
BOOK REVIEW***MANAGING THE UNEXPECTED: SUSTAINED PERFORMANCE IN A COMPLEX WORLD, 3RD ED.***

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The religious institution as a high-reliability organization might sound like an oxymoron in the Western world, given the fifty-year trends of decreasing confidence in church or organized religion reported by Gallop.² Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe have been researching the concept of high-reliability organizing for at least half of those fifty years, focusing on organizations that are required to minimize failure, e.g., aircraft carriers, hospitals, and electrical power plants.

In the three editions of their *Managing the Unexpected* text, they identify five principles of what they call “mindful organizing” (21ff). HROs attend to early signs of potential concerns before they become more serious. They engage in ongoing sense-making, retrospectively seeking meaning in an ever-evolving context while realizing that their very activities contribute to the ongoing evolution of their experience (32). Not unlike some models of practical theology, mindful organizing poses framing questions to better comprehend the situation. What are we facing? What do we think we should do? Why? What indicators should we be monitoring? What feedback do you have that helps to clarify our understanding, identify capacity issues, raise issues we have not yet mentioned? The text includes a Mindfulness Organizing Scale assessment tool (43).

The first principle of high-reliability organizing (45ff), “preoccupation with failure,” entails a wariness of glitches, of any early indications that systems are not working as intended. These

² <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx>

early cues start to develop into a picture or story that something might be amiss. Hiccups might be clouds gathering before the storm of a failure. They are not meant to be normal. An organizational alertness to leading indicators of potential failure suggests negative feedback is at least as valuable as positive feedback, maybe more so. As one specialist in a highly respected children's hospital observed, "My job is being prepared for the worst while working for the best."

"A reluctance to simplify," the second principle (62ff), might be analogous to the liturgical idea of mystagogy. While members are systematically catechized into the faith community, knowledge of God cannot be distilled into simple truths. All will be fully known eventually. For now, holy mysteries invite an unrushed, lifetime journey of apprehending, of seeking to know and be known by the Creator and in the midst of community. A reluctance to simplify avoids over-generalizing while seeking a variety of perspectives. Diverse opinions broaden understanding, opening the organization to greater awareness. Rather than placing new evidence in familiar buckets with well-known labels in a nod to efficiency or parsimony, mindful organizing allows the fresh data to update interpretations of what is happening.

For one to manage the unexpected, a shared awareness of operating in a changing environment is required, a "sensitivity to operations" (77ff). Participants in HROs "make an effort to assemble complex inputs into a map, a frame of reference, and a definition of the situation, in other words, a plausible story" (83). They understand their role as a contributor to the organization and have a sense of how the various contributors together help form the whole. They respect the need to add value by "heedfully interrelating" as part of a larger system. Their attention is sharply focused with a humility that recognizes no situation is ever exactly like another. Therefore, open communication and availability to one another are fostered by regularly mining the unique insight each participant has to offer.

The fourth principle (94ff) of a "commitment to resilience" sounds familiar in a pandemic-laden world. HROs define resilience as "a combination of keeping errors small, of improvising work-arounds that keep the system functioning, and of absorbing

change while persisting” (97). HRO participants improvise. They understand the need to deepen improvisational skills and knowledge. Especially in complex and chaotic situations, they demand prompt and valid feedback to adjust their behaviors accordingly. They understand that past experience must yield to new learning as situations change.

In the face of the unexpected, HROs practice a “deference to expertise” (112ff). The hero expert does not exist—only expertise. Therefore, decisions are pushed to coalitions of perceived expertise wherever they form and regardless of rank or status. HRO cultures minimize hubris and foster pliability. They flex to match the situation at hand and habitually run simulations to more quickly identify expertise that can be tapped when the unexpected arises. They work against the “fallacy of centrality” that says ones in central positions will know something is amiss and will alert the rest of the organization. They are the authorities. If they do not see concerns, then nothing amiss must be happening. No need to defer to expertise.

High-reliability organizing in a religious institution might look like attending to the early cues of life in a fallen world with responsive compassion and justice. It might involve stewarding mystery in a diverse community yearning to know and be known. It might resemble a people gathered around a Grand Narrative, each one contributing to making the Story recognizable for others. It might betray a stubborn persistence regardless of the challenges. It might display a readiness to become like a child so God might raise up the lowly.

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