

# Chapter 11

## How to Deal with the Contradictions of Safety Professional Development?

### An Organizational Approach Based on Discussion

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**Abstract** Companies around the world currently ask their employees to behave and work as “professionals”. To be a “pro” has become a managerial leitmotiv that promotes an ideal image of employees based on the highest levels of performance, rationality, responsibility and reliability, especially in the domain of risk industries and safety management. This is typically the vision that managers promote when they decide that “failure is not an option”. Hence, the development of employee professionalism appears to be a very legitimate and neutral objective that should be at the core of the functions of the Human Resource Management. In every big company, many resources of all kinds have been invested to design and implement increasingly sophisticated training programs for professional development and to engage managers and HR’s departments. Unfortunately, these efforts have not produced the expected pay-offs in terms of safety performances and this disappointing performance raises several questions and problems. This chapter addresses them and suggests that some of the basic assumptions and images companies currently use to manage professionalism and professionalization are misleading because they over-simplify their nature. In other words, the notions of performance, rationality, responsibility and reliability that are associated with professionalism are in fact totally oriented towards compliance with formal procedures and rules. In some ways, the “professional” is seen as the perfect employee that never makes errors, never fails and never complains. In fact, this vision is purely behavioral (i.e. exclusively based on personal behaviors) and neglects the social and the political roots of professional skills and competencies. This chapter (1) identifies some of the main tensions and contradictions that are tightly linked to the notion of professionalism and (2) suggests how to actively manage these contradictions and explores new ways to develop professionalism in risk industries.

**Keywords** Contradictions · Discussion spaces · Safety practices

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## 11.1 The Managerial/Bureaucratic Approach Versus The Profession/Trade Approach

We suggest that the main problems come from the political opposition between a managerial/bureaucratic approach to professionalism on the one hand, and a profession/trade approach, on the other hand. The managerial/bureaucratic approach aims to develop the performances of the organization through a process of rationalization based on formal rules, guidelines and best practices. Better rules mean better efficiency as well as better safety for the organization. Therefore, the good practitioner, (i.e. the “pro”), is supposed to be a “perfect” employee that follows procedures and complies with the rules set out and implemented inside the organization. Unfortunately, this is not exactly the reality, even in risk industries, at least for two reasons.

The first reason is pragmatic. The managerial/bureaucratic approach promotes a behavioral vision of professionalism based on the “expected good behaviors” determined by the designers of the technical system as well as the managers of the organization. The problem is that safety comes also from the ability of the practitioners to cope with unexpected situations and events. In such cases, there is no “expected” behavior. This one may be defined *ex post* from the final outcome of the situation, but during the real-time activity, it is the responsibility of the professional to adjust and adapt its behavior as the situation develops, including in unexpected ways.

The second reason is more political. The progressive development of the managerial/bureaucratic approach since the end of the 19th Century was a political fight against the traditional vision of professionals as skilled practitioners strongly socialized in professional groups that were governed in compliance with their own norms and rules, coming from the outside the organizations they worked in. The classic power balance between the company owners and their employees shifted dramatically with the emerging “professionalization” of managers. This new kind of professional was highly trained in management techniques through MBA programs. They were hired by owners to develop the efficient model of large modern companies based on a bureaucratic rationalization of work and organization as defined by Frederick Taylor (1911) and Henri Fayol (1916). This constituted the “managerial turn” described by Berle and Means (1932) with the rise of “managerial firms” and the fall of the traditional “entrepreneurial firm”. In managerial firms, owners stay outside the company. They are simply shareholders that have delegated all the organizational responsibilities to the professional top managers. At that time, the strategy followed by managers was to develop powerful techno-structures (engineering departments and HR specialists) to impose their monopoly over the work design through the de-socialization, de-skilling and disempowerment of the professionals. The intention was to put professionals under the control of organizations ruled by managers. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that the managerial and bureaucratic rationalization of organizations was a war declared by managers against the professions and trades, and one that managers

largely won. Throughout the 20th Century, professionals have been dramatically weakened inside organizations. In a sense, the paradox is that top managers are today the only true professionals that remain inside these modern complex organizations! In that specific context, the managerial call for the development of employee “professionalism” may create a great deal of frustration for employees who have clearly understood that it was not a wakeup call for a renewal of true professionalism based on strong professional identities but rather a call for ever more compliance with formal rules and expected behaviors as we described at the beginning of the chapter.

Are things really different today? Perhaps the war is over, and perhaps managers sincerely now call for empowered highly-skilled employees but the political ambiguities of “professionalization” remain. Although they may not be at war any longer, they are in a situation of “cold war” where external pressures coming from shareholders and regulators reinforce the ambiguities of the professionalization requirements. Ignoring them would give rise to misunderstandings about the deep causes of the success or failure of professionalization programs that consciously or unconsciously tend to lock professionals into a managerial/bureaucratic vision of professionalism.

As we stated earlier, the managerial/bureaucratic approach to professionalism promotes an ideal image of professionals that is inconsistent with their traditional model. The former is based on a particular quest for expertise with the following characteristics:

- The professional is an expert with perfect mastery of the technical and organizational aspects of his or her job, starting with the complete set of formal rules and procedures currently in use. He or she is supposed to be competent (i.e. able to act and make decisions properly in any kind of context) and makes no error and no faults. The “pro” is supposed to deliver relevant solutions simply by following the existing procedures. He or she is the actor that creates the organizational illusion that the reality matches the formal prescriptions of work.
- The “pro” is an autonomous and individual expert. On the one hand, expertise is supposed to be held by individuals, not directly by teams (viewed as sets of individuals); on the other hand, formal teams are considered to be the unique collective context within which the individual expertise unfolds and combines with others.
- The “pro” is an acculturated agent: his identity is melted into the identity of the organization he or she works in. They are supposed to accept and share internal best practices and the criteria in use in their company to assess the professional skills that ultimately shapes his or her professional identity.
- The “pro” is not a political actor. Instead, he or she is an autonomous expert... but without real power over the organization to which they belong. The “pro” does not question the objectives of the organization, he or she is loyal and the performance of the company prevails over his or her own interest without opportunistic behaviors such as free-riding.

Obviously, this bureaucratic representation is an illusion. The problem is that such an illusion is the basis upon which the organization decides who is a “pro” and who is not. It is also on this basis that professional development programs are designed and implemented.

The trade approach gives a very different image of professional development. First of all, there is not “one profession”. Professions are numerous and are located in different communities, potentially competing with one another. Secondly, the identity of the professional is mainly shaped outside the organization (Barley 1996). It is rooted in professional communities ruled by professional guidelines and know-how and practices. Becoming a good practitioner, a “pro”, refers to a process of socialization that entails becoming a member of a particular community. Some academics (Brown and Duguid 1991, 2001) speak about “communities of practice” that partly escape from the control of the formal hierarchical organization and promote a cross-functional logic. It is far from being limited to the unique judgment of managers and HR departments.

The problem is that the tensions between these two opposing representations of professionalism are not managed. We believe that safety professional development supposes to do so through reflexive and discursive organizational practices, according to High Reliability Organization theories.

## **11.2 Finding New Ways for Safety Professional Development: Managing the Tensions Through Reflexive and Discursive Organizational Practices**

We assume that new ways for safety professional development have to be explored at the crossroad of the two opposite approaches of professionalism. This requires active management of the tensions between the two. Dynamic compromises have to be found regarding the roles and responsibilities of the professionals committed to safety, but also about their identity and power inside and outside their organization.

These analyses suggest that we should “bring work back in[to]” our understanding of organization and management (Barley and Kunda 2001) and put the focus on practices and actual working rules and discussions about work, especially in the field of safety management (de Terssac 2013).

We suggest that High Reliability Organizations theory (Roberts 1990; Weick and Roberts 1993) provides an interesting theoretical framework for the management of such tensions. HRO combine a very bureaucratic *organization* based on formal hierarchical structures, clear division of roles, formal rules, procedures and routines, with flexible “*organizing*” processes that come into play when the situation becomes highly complex and unexpected (Weick and Sutcliff 2007). HRO demonstrates that safety is rooted in the day-to-day activities of the practitioners who work in high risk industries. Safety is the final outcome of a continuous

process of reflexivity that brings safety and daily practices into professional discussions. The key point is to keep the organization aware of safety problems and doubting about “what is going on” and “what should be done” (Weick and Sutcliff 2007).

We consider these reflexive and discursive organizational practices as levers for the management of some important tensions associated to the opposition between the managerial/bureaucratic approach and the professional/trade approach of professionalism. In the following sections, we present and discuss three of them.

### ***11.2.1 Formal Safety Rules Versus Safety Embedded in Professional Practices, Knowledge and Debates***

In the managerial/bureaucratic approach safety is supposed to be contained within formal rules. The legitimacy of the rules is rooted in the combination of de-contextualized scientific knowledge and hierarchical authority. In a professional perspective, safety is embedded in contextualized practices rooted in professional skills and expertise that shape the professional safety culture (Gherardi and Nicolini 2002).

In HRO, compromises between the two approaches can be elaborated in real-time action and then discussed and assessed after the facts in work discussions and work debate spaces (Rocha et al. 2015). In real-time action, people make sense of the problematic situations they must keep under control using cognitive resources provided by both formal and informal rules and norms. In such situations, the responsibility of professionals is to take initiatives and be empowered by doing so. Then, the decision “migrates” throughout the organization until it finds the right expertise, regardless to the hierarchical rank. A “self-designing” organization (Rochelin et al. 1987) emerges from the reflexive and heedful interactions people in the team develop to keep the situation under control (Weick and Roberts 1993). Once the action is over, people involved in the situation share their fresh experience and discuss how things were done, in a positive or negative assessment. These discussions confront and combine the formal hierarchical legitimacy with the professional one. They create the reflexive “experience” on which the professional builds up its expertise and becomes a “reflexive practitioner” (Schön 1983). In case of serious problems and doubts, other discussions can be organized in order to develop wider experience feedback learning loops. Managers should provide the resources to organize such reflexive practices. This managerial action supposes to design “work debate spaces” (Rocha et al. 2015) or “work discussion spaces” (Detchessahar et al. 2015).

In that sense, the safety professional is the reflexive practitioner who puts safety, safety practices and, even more widely, work into discussion and debates during action and after.

### ***11.2.2 Training for Safety Versus Learning to Become a Good Practitioner in Safety Industries***

In the managerial/bureaucratic approach, safety training programs are aimed at learning safety rules, canonical practices and safety expected behaviors. In the professional approach, learning how to produce safety means learning how to become a reflexive practitioner (Brown and Duguid 1991). This is not just a question of knowledge and practice, it is a genuine process of socialization that organizes the entrance of the trainee into the group of professionals and modifies the identity of the trainee. It is also a political process that legitimates the knowledge and skills developed by the professional and gives him or her arguments for future professional debates.

### ***11.2.3 Formal Teams Versus Professional Groups and Communities***

In the managerial/bureaucratic approach, professionals are supposed to work collectively in formal teams. These teams are determined by the way work has been divided in the organization. By contrast, professional groups refer to communities that don't always fit the structure of formal teams and departments. A professional group is a group that makes sense for its members. It is often described as a "community of practice" where members share the same practices and discuss them well beyond the organizational frontiers. Discussions are not necessarily consensual, they can be very challenging and take the form of debates and professional arenas where professionals compete and show off their skills. Internal relationships in such communities are both co-operative and competitive to produce shared professional norms and rules. It is the community within which the members find the resources to be a real professional. A professional group is also a political group that promotes the interests of the professional it represents.

In HRO, safety is based on auto-organized groups that emerge unexpectedly from collective action to quickly respond to a problematic situation. This is based on the "heedful interrelations" that practitioners develop among themselves to stay constantly aware of the situation, but also to mind and to care about colleagues who could potentially need help and support (Weick and Roberts 1993).

## **11.3 Conclusion: Discussion as a Fuel for the Professional Development of Professionals and Managers**

Our main conclusion is that "professionalization" of safety means reshaping the identity of the professionals working in high-risk industries. It is a real challenge for management because it requires finding acceptable compromises for both managers

and practitioners. Communication and, more precisely, discussions and debates about safety appear to be the locus of “professionalization”. Such discussions are not always spontaneous and need to be engineered and conducted by managers (Detchessahar and Journé 2011). This implies sharing knowledge, power and legitimacy inside and outside the organization. In that perspective, the notion of expertise cannot be reduced to simply an ability to know all the formal rules and to comply with them. A less bureaucratic approach of expertise and professionalism would include the ability to take some distance from the formal procedures and to discuss that. This raises the question of the collective dimension of the expertise as well as the social and political status of the “professionals” in high-risk industries.

Finally, we argue that the management of the tension between the managerial/bureaucratic approach and the professional/trade approach to safety professionalism does not imply having to “choose” between these two opposite representations. But rather, it means they should be combined in a way that strengthens the legitimacy of both of them. We assume that such a combination can be reached through discussions about safety practices that in turn question general safety principles and formal rules. The aim of the discussion is not to weaken the position of managers to the benefit of professionals. The outcome of the discussion should be the mutual empowerment of both managers and professionals. Discussion is a fuel for the professional development of both “professionals” and managers. In that sense, risky industries need strong (powerful and legitimate) professionals as well as strong (powerful and legitimate) managers to feed discussions about safety that aren’t purely cognitively-based on the rational exchange of information, knowledge and opinions—but that are also based on organizational and political issues. This creates the responsibility for every participant to speak up, to listen and to draw the pragmatic consequences of the discussion. That is the reason why it is so difficult to organize such discussions. That is the reason why risky industries need to design and manage “work discussion spaces”. And, that is the reason why training programs should be considered as privileged moments and areas for “discussion”.

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