**Title:** Mindfulness: The Paradox in Managing Uncertainty

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**Principle:**

Patient safety has been recognized as a critical problem in healthcare delivery for more than a decade.


Berwick’s presentation explained the similarities between the work of healthcare professionals and wildland firefighters.

Berwick called for healthcare organizations to learn from the Mann Gulch fire and from Weick’s concept of sensemaking. Berwick poignantly appealed to healthcare organizations to, like the Mann Gulch smokejumpers, to drop their pulaskis (special hand tools used in forest firefighting) and to find new tools and processes to improve the safety of healthcare delivery.

**Situation:**

Approaches to addressing patient safety include process, technical, and personnel solutions. Recently, however, increased attention is being given to the significant impact of organizational culture on patient safety. This corresponds to Berwick’s recommendations.

Late in 2009, The Joint Commission called for healthcare organizations to define and establish an organization-wide safety culture, integrating lessons learned from high-reliability organizations, and to apply, as possible the concept of HRO mindfulness.

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¹ The Mann Gulch forest fire burned in 1949 in the Missouri River breaks near Helena, Montana; the fire killed 13 firefighters, including 12 smokejumpers and was the storyline for Norman Maclean’s *New York Times* bestseller, “Young Men and Fire.” Weick had read Maclean’s nonfiction book and used its story as the framework for his firefighting sensemaking analysis that was published in *Academic Science Quarterly* in 1993.
First or early emergency responders face double jeopardy when responding to high-risk situations. Not only must they be concerned about the public they serve, they are often in harm’s way themselves. This makes any improvement in creating a "mindful infrastructure" crucial.

**Methods of Implementation:**

The Kansas University HealthPartners, Inc. and The University of Kansas School of Nursing, taught a one and half day HRO/Mindfulness workshop, modeled after workshops developed for federal forest firefighters. As part of the course, Dr. Timothy Vogus, Vanderbilt University, delivered a two hour video-talk titled “Mindful Organizing for Patient Safety.” Dr. Vogus’ presentation provided the scientific basis for transferring HRO tools and processes to healthcare. His talk helped health care practitioners visualize how they might use mindfulness to improve patient safety in their particular work areas.

All the students who attended were healthcare professionals who desired to influence high-quality healthcare delivery and systems improvements in hospitals, social services, ambulatory care and community and business organizations.

The objectives of the Kansas City workshop:

- Each participant would leave the workshop with a basic working knowledge of the five practices of the Weick/Sutcliffe model of mindfulness.

- After the workshop nursing and physician work-groups would take small steps in applying HRO/Mindfulness in their organizations. The goal was to create “small wins” that could enhance their ability to anticipate and contain errors before they escalated into a crisis. These small steps took the form of commitments which they were willing to test at their home units.

- To practice HRO tools, in class, such practical tools as after action reviews, Gary Klein’s “premortem” and the “left-hand column” tool.

- To ascertain whether the concept discussed during the workshop stuck, whether HRO actually helped improve health-care delivery, a follow-up sampling scheme, the “mindful organizing scale,” developed by Timothy Vogus and Kathleen Sutcliffe, was planned. This would give the workshop

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attendees empirical data to see if mindfulness actually did improve safety error rates.

**Results:**

Over 170 nurses and physicians were trained in the Weick/Sutcliffe model of mindfulness. Sampling using the mindfulness organizing scale is currently being completed.

**Conclusions:**

It is too earlier to tabulate the successes and failures of the Kansas City class. Written evaluations of the workshop were generally favorable. The key discussion questions are:

- Is the wildland fire model of Weick/Sutcliffe’s mindfulness model, taught now to thousands of firefighters, applicable to other high risk occupations, such as nursing?
- It is one thing to teach HRO mindfulness, to ask nurses and physicians to act “mindfully” by using the five tenets of HRO/Mindfulness, but it is difficult to “teach” the cognitive based skills in a workshop setting and in such a fashion that they can be viewed as being realistic, practical based tools that front-line medical workers and managers can bring back to their field units and begin immediately using.