

Tired of risk management? Let's talk about threats.

I don't know about you, but the risk 'stuff' is wearing me out; top 5 this, likelihood that, tolerable, acceptable. Having assisted many organisations navigate their way through the language and the objectives with a view to making sense of it all and more significantly, do something practical that improves their safety performance, there is certainly much to be confused about. It is extremely easy to lose your way; imprecise use of such language holds potential to provide a degree of legitimacy to what can actually represent the unconscious undoing of many decades of hard work in the regulatory space whilst remaining convincing to the people involved at the time¹. Let's not forget the term risk is not reserved for safety; the presence of risk activities within your organisation does not necessarily equal safer operations.

So, here's a different perspective. Are your frontline personnel consistently supported both technically and culturally by the entire organisation to meet their safety responsibilities? If not, I would argue your Safety Management System [SMS] is faltering; it doesn't matter what the risk register, the dashboard or the algorithm says, if your measures are not effective, the chance of harm is on the increase and any scrutiny of your system is likely to reveal gaps between the *appearance and the reality* of safety.

*Threats*² can be defined as conditions or 'factors' that *attempt* to weaken safety risk controls *and* require attention to ensure barrier effectiveness so that safety margins are maintained. Threats are omni-present, even in the most harmonious of systems where safety is fully integrated; personnel are surrounded by multiple system and social dynamics that hold the potential to pull people in different directions. Often the only thing that determines whether the threats get through, or not, is the performance of your personnel.

Such threats can be generated by the organisation in which people work, may be generated by interactions with other systems or can be part of the natural environment. Some are more obvious than others, some vary in their intensity and some are unique to certain domains; time pressure, for example, can be extreme or subtle, real or perceived whereas the non-availability of a critical tool is more binary. In isolation, these examples may appear simple to 'resolve' yet scrutinise many systems performance and you will see these issues lingering around. Add to that the fact that humans are influenced by more than the immediate situation they face; previous expectations, normative behaviours, team hierarchies and many more social dynamics all play their part in how we *truly* act when under threat from those conditions generated by the very system designed to support us. Experience suggests that the source of the threats often remain unresolved and rarely do we obtain a robust understanding of why personnel weren't able to defend against them. A recently issued report alluded to the inadequate focus on these skills in the lead up to an event³ whilst the domain in question has had the requirement in regulations for over 14 years.

Arming your teams with a host of skills that can be drawn upon to defend against such threats *as part* of their competence is crucial towards a higher level of safety performance and organisational resilience. I say skills as they need to be practiced, honed and embedded; being aware of them only is unlikely to have much of an impact. More significantly however is that threat management skills must be allowed to flourish if the objectives of SMS are to be consistently achieved. Too often the tacit nature of threat management goes un-noticed, rarely features in personnel appraisals and reliance on their promotion is often relegated to administrative mediums such as posters or notice boards. The skills need to be *valued and upheld* as a key element of a broader competence framework and receive the attention they deserve if you truly wish to develop this vital element of safety risk management. Critically, in the face of broader enterprise influences, these values must

stand tall and be committed to by all leaders; decry the right call by your personnel and you send out a more destructive message to the broader organisation and undoubtedly jeopardise any trust you may have.

Developing your personnel as threat managers not only *protects* your safety risk control measures, it creates demonstrable clarity of responsibility, drives organisational change *further reducing the threat potential*, and increases resilience of the operation. It also contributes to meeting the intent of the human factors requirements found in many regulations nowadays. A word of caution however; expecting your personnel to be 100% reliable in a poor system is futile so Threat Management cannot be relied upon as a sole solution. Effective management of safety relies upon various techniques and measures throughout the entire organisation, against unequivocal objectives and more crucially, *at all times*.

If honest, it's not new! Threat Management has been around for long time now, may be known by different names with terms varying from organisation to organisation yet it is often a weak area. It can be deployed into any domain and represents many years of research into human performance. Yet here is the crux; what you ultimately call it isn't important, this isn't about a word, but what does matter is that your personnel are *enabled to deploy effective strategies to defend* your safety control measures from the vast array of dynamics that surround them every day. Reconsider the use and scope of the 'risk language', develop your people, create supportive systems around them and watch your positive outcomes improve.

References

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