Theoretical Foundation and Practical Application of High Reliability Organization

Janice Tolk, Ph.D., P.E., B&W Pantex
Rick Hartley, Ph.D., P.E., B&W Pantex
Mario Beruvides, Ph.D., P.E., Texas Tech University
Ean-Han Ng, Ph.D., EIT, Texas Tech University

Practice without theory is blind; Theory without practice is idle. - Confucius

The High Reliability Organization (HRO) theory has been around since 1980s. Both theoretical and application based research on HRO can be found in the literature. Many research areas have been incorporated into HRO. Many organizations had claimed to be HROs or in the process of becoming HROs. With the incorporation of other research areas, exploration of other research avenues within HRO, and a great number of organizations upgraded to HRO, HRO has gained prominence among practitioners and academicians alike.

HRO research started with the observation of several highly reliable organizations. Through analytic induction, the first primary theory of HRO (Roberts) was developed. Second primary theory of HRO (Weick and Sutcliffe) was developed through analytic induction as well. Analytic induction is very effective in developing the initial stages of research. Since the development of these primary theories, several secondary theories have been proposed.

With the advancements in the HRO research and wide adoption of HRO in academic and industry, a number of critical questions regarding the theoretical foundation of HRO need to be addressed in order to further advance the HRO research. Questions such as What is the operational definition of HRO? How do we characterize HRO? What are the criteria to determine if an organization is truly a HRO? The operational definition and characteristics of HRO will determine the types of organizations that can be classified as HRO, and thus, determine the type of theoretical research to be conducted. A number of research articles have raised questions on the theoretical foundation of HRO research. Several suggestions have been proposed to improve HRO theory. However, no conclusive or definitive improvement to the existing theory had been done.

The theoretical foundation of any management theory is as important as the practical application of the theory. This presentation will discuss the issues raised due to the lack of operational definitions of HRO, questions on the theoretical foundations of HRO raised by various researchers in the literature, and corresponding suggestions proposed to improve the HRO theory.