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Storytelling and Safety Culture

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Synopsis

The paper uses a five-part model of nuclear safety as the basis for discussion of how the oral culture in an organization contributes to (or can potentially undermine) the understanding of safety, the commitment to safe practices and the formation of group identity which is the product of effective cultural leadership. It explores some differences between oral and literate forms of expression, how these interact, and why both are essential parts of nuclear safety culture. It looks at how oral forms impact safety culture, and how by understanding the power of the oral culture leaders can be more effective in shaping people's understanding and commitment to the essential practices of nuclear safety.

Oral forms of expression in cultures are highly stable because they are repeated as "stories" and as ritualistic patterns. They are the only forms of language that "live inside us", so they are essential for things such as communicating principles and forming a sense of group identity. Oral forms can be exceptionally long-lasting and can (and do) influence cultures sometimes decades after they first come into being. In other words, (and for good and bad) they have an exceptional ability to survive change. This is because oral stories are like magic flowers. Every time the story is told its seeds spring out and scatter, and are planted in every hearer. Then any one of those listeners can carry the story forwards into the future and retell it so another magic flower is born. Compelling stories are therefore always alive, they only die when they are replaced with a more compelling story.

Literate forms such as technical terms, documents and written communications dominate organizations, but although the jargon of technocratic life are necessary, they are largely sterile and void of emotional meaning. Jargon demands that people understand its precise meaning –that is its purpose. But more human language allows people to give something of their own meaning to the words. Oral culture therefore always contains more human language, and this language will come from the stories people tell themselves or that they hear from the leaders. Sometimes these stories are in competition, but the prevailing oral culture (in part the "winning story" in the minds of individuals and groups) is always on display when interviews or group discussions are held. This means that a large part of safety culture assessment work is carried out through listening for, and listening to, the oral culture and then discerning how this is affecting nuclear safety.

Some of the oral forms and stories in organizations are unhealthy for safety culture, but it needs an attentive leader to hear the "counter-stories" and to take action to replace them with different stories (which may well fail unless they can be made into oral forms). Leaders operate between the current situation and the possible futures. And the only way of describing a future is through words and images which themselves inevitably carry meaning from the past. Therefore, effective leaders are always intensely involved in a process of interpreting the past to illuminate the future. These kinds of interpretations are most effective (and sometimes only effective) when they are put forward in oral forms. Then they can become the magic flowers of the stories about "who we are" and "who we are becoming".

Country or International Agency

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