



The Truth and Challenges of Cultivating Chronic Unease – Human Factors, Anticipation and Vigilance

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Today, the term “Chronic Unease” warrants more exploration based on what we know about human and motivational science. When we consider some important factors about how the human brain approaches safety and operation-critical situations, it will take a focused team effort to achieve reliably safe results.

The term may sound like an undesirable medical diagnosis, but in reality it describes an attitude throughout an organization’s workforce that is linked to successful safety outcomes in high hazard industries. In fact, chronic unease is cited as a characteristic of High Reliability Organizations (HROs) describing companies with long-standing records of safe operations. At its core, chronic unease is a mindset that gives rise to an especially effective approach to safety and risk management.

Chronic unease is about accepting that we are vulnerable to an incident, injury and catastrophe if work teams and their leaders miss important changes to, and related increases in, exposure. This includes noticing weak signals that act as symptoms of a brewing problem that, to keep people safe, requires special attention. It is also about being vigilant in cultivating and maintaining a group mindset that examines “How Can It Happen Here?” “What are We Doing to Prevent it From Happening?” and finally, “How Effective Are Our Efforts?”

Focusing on Anticipation

The goal of High Reliability Safety is to improve the identification and response to early warning signals. This was within our review of the five aspects of organizational performance that are key to both preventing catastrophic incidents and ensuring safe operations: Anticipation, Questioning, Diligence, Resilience and Learning.

Chronic Unease is a critical aspect of Anticipation. It is a state of unrelenting watchfulness, a persistent suspicion that all is not well, and that something could go horribly wrong at any moment. Anticipation is created by a culture that is always seeking indicators of problems. People with a strong “safety imagination” tend to have a talent for imagining the catastrophic consequences of risk situations. Their vigilance leads them to closely monitor the environment, picking up even on weak indicators that something is awry. In the pursuit of effective safeguards, pessimism and a questioning attitude are considered good qualities as both are linked to a tendency to expect failure, battle complacency and tenacity.

Anticipation skills improve leadership’s ability to identify potential risk and recheck and verify safe operations, even at times when they seem to function smoothly.

As a leader with chronic unease, you need to focus on:

Triggering questions to confirm that signals (and small incidents) are not being missed during periods of low incident reporting;

Recognizing that problems are always possible since no system is without gaps;

Encouraging and celebrating the reporting of “weak signals” or minor abnormalities and

Thoroughly investigating variances and anomalies to improve learning and understanding

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How Chronic Unease Bolsters a Culture of Safety

When an organization incorporates chronic unease effectively, leaders create an environment where everyone develops a heightened sense of Anticipation. This means that “weak signals” no longer go unnoticed, but instead are understood as an indication that something needs attention. It also refers to an open channel of communication. Individuals are no longer afraid to speak up, even if their concerns may turn out to be unfounded.

Decision-making driven by chronic unease requires access to data and information. Successful organizations are active in seeking more information about risks and safety measures that can help optimize their safety performance. High reliability organizations routinely discuss and review their risk registries, hazards assessments and hazard control systems.



While chronic unease can be a natural part of someone's personality, the behaviors associated with it can also be taught, learned and even measured when an organization commits to a culture of High Reliability Safety.

Human Design and the Pitfalls of Avoiding Chronic Unease

When unchecked, there is a dark side of chronic unease: An excessive sense of it can morph into paralyzing anxiety. The brain's hardwiring dictates maintaining homeostasis and pushing us to a place where "everything's fine" – This poses a great challenge for teams to successfully transition from understanding chronic unease as a concept to understanding that it requires daily attention via deliberative action. These actions can be questioning, reviewing and verifying safe operations, which are especially important given the continual brain prompts that tell us that today will be just as safe as yesterday.

This notion is often overlooked and usually requires ongoing underscoring with teams to prevent a drift toward our default setting, often referenced as "complacency." It is often assumed that leaders and teams go from attentive to complacent. However, this shift should be viewed as "what have we done today to move from inattentive to focused" at specific points throughout the day.

A state of mind preoccupied with potential failure is beneficial only when it drives specific, planned and timely action to reduce risk and prioritize safety – even when it may introduce inefficiencies into your daily work process.

These actions may slow down operations to accommodate data collection and to weigh various courses of action. However, considering the scope of potential harm to human life, the environment, property and company brand should an incident occur, the costs of a slowdown and short-term productivity are dwarfed by the enormous benefits of a culture of chronic unease.

As a call to action, take time each month to assess a worksite or department's readiness as they consider the view of "It Can't Happen Here" versus "How Can It Happen Here?." Consider providing observational feedback to teams regarding the group's vigilance to detect changes in exposure, as well as reporting their ability to take control of human factors matters that naturally creep into operations if left uncontrolled.

Doing so is the first major step to becoming a High Reliability Organization. How is your journey progressing?

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