High Reliability Organizing (HRO) describes the process used by veteran and novice alike for effective, safe, and reliable operations when entering an adverse or hazardous environment. As attractive as HRO is, many of its principles and characteristics are counterintuitive. The authors draw on their experience of over 50 years using these principles to interpret and translate HRO for use in healthcare. The concepts and principles of HRO and which support HRO are presented independent of medicine or healthcare. Source material for this book comes from the originating science or discipline.

High Reliability for a Highly Unreliable World explores this environment, the inevitability of crises, and the response of individuals and organizations. Though organizations and systems respond, it is the individual who engages. Planning, leadership, and decision-making models presume effective use of cognitive capabilities. Yet stress impairs cognitive function and threat distorts reasoning, a critical defect addressed in this book. Discussion of the different rationality and methods to modulate threat responses is new in this book and fundamental to making HRO operational.

A silo-free book. It draws upon many disciplines yet avoids the creation of silos that the combination of disparate disciplines can create when people pick and choose what makes sense to them or what is easiest to incorporate without regard to how others use the same knowledge. The authors integrate these disciplines into a coherent whole that explains HRO. This book does not give solutions and does not guarantee success. Rather, it describes how to think and operate when the rules around you have changed and the internal logic of the system is lost. HRO is a way of thinking and a way of organizing to work with adversity or enter a hazardous environment. Its methods, however daunting initially, can readily be learned and rapidly used for routine operations before a crisis.

“High Reliability for a Highly Unreliable World” is the long awaited primer on High Reliability Organizing (HRO) for the medical care professional that presents a definitive set of ideas and tools for managing the complex decision processes in the medical care environment. Interpreting and expanding upon the five HRO Principles from the previous definitive work of Weick/Sutcliffe in the three editions of “Managing the Unexpected”, this book further defines the five Attitudes and six specific Values that can be developed and are found in most HROs to facilitate more efficient and effective daily operations while training the entire medical care organization to anticipate and perform well in uncertain situations.

As both the Joint Commission and the Department of Defense continue to emphasize and encourage expanded use of HRO principles in healthcare, this book fills the void with specific recommendations, techniques, and procedures along the journey of higher reliability and enhanced patient safety.

- Thomas A. Mercer, RAdm, USN Ret, Former Commanding Officer, USS Carl Vinson (CVN-70) and , Commander, USS Nimitz and USS Midway Carrier Strike Groups, Commander, US Naval Facilities, Philippines during Desert Shield/Storm and Mt Pinatubo Eruption and Recovery

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Preparing for Code Blue through Daily Operations in Healthcare

Reviewer comments

“...High Reliability for a Highly Unreliable World provides a modern-day Rosetta stone for translating other industries’ success in quality, safety and reliability to health care. It draws heavily from contributors’ expertise in human performance in aviation, defense, law enforcement and maritime industries, to give breadth, depth and practical wisdom not yet available within health care. Much value, concept, context and content rests in the many stories and sidebars they provide. References to complexity science, anthropology, physiology, neuroscience, epistemology, logic and general philosophy will capture the interest of scholars and content experts; beginners and novices will want this book close at hand as a reference to frame future practice.”

Roger W. Bush, MD, MACP, SFHM  
Director, American Board of Internal Medicine  
Commissioner, The Joint Commission  
Director, American Board of Medical Specialties, Multispecialty Portfolio Program

“...[This] book takes the reader on a high reliability journey designed for healthcare delivery environments on the system, team, and personal levels of involvement. This work provides context to high reliability through stories and examples common to high-risk environments but unique to health systems and patient care. Without deviating from established HRO principles the authors introduce health care organizations and workers to theories and tools not generally associated with patient care delivery but that encourage introspective analysis of beliefs, behavior, and work processes and importantly, a simultaneous bottom-up, top-down acceptance and adoption of a sustainable, contextually relevant highly reliable health organization...”

Patricia E Sokol, RN, JD,  
George W Merck Family Fellow, Institute for Healthcare Improvement 2010-2011

From the foreword

“The present authors live by a 72-hour rule: “what I teach today must explain yesterday or be used tomorrow.” The density of ideas presented in this book might seem to preclude explaining either yesterday’s simplified determinacy or tomorrow’s indeterminacy. But that’s not necessarily the case. True, the variety of literatures and ideas and concepts and applications that are discussed is stunning. But so are the connections back to a much smaller set of foundations of high reliability organizing. Thus, the variety in this volume provides multiple points of entry into a finite set of principles, attitudes, and values that cohere around the management of complex surprises. Throughout there is an ongoing sensitivity to the fact that “if it happened once, it can happen again; if it happens again, it can happen worse.” And throughout, there is also an insistence that decision makers should keep asking themselves, is this “too soon” or “too late,” and “too much” or “too little.”

Sustained reliable functioning in an uncertain world is neither as obvious nor as intuitive as people often presume. It is tempting to simplify pathways to reliable functioning, tempting but misleading. The beauty of this volume is that pathways to more reliable functioning are made explicit even if, at times, that explicitness feels daunting. A close reading coupled with sustained, alert implementation, will produce the kind of informed awareness verbalized by a Los Angeles firefighter who said, “I may not know what is happening, but I know what to do.”

Karl E. Weick  
Distinguished University Professor, Emeritus  
University of Michigan

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