



The Five Principles of High Reliability Organizations (or HROs)

In their book “Managing the Unexpected: Resilient Performance in an Age of Uncertainty,” Drs. Karl E Weick and Kathleen M. Sutcliffe examine ways that people and organizations organize for high performance settings where the potential for error is overwhelming.¹ For example, nuclear aircraft carriers, air traffic control and operations systems, hostage negotiation teams and emergency medical treatment centers share a singular demand: they have no choice but to operate reliably.²

Weick and Sutcliffe attribute the success of HROs to their determined efforts to act “mindfully.” HROs organize themselves in such a way that they are better able to notice the unexpected and halt its development.³ The following five principles have been identified⁴ by Drs. Weick & Sutcliffe to underlie HRO performance and capacity to anticipate, respond, and contain the “unexpected.”

- 1. Preoccupation with failure.**
Attention on close calls and near misses (“being lucky vs. being good”); focus more on failures rather than successes.
- 2. Reluctance to simplify interpretations.**
Solid “root cause” analysis practices.
- 3. Sensitivity to operations.**
Situational awareness and carefully designed change management processes.
- 4. Commitment to resilience.**
Resources are continually devoted to corrective action plans and training.
- 5. Deference to expertise.**
Listen to your experts on the front lines (ex. authority follows expertise).

Weick and Sutcliffe advise that failure to move towards this type of mindful infrastructure magnifies the damage produced by unexpected events and impairs reliable performance.⁵

¹ Weick, Karl E.; Kathleen M. Sutcliffe (2001). [*Managing the Unexpected - Assuring High Performance in an Age of Complexity*](#). San Francisco, CA, USA: Jossey-Bass Preface p.ix

² Id.

³ Id. p18.

⁴ Id. pp. 10–17.

⁵ Id. p2.