**The Importance of Operational Discipline and Formality to Improving Safety in High-Reliability Organizations**

When I was in the U.S. Navy's Nuclear Power Program, I oversaw numerous High-Reliability Organizations. High-Reliability Organizations (HRO) are organizations which routinely operate and execute in high risk, dangerous environments, yet have very few safety incidents or mishaps. In my experience, there was one organization that stood out as the "gold standard" - nuclear powered aircraft carriers.

Onboard a nuclear carrier, operational discipline and formality, in tandem with the construct of the Flawless Execution℠ model, set a standard of improved communication, safety and productivity. As the 20th Commanding Officer of the world's first nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS ENTERPRISE (CVN-65), I was privileged to lead a crew and work with a team of over 5,500 people that epitomized operational discipline and utilized formality in every process to ensure the highest level of safety while achieving operational excellence in all facets of operations.

**Defining Operational Discipline and Formality**

Because of my background in high risk operations, I believe high-reliability organizations such as organizations in the railroad industry, oil and gas industry, energy industry, manufacturing industry, and mining industry, would benefit greatly from making operational discipline and formality cultural norms.

At Afterburner, we define operational discipline as a mindset and commitment to strict adherence to standards, processes and rules that govern operations in groups or individuals. Operational discipline encompasses multiple operators, teams, business units or an entire organization. Operational discipline epitomizes professionalism and encompasses what I call formality.

Whereas operational discipline is a mindset or commitment, the dictionary defines formality as that strict adherence to established rules and procedures; rigidity. Formality is the actionable part of the operational discipline mindset and is the mechanism that establishes and maintains forms, rules, processes, or customs. Formality is the engine that drives operational discipline from a mindset to action. It is through formality in process, and strict adherence to those processes, that operationally disciplined organizations are able to safely and successfully conduct operations in the high risk arena.

Together, operational discipline and formality determine how individuals and teams act, communicate, resolve issues, perform maintenance, back teammates up and foster ownership. I believe that very often, the difference between successful high risk operations and unsafe operations is in how operationally disciplined and formal a team is at following established processes, maintaining established standards, and how well they truly embrace a no-nonsense approach to execution. Disciplined, formal, no-nonsense adherence to established standards and processes, before, during, and after operations is what makes operational organizations great.

**Flawless Execution℠ - A Framework for Embedding a Culture of Operational Discipline and Formality**

Afterburner's Flawless Execution**℠** methodology of Plan - Brief – Execute - Debrief is an operational framework that can provide the formality that drives the operational discipline necessary to close execution gaps and prevent errors and crises. Teams that are well-trained in the Flawless Execution**℠** model have the processes that better equip and empower them to work together to develop collaborative plans, maintain accountability, seamlessly execute processes, and then debrief events to garner lessons learned for the next planning cycle. The result is continuous improvement in safety and performance in even the most hostile operating environments.

The Plan - Brief - Execute - Debrief cycle is scalable and flexible enough that it enables strict adherence to any organization's already established processes and procedures. Without such a structured, formal process, teams are often unable to create clear, measurable, and achievable mission objectives and plans. Mission briefs may be inconsistent, execution tends to be marred by communication failures and task saturation, and debriefs either don't happen or become inefficient and ineffective. Teams that rigorously adhere to processes such as the Flawless Execution Cycle become operationally disciplined and formal in action. They also plan better, quickly identify root causes of errors, and, therefore, are able to eliminate execution gaps.

**Importance of Formality to Improving Communication**

A process every organization should understand is how to communicate. Whether you're performing maintenance or delivering instructions during a stressful process, formalized communications can significantly enhance and improve safety, execution and productivity. Organizations engaged in high-risk operations should consider using precise, simple communications and verbiage for alerts, directions and questions. In the fighter pilot world, on bridges of ships, and in carrier nuclear propulsion plants, we use a method to communicate called "comm brevity" – a simple, efficient, standardized use of terms to give direction during execution.

"Comm brevity" is a verbal form of formality in communications. It avoids the pitfalls or confusion of using too many words or the use of lingo or slang during execution. Many times, errors occur because personnel may not know or might not understand what was said or meant by a fellow team member or leader, thus causing confusion or improper action. Such communication errors can result in unsafe situations, as directions or requests are potentially only partially-heard, partially-completed, or go unnoticed altogether.

Standardized communication ensures a team is precise in communication and follows a strict, formal process from beginning to end. Other types of standardized communication processes may include echoing the original request or confirming the request with a formal response. Keywords that have a singular meaning can also help direct action and formalize communication. Such simple keywords or phrases can be directional or advisory in nature.

By using standardized formal communication, teams and leaders are better able to assess when operations are being executed correctly. Teams can also better comprehend and assess when problems are occurring, even if the environment is distracting or if task saturation sets in.

**How to Utilize Formality**

Operational discipline is essential to following formalized processes exactly as dictated – both as teams and individuals. Every high-reliability organization is different, and there are many different methods to instilling operational discipline and formality in each business unit. What is important is that organizational standards are formalized, trained to and enforced.

To accomplish this, some companies may prefer to formally write out their standards and then distribute them throughout the company, while others may prefer to initially train the front-line leaders on the formalized standards and then have the front-line leaders distribute this knowledge throughout the organization, both in theory and in practice. However, no matter which method you choose, every individual needs to know the processes and procedures, and these processes and procedures must be common throughout the organization. When breaches in formality or discipline are identified, they must be debriefed and corrected, if not immediately, soon thereafter. Individual and team accountability are the cornerstones to achieving consistently-successful operations in harsh, high risk, unforgiving environments.

**Formalized Standards, Standard Operating Procedures and Issue Resolution**

In the world of high risk operations, teams must invest the time to establish organizational standards and standard operating procedures. These standards govern the behavior and actions of a group or individual and are critical to success.

Another important aspect of formality is issue resolution. How do you resolve issues in your organization – formally or informally? Do you have a common process? How and to whom are issues reported? Are your resolutions documented and are you generating and distributing the lessons learned? Are corrective actions timely and tracked? How well do you debrief? What will you debrief – planned events, unplanned events, or both? What process do you use to debrief? At Afterburner, our Flawless Execution**℠** debriefing methodology is a simple seven-step process called "STEALTH." The STEALTH Debrief Model, delivers explicit, actionable lessons learned, and is a structured, yet simple and scalable model that can be used at any level to provide answers to all of the above questions.

**Operational Discipline and Fostering Ownership**

A final and important pillar of organizational discipline and formality is the fostering of individual and organizational ownership. Passionate ownership, at a personal and organizational level, is what makes good organizations great. Great organizations that foster personal ownership are deeply rooted in personal accountability and responsibility.

Infusing ownership comes down to answering two simple questions: "What is OUR standard?" and "How do WE ensure it is being met?"

Once the standard is determined and formalized, we must constantly ask ourselves several key questions to ensure we are not missing the mark. Such questions might include: "Are we providing proper supervisory oversight during key events or evolutions?" "Do our supervisors and leaders conduct proper, formalized tours or inspections prior to operations?" "Or are our leaders overlooking events or conditions that do not meet the standard, no matter how big or small?"

A good indicator of ownership within an organization, good or bad, is how detailed the pre-operation area tours are or how inclined team members or supervisors are to looking the other way when the standard is not met. Leaders and team members just going through the motions, on pre-shift walk-throughs or leaders who overlook even the smallest of "below OUR standards" conditions or actions are condoning those conditions or actions, which will eventually normalize the sub-standard performance.

At Afterburner, our Flawless Execution℠methodology provides forcing functions that help embed operational discipline and formality by teaching leadership processes to teams and team leaders. Forcing functions, such as written plans developed during the planning process and utilized during execution, help maintain accountability and responsibility. Execution of these plans, along with standard operating procedures, are tracked and discussed as part of an Execution Rhythm, a series of face-to-face meetings that track performance and execution through direct interaction with those accountable and responsible. Once your personnel are trained on the standards, and operational discipline and formality are embedded in their DNA, when the "fog of war" or stressful situations set in, they will revert to and maintain the standards you set for them.

Operational discipline and formality are cultural phenomena that dictate how employees operate, communicate and execute processes. The Flawless Execution℠methodology, coupled with operational discipline and a strict adherence to formalized processes and standards, becomes the winning combination your teams need to consistently overcome even the most challenging environments and achieve the highest level of safety and productivity in even the harshest playing fields.

**About the Author**

Ron Horton, [Afterburner, Inc.'s](http://www.afterburner.com/) first Executive Vice President of Safety and Leadership Development, is a 1982 graduate of the United States Naval Academy with over 30 years of distinguished service. He is also a graduate of the U.S. Navy's prestigious Nuclear Power Program and was selected for the rank of Rear Admiral, serving in that capacity as the commander of a logistics group, an operational task force and a navy region in Singapore, where he was the senior U.S. Naval Officer in Southeast Asia. Horton was also selected for and served as the 20th commanding officer of the world's first nuclear powered aircraft carrier, the USS ENTERPRISE (CVN-65). In that capacity, Horton led, directed and was responsible for all aspects of operations and maintenance of this "floating city," including its crew of 5,500 personnel and eight nuclear reactors. Horton's leadership won the ENTERPRISE numerous awards, including the coveted Battenburg Cup, which signifies the "Fleet Forces Ship of the Year." As Afterburner, Inc.'s Executive Vice President for Safety and Leadership Development, Horton is responsible for helping high reliability organization's achieve their safety and leadership goals through the Flawless Execution**℠** model. For more information on Afterburner, Inc., please call 877-765-5607 or visit [www.afterburnersafety.com](http://www.afterburnersafety.com).