

The Basic of High Reliability Organizations: Making Your Organizations Safer and More Effective

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- In his experience at hostage negotiations with the Oakland Police Department, Mr Hare observed commonalities across units that either didn't have accidents, or that handled the unavoidable catastrophes really well.
- There is a difference between outcomes and resolutions across some of these organizations. Some organizations working in high risk environments manage to avoid catastrophic problems. There are common qualities or practices in these organizations; not just in the leadership, but in the culture, fabric, structure, design, and even the implicit norms and unwritten practices in these organizations.
- According to the Sapir-Whorfian hypothesis, culture resides in language. You can't pass on ideas if you don't have words for them. It is difficult to conceptualize and transfer ideas for which the common language doesn't exist. Before the literature on high reliability organizations, there was little common language to describe the practices and processes in organizations that enhanced reliability and prevented harm. Theory and writing on high reliability organizations gives us a lexicon to examine and describe successes and failures across industries and professions.
- Dr Kowal suggests that causes must be identified for symptoms in organizations. Problems that emerge and appear often have underlying, recalcitrant causes that are very difficult to correct or even identify.
 - Tacit knowledge is the fundamental type of knowledge upon which action in organizations is built; most of the things we do in organizations depend on tacit knowledge and information. However, tacit knowledge is not easy to explain, describe, or get a handle on. Dr Kowal estimates that 80% of knowledge in organizations is tacit/unwritten rather than explicit/written. Therefore, much of what occurs in organizations escapes easy analysis, study, and is very difficult to control. In this kind of an environment, the root causes of problems in organizations are very difficult to understand and address.
 - High reliability organizations do an unusually good job of addressing these problems by identifying and addressing their causes, not just at managerial levels but throughout the organization.

- Lessons learned in organizations that are highly reliable: they tend to have:
 - Redundancy: there is backup in operations (two systems to do the same thing, in case one fails... and the two systems should fail for different reasons, so they don't fail at the same time. For instance, a power outage should not destroy the main system as well as the backup).
 - Flexibility: there is great latitude in how the organization is structured and how decisions are made. Resources and people flex and move to provide backup and to shore up weak areas in times of crisis, and return to their normal roles during routine operations.
 - Time compressed activities: People who respond during emergencies work together in a highly cooperative manner that actually expands how much time they have to respond—because multiple people are synchronized in their response, they can do much more in a given period of time than just one person can accomplish in the same period (and even much more than the multiple people could do if they were not so synchronized).
 - Alternative organization or command:
 - Linear vs non-linear leadership, and migrating of authority: Patterns of reporting and decision-making change during crises such that each person, regardless of formal position, can innovate and act independently if needed for quick response. Similarly, information flows broadly throughout the organization so that people in lateral positions receive critical information faster than it would take for the information to flow up the chain of command and back down. Authority to make decisions migrates to the points and people in the organization where the decisions need to be made and where information is available to make those decisions quickly and accurately.
 - Receptive leadership: Leadership is open to the ideas and innovations by all staff, regardless of formal position or rank. Safety is rewarded rather than discouraged. Various leadership styles are effective, but being flexible among these styles and being able to work collegially is essential, especially during crises.
 - Rules are not hard and fast; they were written without knowledge of exactly how unexpected events and major crises would transpire. Rules that are inappropriate may need to be ignored, and leadership should be receptive to this process. Understanding when and how to act outside of prescriptions is important.

- The routine organization looks like a ‘wiring diagram’; there is an affection for hierarchy and symmetry in the organizational chart, and there is close coupling between units (things are so tightly interdependent across people and/or subunits that, if errors begin, they fly through the system too quickly to be stopped).
 - There is often a need in these organizations to work more collegially.
- Matching people to the right jobs is also a challenging task, in all organizations more generally. One must consider aspects of individuals’ personalities, evaluate their vulnerabilities, and mentor on the job. For HROs to work, they have to work at the bottom-level; with people who trust each other.
- Since we are dealing with rare events, the challenge of finding them is in staying vigilant to detect them and get down to their root causes.