The Five Principles of High Reliability Organizations (or HROs)

In their book “Managing the Unexpected: Resilient Performance in an Age of Uncertainty,” Drs. Karl E Weick and Kathleen M. Sutcliffe examine ways that people and organizations organize for high performance settings where the potential for error is overwhelming.\(^1\) For example, nuclear aircraft carriers, air traffic control and operations systems, hostage negotiation teams and emergency medical treatment centers share a singular demand: they have no choice but to operate reliably.\(^2\)

Weick and Sutcliffe attribute the success of HROs to their determined efforts to act “mindfully.” HROs organize themselves in such a way that they are better able to notice the unexpected and halt its development.\(^3\) The following five principles have been identified\(^4\) by Drs. Weick & Sutcliffe to underlie HRO performance and capacity to anticipate, respond, and contain the “unexpected.”

1. **Preoccupation with failure.**
   *Attention on close calls and near misses (“being lucky vs. being good”); focus more on failures rather than successes.*

2. **Reluctance to simplify interpretations.**
   *Solid “root cause” analysis practices.*

3. **Sensitivity to operations.**
   *Situational awareness and carefully designed change management processes.*

4. **Commitment to resilience.**
   *Resources are continually devoted to corrective action plans and training.*

5. **Deference to expertise.**
   *Listen to your experts on the front lines (ex. authority follows expertise).*

Weick and Sutcliffe advise that failure to move towards this type of mindful infrastructure magnifies the damage produced by unexpected events and impairs reliable performance.\(^5\)

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\(^2\) Id.

\(^3\) Id. p18.

\(^4\) Id. pp. 10–17.

\(^5\) Id. p2.