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How mindful is your company? Lessons for organizations from the Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital Ebola crisis

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In December 2013, the most widespread epidemic of the Ebola virus disease broke out in West Africa. Spreading rapidly with horrific symptoms, no known cure, and an extraordinarily high mortality rate, the disease threw global public health authorities into a panic. Then, on October 8, 2014, the American public's worst fears were realized. Thomas Eric Duncan, a Liberian national who had arrived in Dallas, Texas less than three weeks earlier on a flight from Monrovia, Liberia, died of Ebola at Texas Health Presbyterian Hospital (THPH). Experiencing symptoms of abdominal pain, dizziness, nausea, and headache several days following his arrival in Dallas, Duncan had gone to THPH's emergency room (ER). However, his illness was misdiagnosed and he was sent home. Duncan returned to the ER several days later, but his disease was ultimately fatal. Additionally, without a rigorous Ebola protocol being followed by the hospital, two nurses contracted the virus.

How did such a critical misstep occur at a respected American medical institution? What is to stop other types of crises from happening in nuclear power generation plants, air traffic control systems, or any other high-reliability organizations (HRO)? The answer: Mindfulness. Mindfulness refers to clear-minded attention to and awareness of what is perceived in the present, both internally and externally. Mindfulness in individuals is linked to enhanced attention, cognition, emotions, behavior, and better workplace performance. Mindfulness is also important for organizations. Given the dynamism and uncertainty of our business environment, all companies, and HROs in particular, can benefit from becoming more mindful. HROs operate in environments with high potential for error and where the scale of consequences precludes learning through experimentation. In *Managing the Unexpected: Resilient Performance in an Age of Complexity*, Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe state that

acting mindfully means that companies organize themselves in a way that allows them to notice the unexpected and prevent or contain its further development; if they are unable to prevent or contain the problem, they focus on resilience with an emphasis on swift restoration of the system.

Organizations that are not HROs can benefit from mindfulness, too, as shown in the cases of the Exxon Valdez and BP Deepwater Horizon oil spills. The Exxon Valdez oil tanker ran aground on Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound, Alaska in 1989, releasing 10.8 million gallons of oil. An investigation determined that causes were due to human error, possibly as a result of fatigue and excessive workload. Additionally, the captain was charged with impairment from alcohol. The 2010 explosion of BP's Deepwater Horizon Macondo Well offshore drilling rig in the Gulf of Mexico became the petroleum industry's largest marine oil spill in history. The rig sank and led to the release of 210 million gallons of oil over the course of 87 days. Multiple stakeholders were involved. The rig was owned by Transocean and leased by BP to drill an exploratory well, and Halliburton had performed some cementing operations in the well within 24 h of the explosion. BP blamed Transocean and Halliburton; those companies each blamed BP solely. The investigation's final report found that BP, Halliburton, and Transocean had made cost-cutting decisions that ultimately led to the explosion. A lack of safety culture, poor risk management, lack of response to critical indicators, inadequate well control response, and insufficient training were all contributing factors to the explosion.

Moving to the food manufacturing and restaurant industries, both Blue Bell Creameries and Chipotle Mexican Grill experienced foodborne illness outbreaks in 2015 leading to hospitalizations and, in the case of Blue Bell, deaths.

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Chipotle's contamination occurred on the farm and in transport, and involved mishandling of product storage and restaurant employees. Blue Bell's front-line workers reported that they tried to call bosses' attention to unsanitary and potentially unsafe conditions, including water leaks onto ice cream processing equipment.

The key question is: How do organizations become more mindful? We sought the answer to this question through a qualitative study that extracts lessons on organizational mindfulness from the 2014 THPH Ebola crisis. As part of this qualitative effort, we relied on public sources and archival records, incorporating information from news sources, scholarly analysis, health officials, and hospital administrators. Secondary data were collected from administrator interviews and documentation of lessons learned. In addition, we further enriched our model and validated our conclusions by conducting interviews with an expert panel, including doctors, policy makers, and emergency response leaders. By taking a systemic view of the events that occurred in Dallas, we provide a set of lessons on mindfulness that are relevant to all firms operating in uncertain, complex, and fast-paced contexts.

STRATEGIES AND CULTURES FOR MINDFULNESS

Attention and *awareness* are critical elements of mindfulness. Implementing mindfulness requires the combination of continuous refinement of existing expectations, as well as a willingness and capability to formulate new expectations that make sense of unprecedented events. Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe propose five strategies for mindfulness: (1) preoccupation with failure, (2) reluctance to simplify interpretations, (3) sensitivity to operations, (4) commitment to resilience, and (5) deference to expertise. A constant preoccupation with the possibility of failure, even in the most successful endeavors, avoids hubris and arrogance

by allowing individuals to ask questions and recognize mistakes. Reluctance to simplify interpretations involves taking deliberate steps to create more complete and nuanced pictures of activities and processes to include diverse views and skepticism. Sensitivity to operations highlights attention to input from the front line, the development of situational awareness, and the ability to concentrate on a specific task while having a sense of the bigger picture. Commitment to resilience emphasizes containing and bouncing back from errors, including the ability to keep errors small and to improvise workarounds that keep the system functioning. Finally, deference to expertise involves valuing diversity because it allows firms to act on the complexities their employees recognize and defer decisions to the person with the most expertise, regardless of rank or status. Together, these factors generate reliably dependable processes with minimal and manageable errors.

Mindfulness strategies need to be supported by mindful organizational cultures. The question is: What type of organizational culture might support mindfulness? Multiple types of cultures have been recommended for HROs, including safety cultures, informed cultures, reporting cultures, fair and just cultures, flexible cultures, learning cultures, and error management cultures (see Table 1 for the core belief behind each culture). We find that each of these cultures, alone, does not capture the essence of a mindful organizational culture.

Edgar Schein, one of the world's foremost scholars of organizational culture, concluded that culture is developed by individuals within an organization sharing common experiences in addressing external and internal problems. These experiences lead the organization to developing shared beliefs about the way the world surrounding them works, and the methods for problem solving that are effective in that world. This description of culture is consistent with the notion of "web of beliefs," developed by Willard Quine and Joseph Ullian, which emphasizes observations (at the periphery of the web), inferred beliefs, and deep-seated

Table 1 Organizational Cultures and High-Reliability Organizations

	Core belief and definition
Safety culture	<i>Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does.</i> A culture that reflects safety in individual, group, and organizational attitudes, values, and behaviors.
Informed culture	<i>Ideas in secret die; they need light and air or they starve to death.</i> A culture that requires the free exchange of information.
Fair and just culture	<i>Don't shoot the messenger.</i> A culture in which everyone openly identifies and examines the organization's weaknesses, and feels safe voicing concerns about one's own actions and those of others.
Reporting culture	<i>Don't fear being shot.</i> A culture with a system of reporting near misses, "close calls," and other warning events.
Flexible culture	<i>Rules don't and can't cover every situation.</i> A culture that adapts to changing demands.
Learning culture	<i>Learning is continuous; be a student.</i> A culture conducive to creativity, problem solving, and experimentation.
Error management culture	<i>Problems are not stop signs, they are guidelines.</i> A culture that uses early detection and correction methods to minimize the negative consequences of errors, and prevents future errors by analyzing the causes of similar errors.

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