Abstract
Daved van Stralen, MD, FAAP

The men of the 1970’s live-or-die environment of EMS had combat experience, fought major fires, experienced dangerous criminal actions, and, with limited options, worked alone to care for dying patients or victims as many called them. Most had lost a friend and all knew someone who died during an emergency. They had simplicity to their approach and an informal structure that worked despite the more formal structure of their respective services and associated formalities. This is where I started my working career. These men shared with me their painful lessons and hard-earned insights because they wanted me to know. They wanted me to do well.

This approach, which I later learned correlated with the High Reliability Organization, became the framework for all of my work in high risk environments whether winter mountaineering, trekking or climbing in the Himalaya, traveling in remote areas of the world, and in healthcare. This approach may seem counter-intuitive for healthcare with its system of central authority residing in the physician. Even the Emergency Medical Services and firefighting, to a degree, have moved toward central authority. From my perspective, it appears people find security in having a great plan and sufficient resources. From my experience, to use a mountaineering slogan, “The more you carry in your head the less you carry on your back.”

It may seem odd but the way we worked together in crisis applied to our day-to-day work, giving this approach the appearance of being somewhat mundane. As I moved into medicine as a physician, one of the first fire department paramedics to attend medical school, it became quite easy to introduce what we now call High Reliability to those not familiar with dangerous work environments. Repeatedly I saw civilians engage an unexpected crisis successfully with surprised satisfaction.

The dedicated novice eagerly learned High Reliability through informal interactions. For others it may take repeated presentations with different points of view. Soon, the student learns to share the workload and to make decisions. Even being responsible for making the smallest decision leads to pride in work and mindfulness. From this emerges what Karl Weick describes as collective mindfulness. People in a typical unit using HRO tell me that it may be the hardest work but it produces the least stress in their lives.

I have learned what those who taught me seemed to have known all along. We “do” HRO because it makes us better as people. The productivity, quality, resilience, and safety are byproducts.