

## Managing the Unexpected: Sustained Performance in a Complex World

BY KARL E. WEICK AND KATHLEEN M. SUTCLIFFE

“Change is the only constant in life.” Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher, uttered this line almost 2500 years ago. Many of us have heard it and lived it. In the military, we are amid great change. Our future is uncertain and the path to get there is changing hourly. We also face uncertainty as physicians. Dr. William Osler once said, “Medicine is a science of uncertainty and an art of probability.” In these times of change in both the military and medicine, we need physicians to lead us through the uncertainty. In the book *Managing the Unexpected*, Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe use the framework of high reliability to offer practical techniques and strategies on how to lead through unexpected events to achieve sustainable success.

Change can be planned or forced upon us by unexpected events. The former has well defined models on how to lead change. Two of the most recognized models are those of John Kotter (Professor of Leadership, Emeritus, Harvard Business School) and Jack Welch (former Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, General Electric). However, what do you do when something unexpected happens? Kotter and the GE model provide a set number of prescriptive steps to plan the implementation of change. Weick and Sutcliffe surmise that when the unexpected occurs, it is already too late to plan for change. The underlying premise of their book is that we need to prepare our organizations in advance in order to be able to handle the unexpected. They have chosen the principles of high reliability, depicted in table 1, as the guiding principles for creating nimble organizations. They encourage leaders to mindfully coordinate around these five principles in what is termed high reliability

organizing (HRO). HRO will prepare leaders to manage the unexpected.

The authors offer numerous examples of companies that failed to manage the unexpected. They also offer background information on the five principles of HRO. I will not delve into those here but instead will focus more on pieces of practical advice for allowing a leader to better manage the unexpected.

Before we start, there are two terms that are crucial to define. **Sensemaking** and **circumstances**. “Sensemaking is about sizing up a situation while you simultaneously act and partially determine the nature of what you discover... [it] is seldom an occasion for passive diagnosis. Instead, it is an attempt to grasp a developing situation in which the observer affects the trajectory of that development.” They define circumstances simply as “flux.”

HRO, in part, is based upon sensemaking, specifically, collective sensemaking. The authors focus on three things we need to do in order to be successful:

1. We must trust the reports of others and be willing to base our beliefs and actions on them.
2. We must report honestly so that others can use our observations to help them come to valid beliefs.
3. We must maintain self-respect, which means we have to respect our own perceptions and beliefs and seek to integrate them with the reports of others without belittling either them or ourselves.

These three principles are critical to collective sensemaking and thus our ability to adapt to the

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unexpected. From this comes adaptive managing, the fundamental task of attending to, sorting out, and prioritizing circumstances. In large part this is based upon our ability to communicate with our employees. Communication is something that we all learn about and hear about regularly, and yet, it is something upon which all of us can improve.

The book offers two protocols to assist in ensuring the best communication of unexpected events to maximize the organization's ability to manage through them. Psychologist Gary Klein proposed a protocol called **STICC: situation, task intent, concerns, and calibrate**. Each of these terms bears with it a question that we need to ask ourselves when we are relaying critical information to ensure the information is actionable. An example from the book on how this would sound follows:

1. **The Situation** = Here's what I think we face.
2. **The Task** = Here's what I think we should do.
3. **The Intent** = Here's why I think that is what we should do.
4. **The Concerns** = Here's what we should keep our eye on because if that changes, we're in a whole new ball game.
5. **Calibrate** = Now talk to me. (Tell me if you don't understand, can't do it, or see something I don't.)

Another way, offered by the authors, to approach this is to ask yourself the following:

1. To what is my attention directed (object)?
2. With what is my attention directed (resources)?
3. For what is my attention being directed (goal)?

These frameworks help convey the critical aspects of a situation, make it more meaningful, allow us to focus our efforts in real time, place our attention where it needs to be, and guide the organization during times of the unexpected.

Communication about an event when it occurs aside,

the focus of the book is setting the conditions for a mindful organization that can best sustain operations through unexpected circumstances. The book offers examples of companies that have either succeeded or failed (or both) in managing the unexpected. However, the gist of the principles in this book are based on the Federal Aviation Administration, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and Navy carrier operations. Thus, we need to ask ourselves, based on their experiences, how do we set the conditions for mindful organizing? The authors provide practical strategies organized around the five principles of high reliability. I doubt that these are new concepts to most of you, but they bear refreshing from time to time. To that end, I will elaborate on a few of the more salient strategies.

The overarching themes on mindful organizing lie in how we engage with, train, and empower our employees. I know for many of us, getting out and doing walk rounds can be tough as we are frequently glued to our e-mail inbox and computer screens full of spreadsheets. However, I have personally seen, in my career, how many of the strategies in this book can help strengthen an organization and help it sustain success through tough times. In order for that to occur though, we must engage not just with subordinate leaders, but also with front line employees on a regular basis. Ultimately it rests with us as leaders to set the conditions and establish the culture of mindful organizing. We need to stay connected to the front lines as much as possible and cannot establish a mindful organization from an office, conference room, or chair.

Regular engagement with our front-line employees helps us stay relevant and keeps us on top of the pulse of the organization. For physician leaders, I would also recommend staying relevant through clinical practice. The benefits to us of being in the clinic side-by-side with our front-line employees is invaluable. While engaging with staff at all levels, we need to seek out bad news. Employees are far more likely to voluntarily report good news and hold the bad news to themselves. It is incumbent upon us to ask questions in order to elicit the bad or potentially bad news so that we can manage it before it snowballs out of control. The goal is to be in front of the issue and prevent it from being an unexpected event. Remember as well to cultivate healthy skepticism and ask questions publicly when appropriate prior to making decisions. None of us want people that blindly follow because that is what they are told to do. It is crucial for our employees to know that we want them to speak up and bring us the good and the bad. The book encourages us as well to treat our past

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experience with ambivalence. Experience is a good guide and can help with the initial response to the unexpected, however, almost every situation has uniqueness; as such we should not just rest on our laurels and treat things as we always have. Lastly, don't forget that there is expertise all around us. We need to defer to the experts whenever possible and encourage the imagination and decision-making skills of those around us to successfully manage the unexpected.

When looking to see if your team is mindfully organized and ready for the unexpected, you can self-assess using the mindfulness organizing scale shown in Table 2. This can help direct your efforts in toward creating a mindful organization. There are other practical tips and tools throughout the book on which I have not elaborated. They serve as reminders on how to practice HRO to set an organization up for success in managing the unexpected. It is impossible for us to remember and execute every one of these strategies, protocols, tips, or tools. However, I encourage everyone to refresh on these topics periodically as we continue our march through the current cycle of change through the unexpected.

Table 1 – Descriptions of HRO principles

Principle	Description
Preoccupation with failure	The need for continuous attention to anomalies that could be symptoms of larger problems. Concentration centers on anomalies, cues, normalizing, wariness, and doubt.
Reluctance to simplify	Simplification obscures unwanted, unanticipated, unexplainable details and in doing so, increases the likelihood of unreliable performance
Sensitivity to operations	Close attention to what is going on right now, in the present. Definitions of the situation matter, and it is one's sensitivity to these definitions that also matters.
Commitment to resilience	A combination of keeping errors small, of improvising workarounds that keep the system functioning, and of absorbing change while persisting. Resilience requires elasticity and recovery.
Deference to expertise	A pattern of respectful yielding, domain-specific knowledge, compressed and generalizable experience, and relative expertise.

Table 2 – The Mindfulness Organizing Scale

How well does each of the following statements describe your work unit, department, or organization? Enter next to each item below the number that corresponds with your conclusion:

1 = not at all, 2 = to some extent, 3 = a great deal.

We have a good “map” of each other’s talents and skills.
We talk about mistakes and ways to learn from them.
We discuss our unique skills with each other, so we know who has relevant specialized skills and knowledge.
We discuss alternatives as to how to go about our normal work activities.
When discussing emerging problems with coworkers, we usually discuss what to look out for.
When attempting to resolve a problem, we take advantage of the unique skills of our colleagues.
We spend time identifying activities we do not want to go wrong.
When errors happen, we discuss how we could have prevented them.
When a crisis occurs, we rapidly pool our collective expertise to attempt to resolve it.

Scoring: Add the numbers. If you score higher than 22, your firm’s mindful organizing practices are strong. If you score between 14 and 21, your firm’s mindful organizing practices are moderate. Scores lower than 14 suggest that you should actively be thinking of ways to improve your firm’s mindful organizing practices.

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