

The Use of Social Technology in the Application of High Reliability Organization (HRO) and Risk Management Principles

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Principle: All 5 principles of High Reliability Organizations (HRO) are dependent upon clear, effective communications this is especially true in the “Deference to Expertise” principle. Other important principles such as perception, problem framing and decision rationale are all embedded in social technology.

Situation: The application and use of HRO and risk management principles frequently falls short of the mark because of poor communication practices. Operational decisions in many areas such as on large wildland fires on National Forest lands and are ultimately made by agency administrators or managers. These individuals have varying degrees of experience and knowledge of HRO and risk management. On National Forests support is provided in part by Incident Management Teams (IMT) which have a high degree of experience and knowledge in incident response. This variance coupled with difficulties in communications often results in failures to define and implement shared goals resulting in wasted resources and the acceptance of unnecessary risk to the point of fatalities. The author discovered multiple cases where these failures to be rooted in communication breakdowns *even* when the parties involved were in frequent conversations and close contact.

Methods of Implementation: Initially the National Incident Management Organization (NIMO) received extensive and intensive training in social technology in order to participate and lead engagement activities as well as support agency administrators during incidents. Subsequently the author and NIMO trained developed and lead practices with responders and administrators. These engagement sessions are non-traditional, must be repeated and require vertical and horizontal integration to be effective. Success is dependent upon shifting the approach rather than perfecting a set of actions. A wide range of experiential practices were employed, all with the goal of retraining mental muscle memory.

Results: Full implementation of this type social technology yields a shift in the approach to decision-making at all levels, time critical, operational and strategic. This shift moves those involved from a mission view which attempts to mitigate all known hazards; to a risk management approach where actions are evaluated on the basis of risk vs. gain, with an evaluation of the amount and kind of exposure the action would entail. This shift becomes a way operating or “being” rather than a set of actions to follow. In true HRO fashion, the individuals are prepared to manage the unexpected and a learning culture emerges. Empirical results are difficult to obtain, however where metrics were available the application of this social technology resulted in exposure reductions of nearly 50 percent and the doubling of efficiency.

Conclusion: Regardless of the industry operations are always dependent upon communications at a variety of levels and scales. To achieve the benefit of effective communication and engagement skills must be taught and practiced with individuals and groups that will be interacting. These skills are not automatic and at times even counter intuitive. There is still much to learn in this arena and the adaptive approach will give space for this learning.