



LEARNING FROM WHAT GOES WELL: ANOTHER TACTIC TO MILK THE COW?

In learning from everyday work, we need to first approach workers as human beings. **Nippin Anand**, a former Master Mariner, reminds us of the importance of understanding human needs before we can understand what's working well.

A few months ago, I visited a ship all excited to put my knowledge about 'learning from what goes well' into practice. I thought I knew perfectly well what I needed to make it work. Instead of focusing on accidents, I will focus on everyday work, pay careful attention to the context, observe the gap between documented manuals and 'real' work and encourage people to talk about what really works. Simple.

Like an overzealous inspector, I approached an able seaman and asked, "Raymond*, can you talk me through how you lower the lifeboat from the start to the end?" After a long and uncomfortable silence, Raymond replied, "I will tell you everything about the lifeboat, but I want to share something else first if it's OK, sir. The company has introduced a new tax on our earnings. As seafarers, we never had to pay taxes on our income before and it's not small money. It's almost 30% of our

earning, and it puts us in a very difficult situation." Raymond continued for a few minutes while other crew members joined us in the conversation. By now I was starting to get irritated. This was not really my question I said to myself. I was there to learn from what goes well.

But then I started listening to Raymond and something fascinating happened that took me by surprise. Nearly 35 minutes into his moaning, Raymond

looked into my eyes and said, "I know you are here as a visitor. You can do nothing about our situation, but you care to listen. Thanks for listening, nobody from the office listens to us."

By now, Raymond appeared far more relaxed. In a friendly manner, he said, "Sir, let's talk about the lifeboat now." We spoke at length about the entire process from preparation, to launching and lowering of the lifeboat. Raymond told me about the problem with the cranking handle used for hoisting the boat in an emergency. He highlighted the extra precautions that were needed during hoisting the boat (because the original fuse on the davit winch motor had been replaced with a fuse of much higher amperage). Several other issues came up in our discussion such as communication difficulties with hand-held radios and the problem with monitoring the boat whilst being stowed in position. Put simply, it made perfect sense how the design and operating problems were being compensated for by the crew during routine maintenance and drills. This to me was a perfect example of learning from what goes well.

Practising mutuality before learning

Over the years as accident rates have plateaued, both scientists and business leaders are exploring alternative approaches to improve safety and resilience. One approach is learning from what goes well, and includes 'positive deviance', 'learning teams', 'appreciative inquiry', and other ideas and approaches. A common thread across many new approaches is an attempt to humanise work by adopting a bottom-up approach to improve safety, where workers' contributions are considered vital.

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Raymond's story has taught me that any attempt to seek workers' participation should begin with recognising the worker as a social being. Going into the field with an agenda to observe a process or encouraging workers to talk about success is a mechanistic and impersonal approach. It could even appear like the crude deskilling approaches of the nineteenth century. A truly human-centred approach begins with practising 'mutuality'. By mutuality, I mean listening to the needs of others before we start to impose our expectations and demands on them. A worker whose needs are genuinely heard (not necessarily met, as I learnt from Raymond) is more likely to open up and share his or her experiences. In my view, mutuality is a powerful but often a forgotten aspect of the conduct of safety professionals.

In the past few years, I have interviewed hundreds of business leaders and frontline workers and sifted through thousands of safety and quality reports to understand the problems with organisational learning. What has struck me is the attitude of business leaders towards workers 'moaning' and 'complaining'. In addition, formal communication channels (employee appraisals, incident and hazard reporting systems, audit and site visit reports, risk assessments, etc.) are devoid of any meaningful engagement in most organisations I

have visited. What is more, apart from whistleblowing there are hardly any communication channels for workers to escalate their concerns to the leadership. A typical reaction from the management to moaning and complaining is "We do not have the resources to deal with it",

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to which my response is "good luck with process improvements".

As we move towards 'learning from what goes well', where we actively seek workers' contributions to improve safety and resilience, it is my hope that we recognise the power of mutuality and a shift from transactional *quid pro quo* approaches towards a more collaborative way to engage with

workers. The argument is straightforward. As much as we want workers to tell us what we need from them, we need to also listen to their needs. Otherwise, any attempt to seek

workers contribution may prove futile and become perceived as another tactic to milk the cow.



Nippin Anand is a Principal Specialist in Safety Management System and Human Factors, and a former Master Mariner with a PhD in Social Sciences. His research interests include applied sciences, storytelling, cultural anthropology and safety management. nippin.anand@nippinanand.com