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Managing the Unexpected



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Things that have never happened before,
happen all the time . . .

Six ideas characterize HROs

- Examine failures more closely, more quickly
- We all oversimplify – embrace complexity
- Listen to expertise – not necessarily authority
- Focus on the critical operation at hand
- Build resilience – build response capability
- Plan – but plan for planning's dangers

Credit: Ideas from the research of Karl E. Weick and Kathleen M. Sutcliffe

Co-authors of:

Managing the Unexpected – Resilient Performance in an Age of Uncertainty

Preoccupation with failure

- Learning from failure is hard
 - Contradicts our desire to celebrate success
 - Learning moments are short lived
- But most threats start small



Preoccupation with failure

- How can we create an environment where:
 - It's ok to say "something doesn't seem right"?
 - I can report a personal mistake without fear?
 - It's encouraged to report an potential issue – even if later it's proven not to be an issue?



Preoccupation with failure – is a preoccupation with learning

- Encourage and make it safe for “speaking up”
 - Practice debriefing – where rank doesn’t matter
 - Create psychological safety
 - Allow “over-reaction” to seemingly small deviations
 - Amplify faint signals
- Actively seek bad news
- Clarify what constitutes good news
- Consider surprises as signs of vulnerability

Preoccupation with failure

- Small deviations, small surprises – usually signal a larger vulnerability

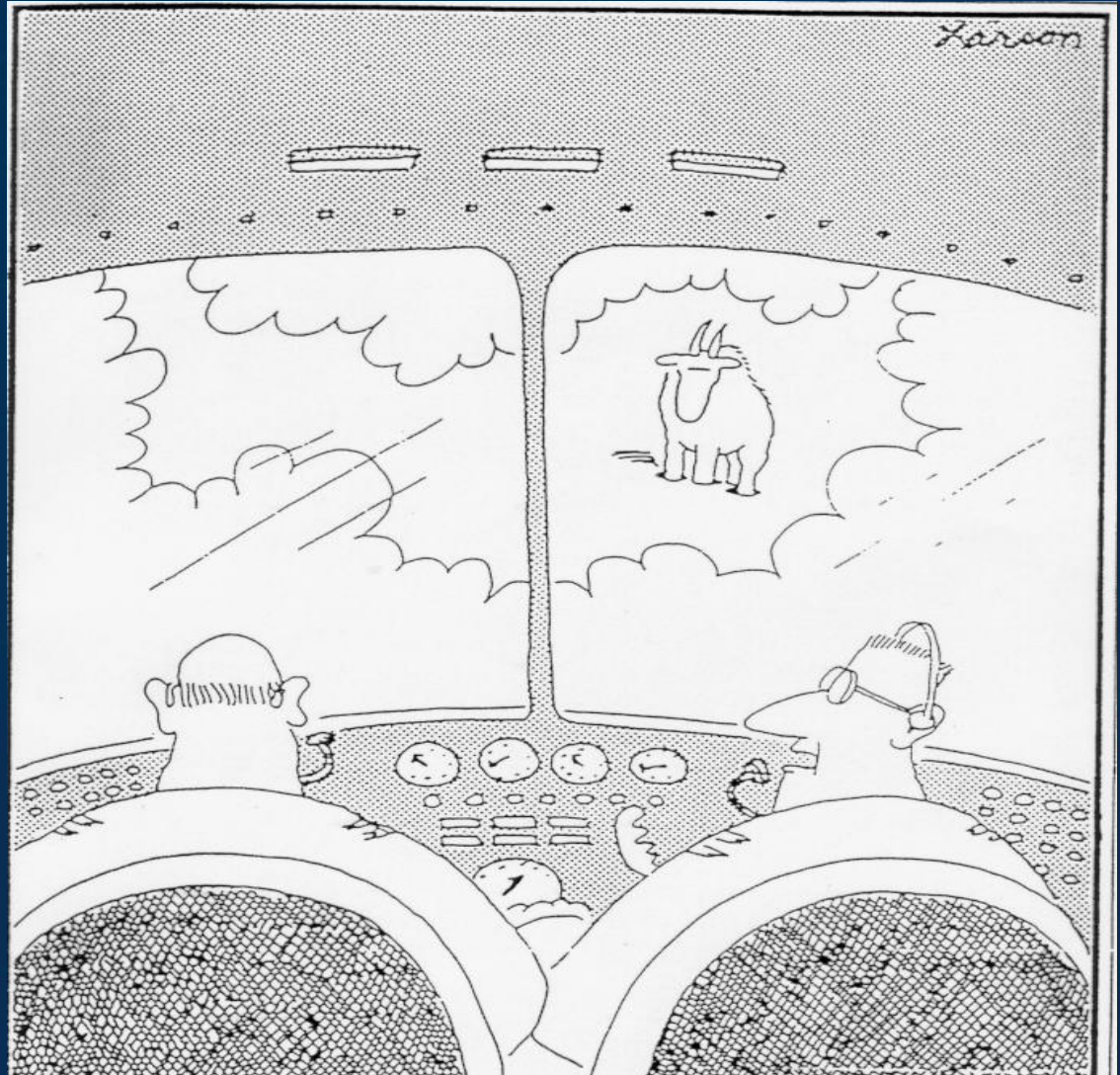
Discussion Point

- Do we consider a surprise or a deviation as an obstacle to overcome, or a warning?



Reluctance to Simplify - Mental Models Matter

“Say – what’s a mountain goat doing way up here in a cloud bank?”



Reluctance to Simplify - Embrace Complexity

Sheila Widnall, former Secretary of USAF, and member of the Columbia Accident Investigation Board:

“NASA saw the shuttle as a 747 that you could simply land, turnaround, take off, and use again.”



When in fact – the shuttle was still experimental

Reluctance to Simplify - Embrace Complexity

- Beware of “We’ve seen this before”

Or “We’ve done this before”

- Solicit a wide range of diverse views

Complex situations
benefit from a diverse
organization



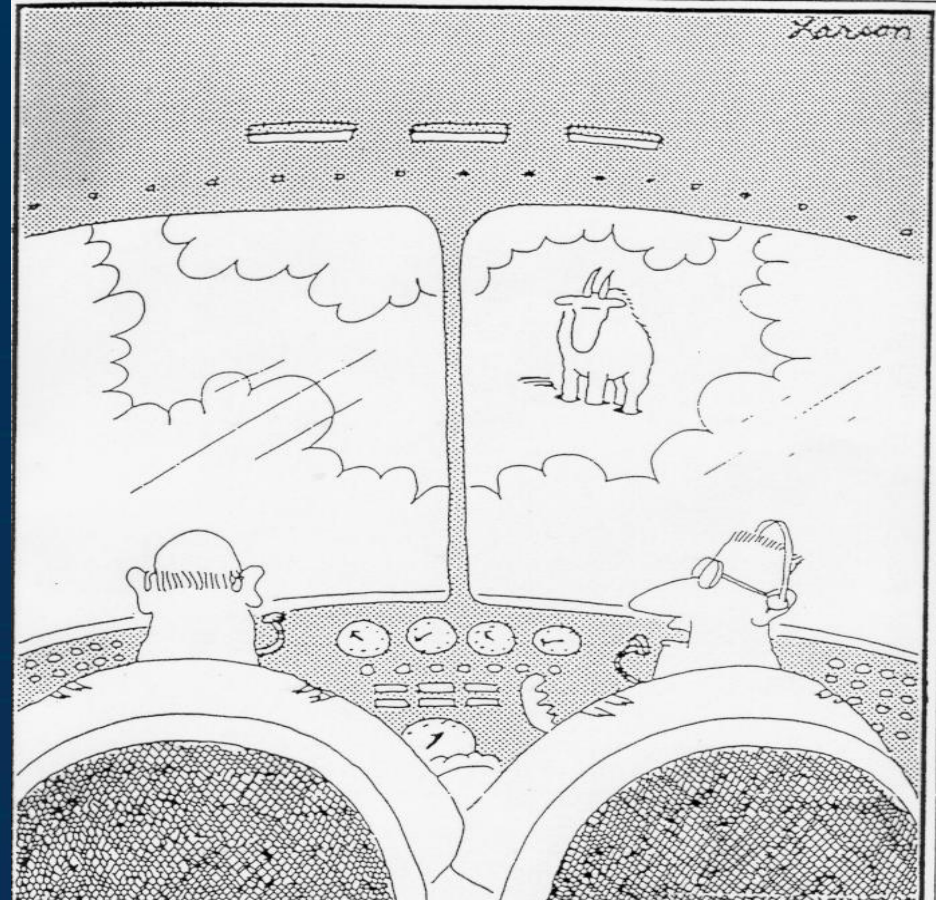


Reluctance to Simplify - Embrace Complexity

- We all simplify our perception of what is happening

Discussion Points

- What phrases do you hear that warn of “oversimplification”?
- What are you doing that is “cutting edge”?
- What inclusive team behaviors can guard against “over-simplification”?

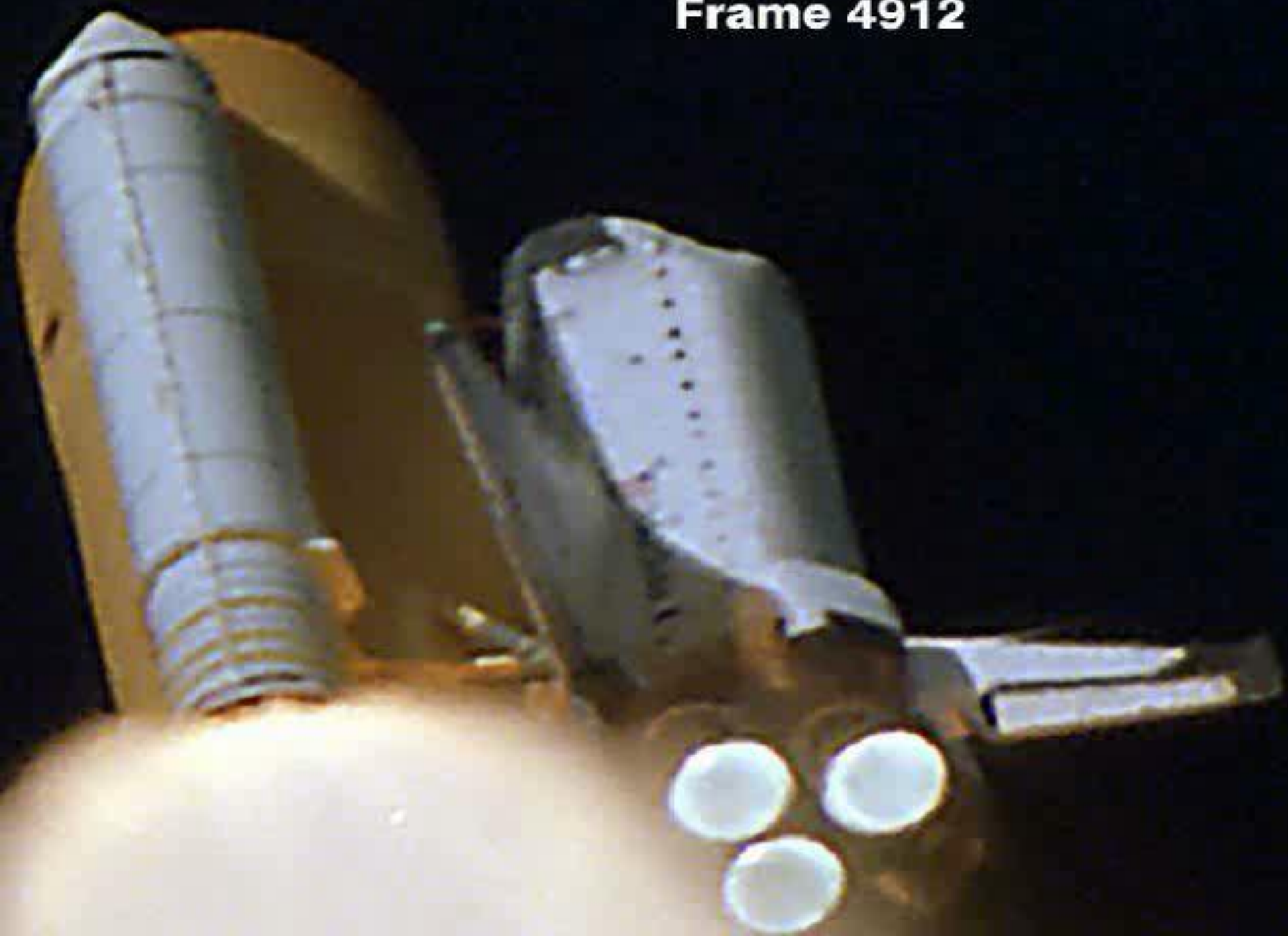


Defer to expertise



- Most organizations put a premium on hierarchy . . .

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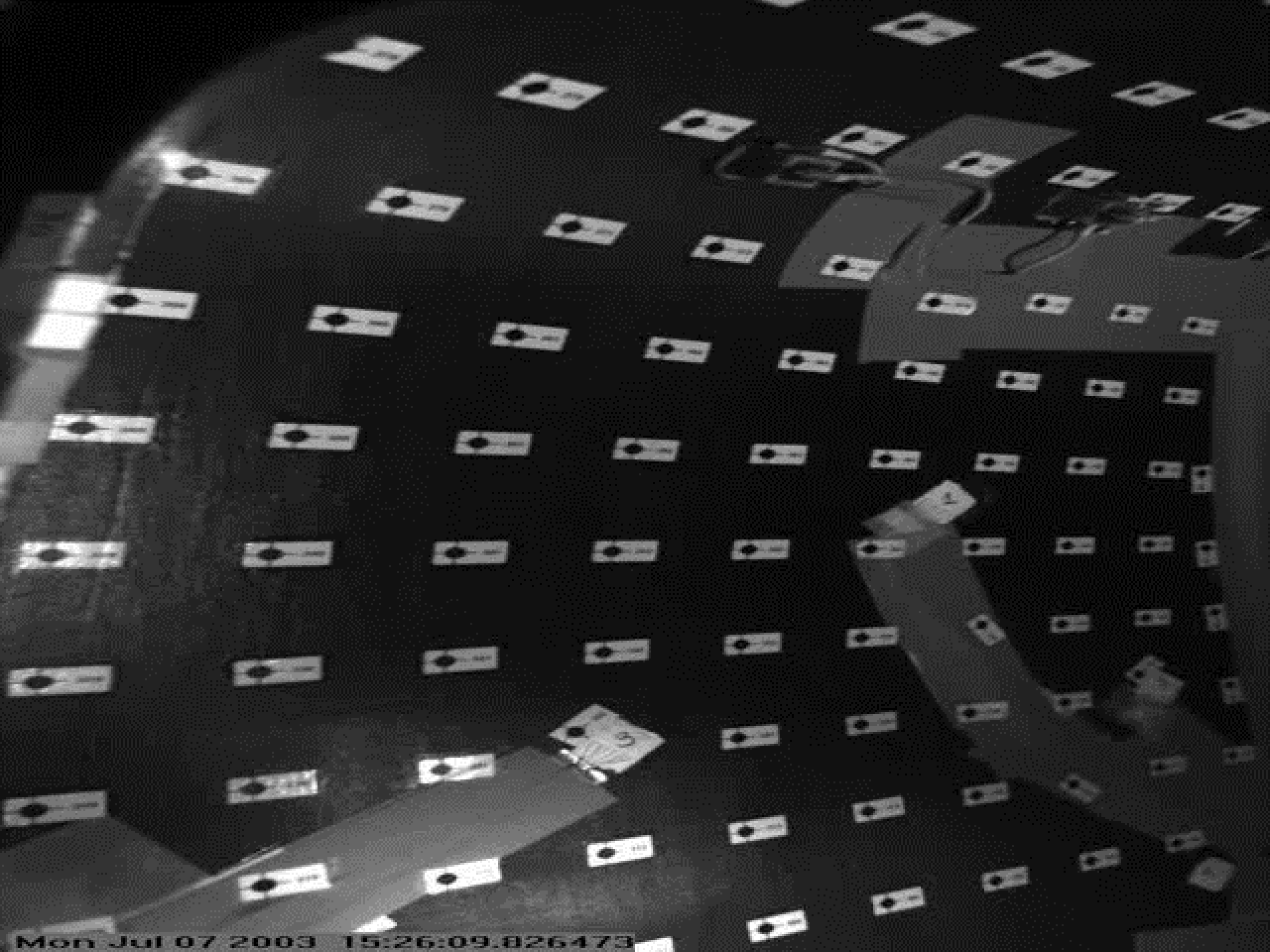
Defer to Expertise

. . . but authority is not a substitute for expertise

HROs nimbly shift
decision making away
from formal authority
toward expertise

- And managers who don't listen to expertise can be fatally wrong





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Enabling deference to expertise

- Beware of the “fallacy of centrality”
 - Discourages curiosity on the part of the expert
 - The “wisdom” of the “boss” is often overestimated
- Learn where your expertise really is
- Create flexible decision structures
- Experience doesn’t equal expertise

Focus on operations – what is the riskiest thing happening right now?

- Most organizations believe other things are more important (strategy, progress, cost, etc.)
- Fill in your own distraction here _____



Keep the “main thing” the main thing

Enabling focus on operations

- Keep the “the main thing” the main thing

Enabling focus on operations

- Continuous contact with the front line



Enabling focus on operations

- Keep leaders/managers accessible
 - Especially when important situations are arising
- Hone your operations-sensitive leadership
 - Speak up
 - Encourage others to speak up
 - Know how you handle pressure and tell others
 - Verbalize your plans

Resilience

Life is a series of interruptions and recoveries

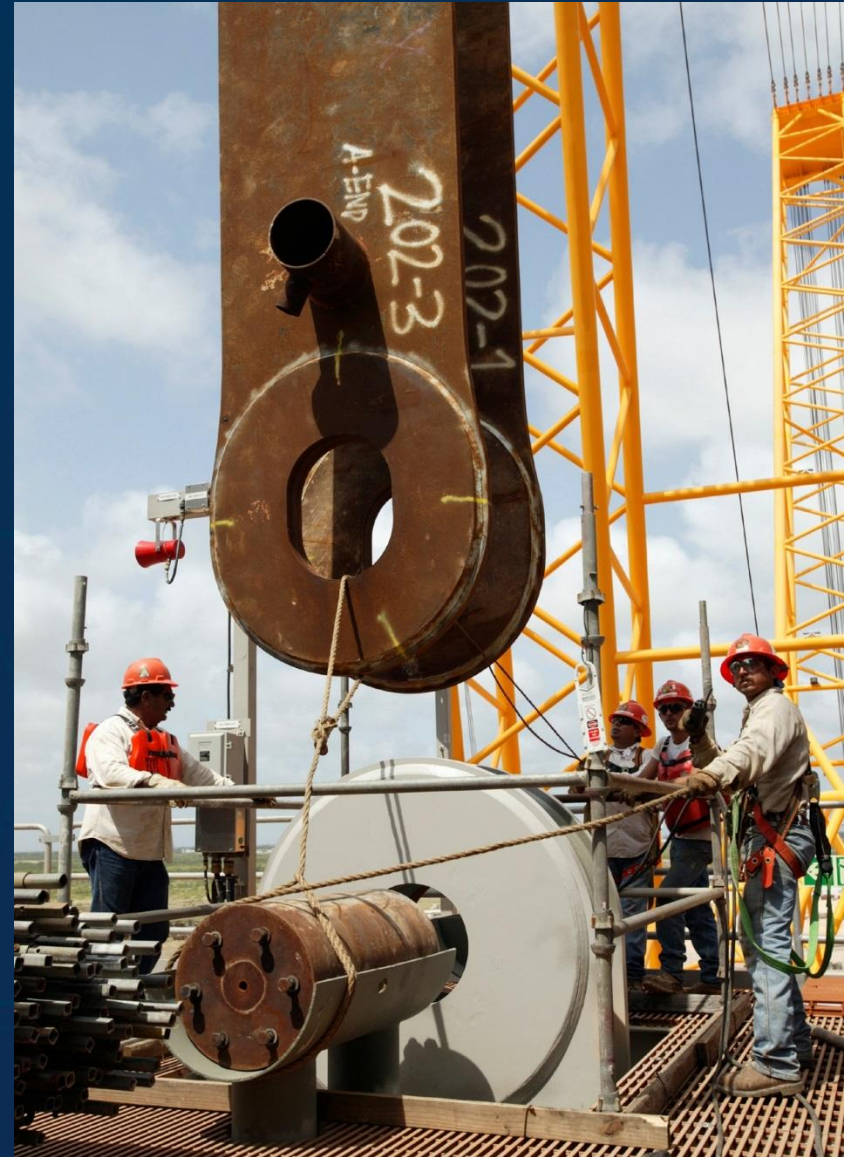
John Dewey, 1922

Resilience means increasing your response repertoire

- Resilience defined
 - Functioning effectively while absorbing an unexpected adversity
 - Bouncing back quickly with no permanent damage
- Cultivate resilience
 - Expect to be surprised
 - Practice, simulate, play “what-ifs?”

Self reflection – table discussion

What is one take-away,
one thing you will try to
do differently?



Plan – but anticipate the limitations of planning . . .

Plans are nothing – planning is everything.

Dwight David Eisenhower



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