

## Moving towards High Reliability – as easy as 3, 4, 5

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To integrate the concepts of high reliability organizing, the learning organization, and safety management into our everyday fire language and practice, we have developed a useful mnemonic; it's called "3, 4, 5." This mnemonic might be a helpful tool for remembering the key concepts and behaviors necessary for attaining high reliability.

**It's as easy as 3, 4, 5.**

**3** – Elements important for respectful interaction

**4** – Aspects of an "Informed" Culture

**5** – Practices of an HRO that help create "mindfulness"

### **3 – Respectful Interaction**<sup>1</sup> (Campbell 1990, p39)

Respectful interaction is based on the presence of three elements: trust, honesty, and self-respect.

- **Trust.** Respect the reports of others and be willing to base our beliefs and actions on them.
- **Honesty.** Report honestly so that others may use our observations in coming to valid beliefs.
- **Self-respect.** Respect our own perceptions and beliefs and seek to integrate them with the reports of others without deprecating [devaluing] them or ourselves.

### **4 - An Informed Culture**<sup>2</sup> (Reason 1997)

An informed culture requires the free exchange of information, which requires a culture that is: just, reporting, able to learn from itself and flexible.

- **Just Culture.** Don't shoot the messenger.
- **Reporting Culture.** Don't be afraid of being shot.
  - Are things happening that I did not plan/expect?
  - Have I let someone know?
  - Did I learn something that others should know about?
- **Learning Culture.** Learning is continuous; be a student.
  - Have I challenged my assumptions and expectations today?
  - Was I lucky or was I good?
- **Flexible Culture.** Rules don't and can't cover every situation. This is not the same thing as a "good rule" misapplied or ignored because it is not convenient or you don't agree.

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<sup>1</sup>Campbell, Donald T. 1990. p 39 In Asch's moral epistemology for socially shared knowledge" In Irwin Rock (Ed). The legacy of Solomon Asch: essays in cognition and social psychology: 39-52. Hilldale, NJ: Erlbaum.

<sup>2</sup> Reason, James. 1997. *Managing the Risks of Organizational Accidents*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company.

## **5 – Hallmarks of High Reliability Organizations<sup>3</sup> (Weick and Sutcliffe 2001)**

Highly Reliable Organizations spend energy thinking about mindful anticipation and awareness and in mindful containment.

*Things happen all the time we've never seen before.” (Karl Weick)*

### **‘Mindful Awareness and Anticipation’ of the Unexpected.**

- **Preoccupation with Failure**
- **Reluctance to Simplify**
- **Sensitivity to Operations**

A few useful tips to increase these HRO practices:

- Restate your goals in the form of mistakes that must not occur.
- Create/practice mindful moments (remember that mindfulness takes effort)

### **‘Mindful Containment’ of the Unexpected.**

- **Commitment to Resilience**
- **Deference to Expertise**

A few useful tips to increase these HRO practices:

- **“Begin to contain the event by doing what experience tells you to do, but remain in doubt that you’re doing exactly the right thing.**  
When the unexpected deteriorates into a (serious) disruption this result is an outcome that is partly novel and partly routine. You’ve seen a lot of messes, but you’ve never seen quite this particular mess.”
- **Enlarge competencies and response repertoires** (e.g. sand table exercises, staff rides, etc)  
Resilience takes “deep knowledge.”
- **Accelerate feedback (e.g. After Action Reviews)**  
Systems with slow feedback essentially give up any chance for resilience. Effective resilience requires quick, accurate feedback so that the initial effects of attempted improvisations can be detected quickly and the action altered or abandoned if the effects are making things worse.

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*“Every day we come home without an accident or injury is a near miss.”  
(MTU 3 participant, Missoula, MT 2006)*

## **All High Reliability Organizations**

Know that small things that go wrong are often early warning signals of deepening trouble that provide insight into the health of the whole system.

Treat near misses and errors as information about the health of their systems and try to learn from them.

Understand that if you catch problems before they grow bigger, you have more possible ways to deal with them.

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<sup>3</sup> Weick, Karl E., and Kathleen M. Sutcliffe. 2001. *Managing the Unexpected—assuring high performance in an age of complexity*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.