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How Standards and Accountability Lead to Safety and Security Violations at Nuclear Weapons Plants

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Abstract. This article describes some counterintuitive consequences of instituting safety standards and accountability practices at nuclear weapons plants.

Many textbooks on organizational psychology and management emphasize the need for explicit standards and accountability for one's actions. Standards are posited to be necessary so that employees will know what they're supposed to do. Accountability--some mixture of (1) positive and negative reinforcement for doing what's supposed to be done and for not doing what's not supposed to be done and (2) punishment and omission training for not doing what's supposed to be done and for doing what's not supposed to be done--is posited to be necessary so that employees will be motivated to manifest appropriate behavior and act on this motivation. Accountability also is posited to facilitate and reinforce the comprehension and retention of standards. And so turns the virtual world.

In the real world, there are complicating factors comprising significant and complex disparities between the needs of the organization and the needs of employees. These disparities too often lead employees to viewing standards and accountability as impediments to reward--positive and negative reinforcement--for themselves and their loved ones, not as objectives with which compliance yields intrinsic pleasure and benefits for the organization and even the larger community. When these disparities are not factored into systems of standards and accountability, disaster may strike. For example, if violations of standards are otherwise to formally lead to noxious consequences, employees can seek to cover up violations all together or to scapegoat the innocent. Both of these possibilities are most easily accomplished through the unobserved falsification or destruction of data and through the coopting or denigrating of monitors of standards. (The same dynamics are pertinent when reward--positive and negative reinforcement--is withheld until or further increased when behavior is "above" standard. Here "above" standard quickly becomes standard, expected, and unmet via a sense of entitlement. And again the same dynamics are pertinent when standards are met. Here the notion that not meeting standards and meeting standards can result in similar reward--if one does not get caught not meeting standards, and if not meeting standards and covering up one's accountability takes less work than doing the job right--quickly becomes salient and robust in controlling employee behavior.

When cover-ups and scapegoating involve organizations geared to market products that satisfy needs produced through marketing, the consequences may be unsettling as to views of human nature but are otherwise unremarkable. When cover-ups and scapegoating involve organizations whose dysfunction can lead to significant health hazards, the consequences can become staggering.

At facilities in Hanford, Washington, the above analysis seems germane in the lack of attention of some Department of Energy authorities and contract site managers towards leaks from underground tanks of radioactive waste--in liquid, sludge, and dried salt forms--into the ground and into ground water moving towards the Columbia River. The analysis also seems germane for the unfortunate gaps in knowledge about how to clean up the contamination and prevent additional damage.

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The bottom line? The selection, training, and management issues for nuclear weapons plants must confront what may be termed senses of entitlement--arrogating to oneself the "right" to disobey, exploit, or subvert standards and accountability. Yet given that employees up and down the chains of command may be subject to sense of entitlement, one may end up fearfully confronting a nuclear version of the old Soviet Union. They pretend to manage us, and we pretend to comply. (See Buckalew, L.W., & Buckalew, N.M. (1995). Survey of the nature and prevalence of patients' noncompliance and implications for intervention. *Psychological Reports*, 76, 315-321; Dickson, R.E., Manusov, V., Cody, M.J., & McLaughlin, M.L. (1996). When hearing's not believing: Perceived differences between public and private explanations for two compliance failures. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 15, 27-39; Fogarty, J.S. (1997). Reactance theory and patient noncompliance. *Social Science and Medicine*, 45, 1277-1288; Wald, M.L. (March 23, 1998). Admitting error at a weapons plant. *The New York Times*, p. A10.) (Keywords: Accountability, Bureaucracies, Organizations, Safety, Security.)