



SAFETY

The safety to speak out

BY ESTHER EWING

The devastating explosion of the NASA space shuttle Challenger in 1986 was witnessed by millions. Just 73 seconds into its flight, Challenger broke apart, killing the seven astronauts on-board. An investigative commission after the disaster delved into the underlying organizational and cultural issues at NASA, and determined that the structure and decision-making processes of the organization were flawed, and safety had been compromised.

NASA's problem was that its values had changed from taking the time to be "inquisitive to a fault" to "faster, better, cheaper." When the latter prevailed, business managers shut down dialogue with engineers who kept raising issues about safety in the meetings. And make no mistake, those engineers raised tangible problems. It became psychologically and emotionally unsafe, however, for engineers to bring up these issues because they were ridiculed and overruled by their business managers.

Mining today is international, and safety is just as important here as it is in space travel. Raising concerns about safety in a meeting increases safety in the field, where the stakes and health risks are higher. But different cultures have varying approaches to safety, which can cause conflict.

One of our clients, the Canadian subsidiary of a large eastern European mining company, held safety to be paramount. However, the culture of its parent assumed that if someone got hurt on the job, they had not followed the rules. These are two widely different attitudes toward safety, even within the same company. Therefore, I propose a new approach to the culture of safety in meeting rooms founded on "Intentional Teams."


This is a team where members feel comfortable and have the communication skills to respectfully speak up about sticky issues, one that promotes a culture where safety can be a top priority. In return, these concerns must be listened to and given careful consideration. This ensures the emotional and psychological safety of everyone on the team. When team members are free to raise inconvenient or unpalatable truths, the team is more likely to face tough issues head on and solve them. On the other hand, when teams are in denial

or have a culture with unnamed elephants in the room, dangerous things can happen. Thus, safety in the meeting room helps ensure safety in the field.

A highly functioning Intentional Team has four characteristics: a sense of direction for the work it must do together that is shared and compelling; flexible leadership; a performance mindset; and an inclusive culture that supports performance. Intentional Teams are disciplined, aligned and focused on goals. A World Cup champion soccer team, a Formula One pit crew, and a high-performing project team in a mining company all embody these characteristics.

One of our mining clients had a situation where young, front-line supervisors in an engineering, procurement and construction management (EPCM) company found it difficult to hold older staff accountable for safety procedures. If veteran staff members took shortcuts, their supervisors were uncomfortable insisting that they follow the right processes. A manager in our client's company noticed this reticence but when he tried to raise the issue with his counterpart in the EPCM company in a meeting, he was accused of being fussy and could not get any traction.

While the safety issue was eventually addressed, it raised a red flag that the culture of the team was not fully supporting safety in the field. It all begins with the internal dynamics of the team. In a mining company where raising difficult issues is supported in the team's culture, the chances of a problem with safety in the field are reduced because problems are discussed openly.

Sometimes, good comes from bad. In one company, a heavy piece of equipment fell 1,000 metres to the bottom of a mineshaft. While no one was hurt, production at the mine was suspended and restoration was risky. An engaged, intentional restoration team got things up and running without injury and this team won its organization's International Safety Award. 

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