Constructive Deviance in Search and Rescue Teams:
Getting Around Regulations

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Abstract

Highly Reliable Teams (HRT) work in complex and extensively regulated environments where improvisation outside routine processes can be critical to success. Work teams in search and rescue, emergency medicine, surgery, aviation, and military solve complex problems in chaotic environments with high reliability. They must produce successful outcomes under the detailed and conflicting regulations from professional societies, sponsoring agencies, and government.

This research project will identify how HRTs deal with regulation during times of high stress and chaos when solutions fall outside accepted process and regulatory protection. The Principle Investigator (PI) proposes to imbed with six different HRTs, and through observation, interview and participation, explore the relationship, regulation, reliability, and non-compliance.

Key Words: Regulation, Deviance, SAR Teams, Complex Problems,

Introduction

Search and Rescue teams exhibit constructive deviance when regulations are not effectively designed for the current mission. This deviance leads to innovations and improvements in the operating procedures of the team. Though deviant team members act outside of the formal rules, informal constraints continue to guide their actions. Teams also conduct post-mission performance reviews in which the actions of the

team are analyzed in a group setting. These discussions are critical to maintaining the integrity of the team while also providing flexibility.

Search and rescue teams undertake physically and mentally challenging missions to come to the aid of lost persons. The mission is to locate and extract the subject(s) to ensure a safe hand-off to the next team for treatment and rehabilitation. Their success is enabled by extensive training to develop technical skills, as well as effective teamwork and communication. A systematic process of problem solving allows them to leverage the talents and expertise of each member of the team and operate effectively. Regulations have been implemented to support the operations of SAR and other emergency response teams. These may be implemented by the team itself or a third-party regulator.

Though regulations are intended to benefit the team, they become problematic because regulators and team leaders possess an imperfect ability to foresee the conditions that will be present in future missions. When team members encounter those unfamiliar situations that could not be anticipated, regulations can become burdensome and obstructive. In some cases, these constraints even increase the risks of a mission or prohibit the team from acting in the best interest of their subjects.

Our findings are supported by participant observation and structured interviews with members from 15 SAR teams.

High Reliability and Complex Problem Solving

Many SAR teams have become dependable and developed the traits of highly reliable teams (HRTs) (see article by Hammond and Taylor in this issue). HRTs are preoccupied with failure, reluctant to blame, and possess a high degree of expertise (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). Because failure can result in catastrophic consequences, HRTs prepare and train for future missions. If the desired result is not achieved, team members focus on how they could have acted to improve the situation, rather than pointing a finger at their teammates. This is part of the ongoing process of learning and improvement that these organizations undertake (Beyea, 2005). HRTs are frequently tasked with solving complex problems in high risk environments..

This process allows teams to solve complex problems in an effort to return circumstances to a desired state (Newell and Simon, 1972). The complex problems faced by reliable organizations are difficult to manage due to the potential for catastrophic results in incident of failure, time constraints, and changing characteristics of the mission (Frensch and Funke, 1995). Emotional duress and incomplete information often limit the ability of logic and rational thinking to guide the decision-making process. Complex problem solving is a social process that requires effective communication and a coordinated implementation of technical strategies by multiple individuals.

The performance of these teams does not only require much training and knowledge, but is also heavily regulated. These mechanisms of control are imposed with the intention to modify behavior in a way that reduces risks for team members and the subjects of their missions. These can be imposed through regulations, policies, or organizational mandates called standard operating procedures. They are implemented by regulators or through hierarchical organizational structures and are enforced in cases of noncompliance.

These constraints sometimes add complexity to already complex problems, which are characterized by unfamiliar and uncontrollable elements that make anticipation difficult and sometimes impossible. HRTs, while highly regulated based on previous experiences, must constantly adapt to new situations. However, formal constraints, in order to be restricting, do not include provisions of flexibility. Thus, when unforeseen challenges arise, regulations may impede the ability of team members to respond effectively.

Despite the lack of given flexibility, we have observed that individuals, or the entire team, are willing to bend or break rules to ensure safe completion of the mission. These deviant actions instead conform with informal constraints, such as the culture of the team or individually held values. Though teams prefer an organized and structured course of action that can be implemented in different situations, they find safety and reliability to be of greater importance. Thus, if the optimal response in a given mission is not in compliance with a regulation, the team will disregard that rule to promote safety and success.

In management literature, these behaviors are conceptualized as constructive deviance. Individuals exhibit constructive deviance by acting outside of the constraints of their organization in a way that benefits the organization and is viewed as acceptable (Vadera et al 2013, Warren 2003). Though constructive deviance has been studied extensively, the concept has not been studied in the context of Search and Rescue. These HRTs are justified in straying from the regulations they are subject to when doing so increases the team's chance of success. Constructive deviance benefits the SAR group by reducing risks and improving its processes.

Forms of Constructive Deviance

Constructive deviance can be observed in many different forms within a SAR team. Though this list is not comprehensive, it begins to establish categories that can be used to analyze team behavior. Each of these types of non-compliance share the same objective, which is to benefit the members of the team, the subject, or to more effectively complete the objective and solve the problem.

Deliberately unclear communication: One way that constructive deviance manifests itself within an HRT is through purposeful miscommunication or equivocation. In these instances, team members with complimenting roles overcome the burden of a constraint through the use of understood ambiguity or false pretense. A demonstration of this type of deviance comes from a SAR team in winter conditions in a mountainous location. This search and rescue team had hiked through avalanche-prone terrain over the course of twelve hours to recover a subject lost deep in the mountains. To the team's discouragement, they discovered that the subject had already expired when they were finally able to arrive at his location.

The team was further dismayed when contemplating the twelve-hour return journey ahead of them back through volatile avalanche territory, now carrying a heavy stretcher for their deceased patient. Had they found their patient alive, the team is authorized to call for an extraction via helicopter. But policy did not permit a flight for transporting bodies, regardless of fatigue levels within the team. The pilots, understanding the exhaustion and hazards in front of the team, coordinated a way in which the team could be transported home and avoid the dangerous trek on foot. Over the radio, they instructed the team to begin CPR on the patient so that they could then assist transporting a subject 'in need of urgent medical care.' The team followed instructions, and were taken back to safety. The after-action report states that the subject died during the flight. By using equivocation as to the true situation, the team was able to receive safe transportation through dangerous terrain and avoid potential casualties.

Don't Ask, Don't Tell: The second mode of observed constructive deviance consists of the team's collective agreement to an implausible condition or occurrence in order to overcome regulatory constraints and accompanying penalties that, in their respective instances, take away from their ability to provide assistance to their subject. A team in a coastal area provides an example of this exception method. The team was trained in white water rescues, but was not trained or authorized to conduct rescues in ocean water. On a mission, they began tracking a subject along the beach. At one point, they could see a body in the water, not far off the shore. The team hoped to avoid disciplinary action, but still come to the immediate aid of the individual. Quickly, they made a plan and members of the team waded into the water. Though the patient was out of their jurisdiction, it was critical that the team acted immediately to have a chance at reviving him. Afterwards, the team collectively stated that "the wind brought the body back into shore." By making an exception, the team was able to work around the imperfect regulation.

Finger pointing: This strategy has three different manifestations. The first is to blame the least vulnerable. For example, a senior SAR member used an old rope and a wrong technique to rescue a young woman on a cliff before the SAR team could arrive. The safety violation was ignored because the sheriff's deputy said, "We trusted his experience in determining the urgency of the problem."

The second manifestation is in situations when constraints prevent mission objectives, there can be brief but collective rebellions. Individuals find strength in numbers under the mindset of "they can't fire us all." This strategy allows teams to mitigate individual risk by collectively dispersing responsibility and, therefore, potential penalties, across all other team members.

Finally, teams sometimes concentrate full responsibility into one single team member who faces severe penalties while the remainder of the team is not held accountable. This individual may be chosen by the team or might volunteer him/herself in order to help fellow team members avoid disciplinary action, job loss, or even legal liability. Placement within the hierarchical structure may impact the consequences or actions taken against the deviator. Thus, the scapegoat may be a junior or senior member of the team, each with separate reasons to accept full responsibility and its consequences.

Junior members may feel obligated to protect more seasoned members. Penalties for their actions may not be as severe because they are less experienced and, therefore, are not held to the same level of accountability as their leaders. Senior members will receive more leniency due to their past accomplishments and expertise. Some will see it as their duty to leverage this recognition and accept full responsibility.

Conclusion

Constructive deviance plays a critical role in the Search and Rescue community as a process of innovation. Although regulations are created and implemented with the intention of aiding the problem-solving process by positively modifying behaviors, HRTs routinely face complex and unanticipated problems. Inflexible regulations based on prior missions often become burdensome to the team's ability to accomplish the objective and solve new problems. Unintentionally, they can suffocate the team's ability to think creatively and implement better methods. Overly stringent regulations hinder the process of problem solving and innovation (Galperin, 2003). Fortunately, teams have found ways to manage these effects and continue operating effectively.

An important way to improve the role of regulations and their effect on team success is to develop an effective feedback loop through a system of after-action reviews. By conducting AARs, the team quickly learns from mistakes and implements new strategies to decrease errors. These reviews can facilitate a connection between regulators and HRTs, who have an interdependent relationship to provide feedback to one another and adjust constraints to more adequately match local circumstances. This will also cultivate an environment where creative thinking and new ideas aimed at innovating and efficiently accomplishing the objective are encouraged. Finally, these post-mission discussions will allow the team to monitor its use of constructive deviance.

The mechanisms of constructive deviance described above demonstrate how teams can successfully innovate. Employing these methods and nonconventional ideas helps Search and Rescue teams to complete their objectives and mitigate risks, despite unforeseen problems and existing regulations that do not support them. Highly Reliable Teams display instances of behavior that conflict with active regulations and norms, but these actions conform with the deeper values of their group culture and lead to innovate solutions in lost-person situations.

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Scott C Hammond, PhD is a Professor of Management in the Jon M. Huntsman School of Business at Utah State University and an active member of Utah County Search and Rescue. He is a well-known speaker and consultant, and author of *Lessons of the Lost: Finding Hope and Resilience in Work, Life and the Wilderness.* He has been a guest on and interviewed by hundreds of media outlets, and hosts a daily "Management Minute" heard on radio throughout the western US.

Abbreviations

AAR	After Action Reports
HRT	Highly Reliable Teams
PI	Principle Investigator

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