

Chapter 16

Beyond Safety Training, Toward Professional Development

Synthesis and food for thought

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Abstract Professional development in safety lies at the crossroads of various logics, each with their own objectives, limits and power games. The arbitration and choices that are made at different levels (individual, collective and organizational) are therefore subject to constraints. It is of major importance to be aware of these constraints, to take them into consideration and recognize them in order to identify the levers for improvement in safety performance. This chapter synthesises the main findings from the book, highlighting what is currently considered to be at stake in terms of safety training, in the industrial world (industry and other stakeholders such as regulatory authorities), and offers avenues for further research.

Keywords Continuous learning · Vocational training · Situational simulation

16.1 Introduction

Despite the increasing attention given to safety training, safety results—notably in industrial sectors where they are already well-developed—seem to have reached a plateau in companies in charge of high-risk activities. Why are accidents still occurring, despite the significant improvements observed? What about the return on investment? Should we provide more safety training? Should we train people differently? These were the underlying issues of the concerns expressed by FonCSI's industrial partners. In light of this harsh assessment, researchers from both the industrial sector and the academic field engaged in an 18-month discussion coupled with a 2-day international seminar. The aim was to explore new avenues to improve industrial safety in companies and give it a more 'professional' dimension.

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The resulting book stands out not only for the diversity of its contributions but because it reflects the debates that have been engaged between the authors. It offers a critical analysis of safety training as defined, envisaged, and organized in at-risk industrial sectors. The challenge is that professional development in safety lies at the crossroads of various logics, each with their own objectives, limits and power games. The arbitration and choices that are made at different levels (individual, collective and organizational) are therefore subject to constraints. This book highlights how important it is to be aware of these constraints, to take them into consideration and recognize them in order to identify the levers for improvement in safety performance. The project that led to this book enabled a number of links between different disciplines, different industries and countries to emerge, and clearly identified points of convergence between the various contributors. Main findings and subsequent stakes and levers that have been identified for improvement are summarized below. At the end, we propose a research agenda aimed at opening new avenues for reflection and possible field experiments.

16.2 Safety as a Dimension of Professional Development

First, the authors agreed on the fact that safety should not be addressed as an isolated dimension. Safety is a feature of everyday working practices,¹ from normal to crisis situations. They found consensus on points that initially appeared quite extreme, such as the impossibility of separating safety know-how from professional know-how (safety skills from professional skills). *Safety is one 'result'—among others—of 'doing things right'*. This clear assumption that safety is an integral aspect of professionalism raises the issue of the general perception the organization has of the link between safety and professional development.

16.2.1 *The 'Good Professional'*

A good professional would be better equipped to make the most appropriate choices in any situation—one which might impact safety as well as other performances—taking into consideration various constraints. But what is a 'good professional'? The criteria differ depending on who is determining it. Although from the peers' viewpoint being a good professional has something to do with the identity of the trade, the identity of the work collective, from the viewpoint of the organization, professionalism is defined in a much more top-down manner. As an example, the

¹It can be continuously produced/ threatened.

competency framework is defined by human resource managers for human resource managers who use it as a job management tool rather than as an activity management tool. The term ‘profession’, according to the sociology of work and professions (and to its English meaning), implies undergoing training recognized at the State level, in a sector that has regulated access, with the possibility of a life-long career and finally the existence of a body of ‘professionals’. In some companies tradespeople claim to be professionals, although this is contradicted by the organizational structure, which does not meet the above conditions, notably in terms of career opportunities within the so-called profession. The ‘management bubble’ has developed in isolation from daily practices. What is the relationship between these two forms of identification and assessment? How can we help to reconcile the job as conceived by human resource managers and the job as actually done? The main issue is the connection between the viewpoint from the top and the one from the bottom.

16.2.2 Time Issues

There is much movements within trades. And there is a contradiction between this rapid turnover and the time needed to make a ‘good professional’. In a rapidly-changing environment, companies look for the minimum skills, which goes against the idea of trade as an art. Should the turnover be slowed down? Should the adjustment of industry be promoted?

16.2.3 Safety Training for External Justification

Mostly, safety training courses are focused on rules, procedures, fuelled by experts’ knowledge and standards and taught in a way that is disconnected from the professional gestures. They are usually designed to respond to high external justification issues, ‘external’ being here understood to have several meanings: supervisory authorities, media, public opinion, which are somehow reflected by internal support functions. Negotiation issues should not be neglected: training can also be a pacification tool towards unions. This justification system involves mainly specific Health & Safety actions to ‘tick the boxes’ that are imposed by external prerequisites. Compliance to standards is mandatory and cannot be avoided. However, there is a decoupling between the standardized, certified stratum and the stratum of workplace routines. Strengthening the internal normalizing policies exacerbates this decoupling. We would tend to suggest that companies limit their investment in certified trainings to those that are required by law.

16.3 Pedagogical Precautions

Working on the assumption that it is understood that safety emphasizes professionalism, promoting its incorporation into training programmes requires pedagogical precautions.

16.3.1 Safety and Real-Life Working Situations

Even contributing scholars whose research fields are not identified by theories of activity expressed a strong interest in actual working situations (situated action). Thus, it is necessary to recognize and explain constraints in order to understand tradeoffs that are made in daily practices, either in nominal or in degraded situations. This underlines the importance of introducing safety as a component of vocational training, which is centered on the technical gestures. But depending on the working situation and its induced constraints, different kinds of (safety) knowledge will be mobilized. Frontline managers are often caught between the knowledge of experts and tradespeople, between safety based on rules and managed safety, with little leeway. Some situations that have never before been encountered, so called unexpected situations, would require experts' knowledge in order to be resolved. On the contrary, in many cases where the situation can be anticipated, reference to expert knowledge will be imposed although it would not be necessary. What are the possible spaces of articulation between these different 'poles' (experts/trades)? The use of simulation to prepare trainees not only to normal but also to degraded situations favors both consideration of rule-based safety and the development of a certain ability to manage safety. Then the issue of transfer is of major importance: what happened during the training session? What will actually be implemented in real work situations?

16.3.2 Professional Development as a Whole, not Limited to Training Sequences

Training in safety is about promoting the development of 'good professionals' at large. 'Technical' training courses that include safety aspects and focus primarily on improving the performance of practices are the most effective ones for anchoring 'good' behavior in professional practice. It is therefore of importance to focus not only on the training sequence. The learning process must be considered in its entirety, as a continuum covering various places, including critical moments, in a more or less enabling environment: psychological support, a recognized right to make mistakes, room for debriefing, debating, and for reflective practice. The general context of the working situation must be taken into account. The logic of a

professional ‘journey’ should be adopted: reception of newcomers, attention given to the narratives of elders, support and companionship.

16.4 Beyond Training Issues, Organizational Stakes

16.4.1 Give More Room to the Professional Figure

The contents of the book confirm that the companionship and example conveyed by field managers are ingredients that largely contribute to actual professional development. However, these dimensions are often poorly recognized and given little accompaniment by the organization. The latter has to recognize that the definition of safety is also built through exchanges among peers. However, spaces that would allow collaboration, discussion about practices, where contradictions encountered in real situations could be explained and debated, where compromises could be made—at least partly—explicit, are in worryingly short supply. The creation or promotion of such visible and known spaces, a sort of recognized ‘parentheses’ should be considered. This would be useful to promote settings between a standardized practice of safety and a professional safety-appropriate practice. Frontline managers should have enough flexibility and receive the support of their hierarchy to implement such spaces.

16.4.2 But Avoid the Seductive Trap of the ‘Professional Hero’

The trend to go back to actual work, to relocate the ‘good professional’ at the core of the skills topic, is a result of the pendulum swinging back after oscillating far towards the prescriptive side. But there is a risk in the glorification of the professional, in having the feeling that the worker’s perspective is necessarily the truth. It could mean that mechanisms are missed, generating collective blindness. It is not desirable to value a figure of ‘professional heroes’. Collective reflection on working practices and the framing by the group of individual initiatives, are an essential issue of learning.

Another approach is to set a target where safety is part of the rules of the trade. But it is not so simple. Agents can reject the safety injunction if the standards do not reflect what they consider to be ‘real safety’—which does not mean they do not care about safety. Some workgroups have developed defensive strategies that lead to risk-taking. The defense of the trade can be in contradiction with standards from elsewhere, hence the difficulty to ‘let safety in’. This requires professional training in which agents will ‘rework’ safety from the viewpoint of the trade: to be a ‘good professional’ is to get the trains running on time AND safely.

16.4.3 Reinforce Collaboration

Professional development requires the reinforcement of transverse collaboration skills, which implies knowing enough about the work of others. However, knowing about the jobs of others definitely does not necessarily lead to harmonious relations: depending on the organizational context, it can also be used to better ‘trap’ others. Designing training schemes together should help to establish some trust between professionals and organizations on matters related to safety.

16.5 Towards a Research Agenda

At the outset of this project, it was obvious for us that much research is still needed. Developing an exhaustive research agenda is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, we wanted to sketch out a short list of themes that, in our view, are worthy of attention from researchers (and practitioners!) and could greatly benefit from empirical research. In short, in this book, we have developed a novel way of approaching the issue of safety training and safety professionalization. However, for the purpose of demonstration, we did this at the cost of some simplifications and deliberately left to one side some important factors and actors. The agenda described above is mostly about broadening the picture and building a more realistic, though also more complex, view of the issue.

16.5.1 Top Managers and (Safety) Professionalism

As often underlined in this book, our approach to professionalization questions the standardized representations of operators. Professionalism is often a claim made by members of the ‘operational core’ of the company as a defense, a protest against what is perceived as an excessive top-down or bureaucratic control. Paradoxically, as we have shown, top management and human resource executives often also support and promote an official discourse that calls for more ‘professionalism’. Obviously, derivatives of the word ‘professional’—professional, professionalism, professionalization—attract various actors with various, if not conflicting, world-views and purposes. There is little chance of consensus developing around these words and their implications. However, an overall picture of the way they are used, by whom, with which underlying meanings, in which purposes, could help us understand the ‘system of professionalization’ within organizations. The technological developments (or rather, the beliefs and expectations related to them) and managerial philosophies (‘the future of management’) should be incorporated into this analysis, along with speculation about the ‘future of work’. Developing such a picture would help find answers to a tricky question: what is expected—or feared—

from all this ‘professional /ism /ization’? On what grounds can we design or arrange fruitful organizational dynamics, undoubtedly not without conflict, but with an expected positive return for most?

16.5.2 Evaluating the Efficiency of Standard Methods and Practices for Safety Training

One of the starting points of this project, based on recurring complaints from industry experts and managers, is that standard practices of safety training are of marginal assistance in industries and companies with a developed safety culture. Although the quality of the training is evaluated, its objectives have yet to be thoroughly assessed. More specifically, to what extent are these practices efficient? The potential adverse effects of indicators must be kept in mind; any prescriptive approach must be contextually reinterpreted and adapted to give sense to professional development. Evaluation implies looking at the whole learning process. It is important to go up the chain, to open the black box to see what actually worked, which is not necessarily the *training* per se. What exactly does ‘a developed safety culture’ mean regarding this issue? When a company has reached this ‘developed’ stage, should standard practices be reduced to the minimum level of mandatory requirements? When a company has not yet reached this ‘developed’ stage, should approaches be reinforced or complemented by additional, innovative methods and practices? While we felt that in this project priority should be given to industries and companies that already have achieved a high level of safety and are already equipped with a large array of safety training programmes, we are in need of a clearer picture of the benefits of safety training in low or average stages of development.

16.5.3 Rejuvenating Standard Safety Training

Given that standard methods of training are here to stay because of regulatory or accountability requirements, it can be argued, taking another angle, that some efforts should be devoted to getting the best out of them. In other words, what can be done to make them more efficient, within the framework of standard practices? For instance, what can be done to prevent routinization and ritualization? How could standard safety training get away from the excessive standardization of safety training and maintain contextual relevance? Which micro-practices, local innovative methods, additional or alternative resources could be introduced, with a low additional cost and within existing occupational and organizational constraints?

16.5.4 Reconsidering the Contribution of Safety Professionals

Another openly assumed bias of our approach was to take safety professionals (Health and Safety departments) out of the picture and deliberately focus on sharp end workers. Obviously, this is an oversimplification of the issue of professionalization. From an organizational viewpoint, safety professionals interact with the question of operators' skills in a complex manner. For one thing, fostering the professionalization of operators in the sense that we advocated in this book could be seen as a threat to the expertise and power of safety professionals. Conversely, if, as we believe, safety professionals face frequent managerial inertia or reluctance within the course of their mission, they might be truly interested in gaining support from operators and first-line managers, and a revised approach to safety professionalization could be an opportunity in their own eyes. Are safety professionals members of a techno-structure that produces standards and control devices, or are they brokers of ideas and practices between managers and operators? Most likely, a wide variety of situations may coexist, depending on the industry, the company, the occupations themselves, and the spirit of the time. With regards to this organizational view, safety professionals are likely to influence professionalization from inside through the kind of safety principles, philosophies, tools, etc., that they favor because of their own training and expertise. Also, they may influence professionalization from the outside, as members of professional societies and networks, having a direct relationship with regulators and producers of norms. A better assessment of the roles of safety professionals is needed.

16.5.5 Putting Other Actors Back in the Game

For the sake of simplicity, we also chose not to investigate the role of various actors that have a stake in the issue: unions, human resource departments, managers, regulators, etc. Safety training and professionalization are part of a wider system and national contexts have to be taken into account. In the case of France, for instance, occupational training in general is one of the principle battlegrounds between unions, governmental bodies and state agencies, and human resource departments. To give an example, irrespective of its nature and efficiency, safety training, expressed in terms of volume and budget, is used by companies as a demonstration to regulatory bodies and unions of their commitment and compliance. A different approach to safety professionalization, as advocated in this book, would have to fit into this wider system—or somehow find ways to escape from its struggles. Additional research is needed to explore the general dynamics of safety professionalization, according to the industries and national contexts, and to decipher which alternative views could be promoted and implemented within, alongside, or against such dynamics.

16.6 To Conclude

Since they affect both training and the participatory dimension of the corporate/unit culture, the inflection points suggested by these findings represent high stakes for the organization. It therefore cannot be considered desirable to advocate for a rapid generalization. Instead we would encourage the multiplication of experimentation, whether at the site level or with regards to one particular trade, depending on the company's current challenges. We suggest that these experimental approaches be implemented in a negotiated framework, and placed under observation with scientific support, with the aim of capitalizing and transferring the results.

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