

Managing the Unexpected

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“A tendency toward mindlessness is characterized by a style of mental functioning in which people follow recipes, impose old categories to classify what they see, act with some rigidity, operate on automatic pilot, and mislabel unfamiliar new contexts as familiar old ones.”¹

This could mean sticking to the old plan because it’s familiar, and ignoring new information that would call it into question.

“Maintenance people who work on valves every day may do so mindlessly, or they can work more mindfully and say, essentially, I have this valve to work on. ‘What system is it on, and what’s the worst thing that can happen?’ When operators execute operations mindfully, they tend to rework the routine to fit changed conditions and to update the routine when there is new learning.”²

In mindfulness practice, we could be letting our mind drift aimlessly, our breath on automatic pilot as usual, but instead, we orient ourselves to the breath. Whenever we notice our mind has wandered, we come back: the feeling of breath going in, going out; its roughness; smoothness; shallowness; fullness. We become familiar with it.

At work, we can apply the same principle of coming back to the breath, to a valve. We can make it our reference point. We can look at it, touch it, and listen to it, with interest. While neither the breath nor the valve has bells and whistles, we can train ourselves to attend to them nonetheless.

At the Davis-Besse nuclear power plant near Toledo, Ohio in 2002, maintenance workers were finding rust particles clogging the air conditioner and water filters. They kept changing the filters every two days for two years, whereas the interval should have been once a month. The metal liner that contained radioactive material under pressure had been corroding, and in just two more months, it would have breached. For two years, no one in the plant questioned the accumulation of rust particles. It was no one’s job *per se*, so this clue to a looming disaster went unheeded.

In a mindful organization, staff are trained to keep an eye out for anomalies, to be inquisitive and bring them to the attention of their superiors. These organizations

¹ Weick, Karl E. and Sutcliffe, Kathleen M., *Managing the Unexpected: Resilient Performance*

² Ibid., 61.

place a premium on noticing irregularities, instead of sweeping them under the rug. Highly Reliable Organizations such as aircraft manufacturers and nuclear power plants cannot afford to have signals such as rust filings go unheeded and unquestioned.

"The most effective Highly Reliable Organizations (HROs)...understand that reliable outcomes require the capabilities to sense the unexpected in a *stable* manner and yet *deal with* the unexpected in a *variable* manner."³

When we come to expect the unexpected, we are not taken by surprise when things change.

How often do you consider whether your usual means of communication is the most effective one to be using for what you are trying to do right now?

If you're a texter, you might just dash off a few words without thinking when a phone call or face-to-face conversation would yield far better results for the operation you're engaged in.

"Face-to-face contact is perhaps the richest source of discriminatory detail because of the capacity for timely feedback, the ability to convey multiple cues, the degree to which the message can be personalized, the variety of language that can be used, and the range of meaning that can be conveyed."⁴

In the absence of face-to-face communication, we rely on phone calls, texts, emails, and printed documents which gives us information that is not nearly as rich and nuanced. When NASA personnel were deciding whether to launch the Challenger spacecraft, the temperature was unusually cold. They were communicating by telephone. They couldn't see each other's facial expressions, so they couldn't see how concerned the engineers were.

³ Ibid., 67.

⁴ Ibid., 155.