Title:

High Reliability Organizing: What It Is, Why It Works, How to Lead It

Authors:

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Principle:

There is a wide spectrum of experience, both pro and con, from both the classroom and the field, in teaching and applying the five principles of the Weick/Sutcliffe model of high reliability organizing.

We will discuss a small sampling of our experiences applying, at the operational level, the Weick/Sutcliffe HRO model throughout the Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM) wildland fire management organization.

Our basic discussion point:

*It is one thing to teach HRO mindfulness, to ask employees to act “mindfully” by using the five tenets of HRO/Mindfulness, but it is quite another thing to “teach” these generally 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 field workers and managers can bring back to their field units and begin immediately using.*

Situation:

Federal wildland firefighting organizations throughout the world, including France, Australia and New Zealand, have adopted the basic principles of the Weick/Sutcliffe model of high reliability organizing. In the U. S., it is not unusual to hear HRO jargon now commonly being used by field going personal in all federal wildland fire agencies.
Strategically, the BLM has adopted HRO as a plank in its national fire management vision statement and has actively worked to insure that every level of fire management operations, from its Washington Office through each of its eleven western state offices, have a “common understanding” and a shared HRO language. Few organizations have been so systematic in diffusing practical HRO to all its various management levels.

**Method of Implementation:**

A three-day national workshop titled “High Reliability Organizing: What it Is, Why it Works, How to Lead It,” was delivered to over a hundred senior fire managers in Phoenix, AZ, in March 2010.

National BLM director, Bob Abbey, set the stage in his opening remarks: “Let me say right at the top, I’m a firm believer in HRO principles and I believe they need to be adopted and practiced through our agency...My expectation is that you will go home; and armed with what you’ve learned this week, you will begin to make the needed changes in your area of responsibility.”

The BLM HRO workshop, even though designed around specific, black and white objectives, was looked at as an experiment in organizational learning (Harvard Business School’s David Garvin says that a learning organization is constantly seeks new ways to improve and relish any chance to experiment and learn. The BLM certainly met this part of Garvin’s definition.).

**Results:**

Each of the eleven States in attendance, and the national office, constructed a short list of actions they’d committed to once they returned to their home units. (See the BLM color brochure for a full listing of the specific commitments each state made.) These commitments

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1 *The BLM manages the land resources on about 245 million surface acres, as well as 700 million acres of subsurface mineral estate. These public lands make up about 13 percent of the total land surface of the United States and more than 40 percent of all land managed by the Federal government.*
where based on Weick’s notion of “small wins,” moderate tasks that could be attempted fairly easily without great effort or cost.

The questions that are being tested and validated through these written commitments are:

- Can firefighters be taught to actively apply principles of HRO cognitive psychology at the field level?
- What is the best method to diffuse the concept of HRO system-wide in an organization, especially if many of its employees say they are “already doing it?”
- How does one measure the “success” of an HRO intervention?
- Should HRO be a top down intervention or, as the BLM has done, seeded from the top allowing the field to experiment and adapt it as they see fit?