational awareness, and multiple points of view lead to creativity and innovation, which contribute to the state of mindfulness. Situations that are novel to the beginner benefit from mindful thinking as will situations novel to the expert. This occurs because novel situations do not always respond as expected. Planning may fail and even endanger people as the organization rigidly follows the plan in a newly emerging or unexpected situation. Many will operate in planned continuance, with a dysfunctional momentum; hoping things will begin to unfold according to what they had expected to see.

The research on mindfulness shows that mindful work becomes more absorbing and pleasurable but most of all provides satisfaction. Pleasure and happiness are passive emotions that happen to us while satisfaction involves an active pursuit. Satisfaction results from adapting to a new situation or solving a novel problem and occurs in a different part of the brain than happiness or pleasure. Mindful learning and problem solving are more likely to bring satisfaction and self-motivation. In dynamic states mindfulness develops a new dimension.

Michael Stallard, referenced often throughout this paper, writes extensively about the value of connection in his book, **Fired Up Or Burnt Out**, and has collected supporting research on the positive aspects of connection. The findings of neuroscientists, psychiatrists, sociologists, and medical researchers shows that *connection meets basic human psychological needs for respect, recognition, belonging, autonomy, personal growth, and meaning*. When these needs are met we thrive. Research shows that when connection is present, organizations are more productive, more innovative, and more profitable. Connection improves both individual and group performance so paying attention to creating an optimal work environment requires paying attention to the so-called soft aspects such as the meaning of work and the way people treat each other. (Stallard 2007)

*A 2004 study of 50,000 employees at 59 global companies conducted by the Corporate Leadership Council found that emotional factors were 4 times more effective in increasing employee engagement than rational factors.*

Connection in positive work relationships provides a sense of well-being, minimizes stress, and makes us more trusting. Without connection people feel lonely, isolated, confused and become distrusting, disrespectful and dissatisfied according to Dr. Edward Hallowell at Harvard Medical School. He describes those latter organizations as “corrosive.” (Hallowell 1999)

When we work in an environment that fails to recognize these parts of our human nature, our physical and mental health are damaged. People want and need to be valued. Psychologist Abraham Maslow, in the 1943 article “A Theory of Human Motivation,” recognized that needs for self esteem and the esteem of others are needs that if unmet produce pain and the drive to seek relief. Where mutual respect exists people are led to “feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength, capability and adequacy of being useful and necessary in the world. But the thwarting of these needs produces feelings of inferiority, weakness and of helplessness.”

Our U.S. organizations pay a tax for disconnection. “The Gallup Organization conservatively estimates the annual economic cost to the American economy from the approximately 22 million American workers who are extremely negative or “actively disengaged” to be between \$250 and \$300 billion.” This does not include those that are disengaged but have not yet spiraled down to the level of active disengagement.

## **Intentionally Create a Connection Culture**

“Culture is the predominant beliefs and behaviors shared by a group of people. A connection culture therefore, is a culture that embraces the necessary beliefs and behaviors that enhance connection among people and meet universal human needs.” (Stallard 2007)

**Vision + Value + Voice = Connection**

In a connection culture people have **Vision** when everyone is *united* by common values, *proud* of their unit’s reputation, and *motivated* by their mission.

**Value** exists in an organization when everyone understands the basic psychological needs of people, behaves in ways that appreciates their positive, unique contributions, and acts to help them achieve their potential.

**Voice** exists in an organization when everyone seeks the ideas of others, share ideas and opinions honestly, and safeguards relational connections.

Michael Stallard writes about a current **next step in the evolution of organizations** because people are recognizing that, “Most organizations today have become masters of *task excellence*, that is hard, quantitative, and analytically oriented aspects of business implicit in areas as Six Sigma (a statistically oriented quality improvement program) and competitive benchmarking (the practice of comparing objective measures such as sales, profits, and inventory level to those of one’s competitors). Unfortunately, organizations that focus on task excellence *alone* will fail to meet the basic human psychological needs that maximize employee’s contributions to the organization.” Some leaders are beginning to see that with “task excellence” alone, success is fleeting. (Stallard 2007)

Common in our world of work is the **Star System**, really a caste system, where a few people are stars and treated like favored gentry; at the low end the strugglers who are the untouchables; and in between are core employees that feel like second-class citizens.

When Shakespeare wrote about Henry V addressing his troops before a 1415 battle in France where they were outnumbered 4 to 1, the English king promised anyone who joined him that:

*...we in it shall be remember'd,  
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers:*

Shakespeare thought that Henry V knew that appealing to any person’s desire for recognition, respect, and meaning in their lives was the key to unleashing their energy.

When we adopt the mind-set that we are in a community with one another through mutual respect, we begin to build internal relationships that create trusted colleagues rather than internal competitors. I know that the reality is that we may not like all of our co-workers. But creating a healthy self-esteem, mutual respect and strong working relationships, is common sense, yet often uncommon in practice.

**Leaders know that their main responsibility is to inspire the people they lead.**

**Vision** represents the cultural element of **inspiring identity** in both individuals and in their organization in ways that satisfy the sense of purpose, significance and pride that we all crave. Without it, people just show up for duty, do what they have to, and look forward to the weekend, their vacation, or retirement.

Many of us are truly fortunate in that we are bringing something new to the world, or have an opportunity to significantly improve what we have been given charge of. Some of us have a history filled with stories, images, facts and figures, sayings and quotable quotes. Share that

history and the challenges you currently have repeatedly, keeping this inspiring identity in front of your team. People need to see that their unit's identity adds something to their personal identity.

**Human value** in a culture is, first of all, about treating people with respect and dignity, and second, about empowering them to achieve their potential. Leaders need to identify and remove the obstacles that make people feel devalued. **Delete what devalues** by:

1. Eliminating disrespectful, condescending and rude behavior.
2. Going easy on criticism.
3. Minimizing unnecessary rules and excessive controls.
4. Eliminating excessive signs of hierarchy.
5. Getting rid of devaluing managers.

Add elements that enhance people's value by:

1. Making a human connection with as many people as possible.
2. Treating and speaking to employees as partners.
3. Helping employees find the right roles.
4. Educating, informing, and listening to employees.
5. Decentralizing decision making.
6. Recognizing the human need for work/life balance

All of these efforts to remove what devalues and increase what does value people will **increase trust** in your people, among work groups, and between units throughout your organization. Stephen M. R. Covey writes in his book, The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything.

“Trust impacts us 24/7, 365 days a year. It undergirds and affects the quality of every relationship, every communication, every work project, every business venture, every effort in which we are engaged. It changes the quality of every present moment and alters the trajectory and outcome of every future moment of our lives – both personally and professionally.

Contrary to what most people believe, trust is not some soft, illusive quality that you either have or you don't; rather, trust is a pragmatic, tangible, actionable asset that you can create – much faster than you probably think possible...I contend that the ability to establish, grow, extend, and restore trust is not only vital to our personal and inter-personal well being; it is the key leadership competency of the new global economy.”

Whether it's high or low, trust is the “hidden variable” in the traditional business formula for success.

Strategy x Execution = Results  
*should be changed to show it by:*  
(Strategy x Execution) multiplied by Trust = Results

The percentage differences in the charts below come from; a study of trust in business by LogicaCMG and Warwick Business School in 2005; another by Watson Wyatt, WorkUSA study in 2002; and another study about trust in schools presented by Stanford professor Tony Byrk, in 2004, published in 2002. (These 2 charts do not include the 80 % tax for nonexistent trust, the 40% tax for low trust, the 20% tax for trust issues, the no tax/ no dividend category where trust is not an issue, or the 20 % dividend category where trust is a visible asset.)

### The 60% Tax (Very Low Trust)

In the organization...	In personal relationships...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unhealthy working environment</li> <li>• Unhappy employees and stakeholders</li> <li>• Intense political atmosphere with clear camps and parties</li> <li>• Excessive time wasted defending positions and decisions</li> <li>• Painful micromanagement and bureaucracy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hostile behaviors (yelling, blaming, accusing, name-calling) followed by periods of brief contrition</li> <li>• Guarded communication</li> <li>• Constant worrying and suspicion</li> <li>• Mistakes remembered and used as weapons</li> <li>• Real issues not surfaced or dealt with effectively</li> </ul>

### The 40% Dividend (World-class Trust)

In the organization...	In personal relationships...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High Collaboration and partnering</li> <li>• Effortless communication</li> <li>• Positive, transparent relationships with employees and all stakeholders</li> <li>• Fully aligned systems and structures</li> <li>• Strong innovation, confidence, and loyalty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• True joy in family and friendships, characterized by caring and love</li> <li>• Free, effortless communication</li> <li>• Inspiring work done together and characterized by purpose creativity and excitement</li> <li>• Completely open transparent relationships</li> <li>• Amazing energy created by relationships</li> </ul>

Covey writes about the incremental expansion of trust as 5 Waves:

1. **Self Trust** based upon the **Principle of Credibility**
  - a. Integrity (Are you congruent?)
  - b. Intent (What's your agenda?)

- c. Capabilities (Are you relevant?)
- d. Results (What's your track record?)
2. **Relationship Trust** based upon the **Principle of Behavior** (13 ways to behave yourself out of problems you've behaved yourself into)
3. **Organizational Trust** based upon the **Principle of Alignment**
4. **Market Trust** based upon the **Principle of Reputation**
5. **Societal Trust** based upon the **Principle of Contribution**

**Inspiring trust** involves extending “**smart trust**,” restoring trust when it has been lost, and developing a propensity to trust.

During the beginning of this paper, I wrote about, “...where **people begin to trust each other and share ideas**...(changes occur.) Cultivating “**Knowledge Flow**” **increases connection** and people begin to **make better decisions, increase creativity, and inspire innovation** so they start thriving in a healthy environment.”

**This is where high performance and high reliability exist.**

**Knowledge Flow** is the expanded connection component called **Voice**. Voice exists in an organization when everyone seeks the ideas of others, share ideas and opinions honestly, and safeguards relational connections. Knowledge flow communicates to people with less power in an organization that they are appreciated and respected enough to be informed and heard, and that their ideas can make a difference. No one person has a monopoly on all of the good ideas. Knowledge flow **increases connection**.

Knowledge flow helps decision makers **make better decisions**. Organizations improve performance by leveraging the experience, insight, and information among people. They listen to people, especially those with different points of view. The Scottish philosopher and historian David Hume declared, “When men are most sure and arrogant they are commonly most mistaken.”

Knowledge flow **increases creativity and innovation** when it flows vertically up and down the chain of command and horizontally across the organization. Both positive and negative examples are replete throughout history. George Washington, FDR, Winston Churchill, all benefited from a leadership style that increased knowledge flow. The U.S. Army benefited with Sgt. Curtis Cullen's idea for the Rhino tank when it quickly made its way to Gen. Omar Bradley in time to liberate France in WWII. I have personally seen both positive and negative examples in every kind of work (military service, academic, civilian government service, and commercial business) that I have been involved with. These principles cross disciplines, demographics and industries.

## **Conclusion**

Events in our lives have shaped our views about the cultures we want to be a part of, the type of leaders we want to follow, and the person and leader we aspire to become. The clearest way that we know that connection exists or is missing is to experience environments where it is in abundant supply and where it is not. Only then do you feel and appreciate the difference.

These are environments where people are more cooperative, empathetic, enthusiastic, optimistic, energetic, and better problem-solvers. It is where they have built the elements of **vision, value, and voice** in their organization and have strived to meet fundamental human needs in legitimate ways. Their leaders have learned how to see what devalues people and deleted those obstacles. They have found ways to increase human value where **people begin to trust each other and share ideas**. They are continually successful at cultivating “**Knowledge Flow**” **increasing connection** and people have begun to **make better decisions, increased creativity, and inspired innovation. They are thriving in a healthy environment.**

Once you have been part of well-functioning high performance unit, you look for others like it wherever you go. If you have ever been privileged to be part of a highly reliable unit, you will always seek to be part of another. If you seek to build one, remember that:

**Fundamental to success in HRO implementation are the connection of people and the trust necessary for optimal knowledge flow.**

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