

IPTC 12828

Corporate HSE Bureaucracies Impede Accident Prevention

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This paper was prepared for presentation at the International Petroleum Technology Conference held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 3–5 December 2008.

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Introduction

Organizational safety programs protect lives of individuals, but they tend to evolve into bureaucratic monstrosities that threaten the life of the organization itself. This paper discusses that phenomenon, explains why it occurs, and offers a way to protect the organization's life while increasing protection for individuals.

Company Life Expectancy

It seems odd that there are so few companies that are more than 200 years old. There cannot be centuries old companies manufacturing airplanes, computers, televisions, or high technology devices that were not known centuries ago, but industries like lumbering, leather making, textiles, construction, mining, and shipping have been around for thousands of years. Why are there no 500 year-old companies making shoes, for example?

Companies form with dedicated, sincere, skilled, and knowledgeable people employing the best available technology to supply something that society needs. When a new company starts business they will sooner or later experience unplanned events that interfere with production and diminish efficiency. If the company effectively analyzes unplanned events and prevents them from repeating then production and efficiency naturally increase. After a few years of solving such problems, companies would be expected to have a big advantage over new competitors who encounter similar start-up problems that reduce output. In theory, a head start in problem solving should lead to established companies having an ever increasing advantage over newly organized competitors.

Real life does not match that theory because new companies wipe out old established companies almost daily. Organizations are born, mature, age, and die – just like any other living organism. The life span may be only a matter of days, or it might last several generations, but organizations rarely survive 200 years. That includes companies, religious groups, and governments. Yes, major religions and countries such as China, Egypt, India, and others have been around thousands of years, but those organizations bear little resemblance to what they were ten centuries ago. They are continuous in name, but there have been numerous organizational rebirths, including empires that have come and gone.

Notice the role of “unplanned events” in an organization's life expectancy. That is the definition for the word *accident* in the broad sense of anything that happens that was not expected to happen and has the potential for causing harm. A central hypothesis of this paper holds that examining how organizations respond to unplanned events that threaten individual lives reflect how they respond to other unplanned events that threaten the organization's life.

The Bureaucratic Spiral

Bureaucracy grows because of ineffective problem solving, as illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. When an unplanned event interrupts production we analyze it to determine causes then we do something to prevent it from happening again. The corrective action may be anything from a single act taking only a few seconds up to a major change involving hiring more people, but it always requires at least a little time and resources. If the corrective actions work, the problems (unplanned events) disappear, but if the actions are not effective then the problems grow. They grow because of repetition, expansion into other areas, or by adding the additional issue of why the corrective action failed.

Essentially all accidents are repeats of previous accidents, and the last time they happened people took corrective actions to