The Risks of Risk Management

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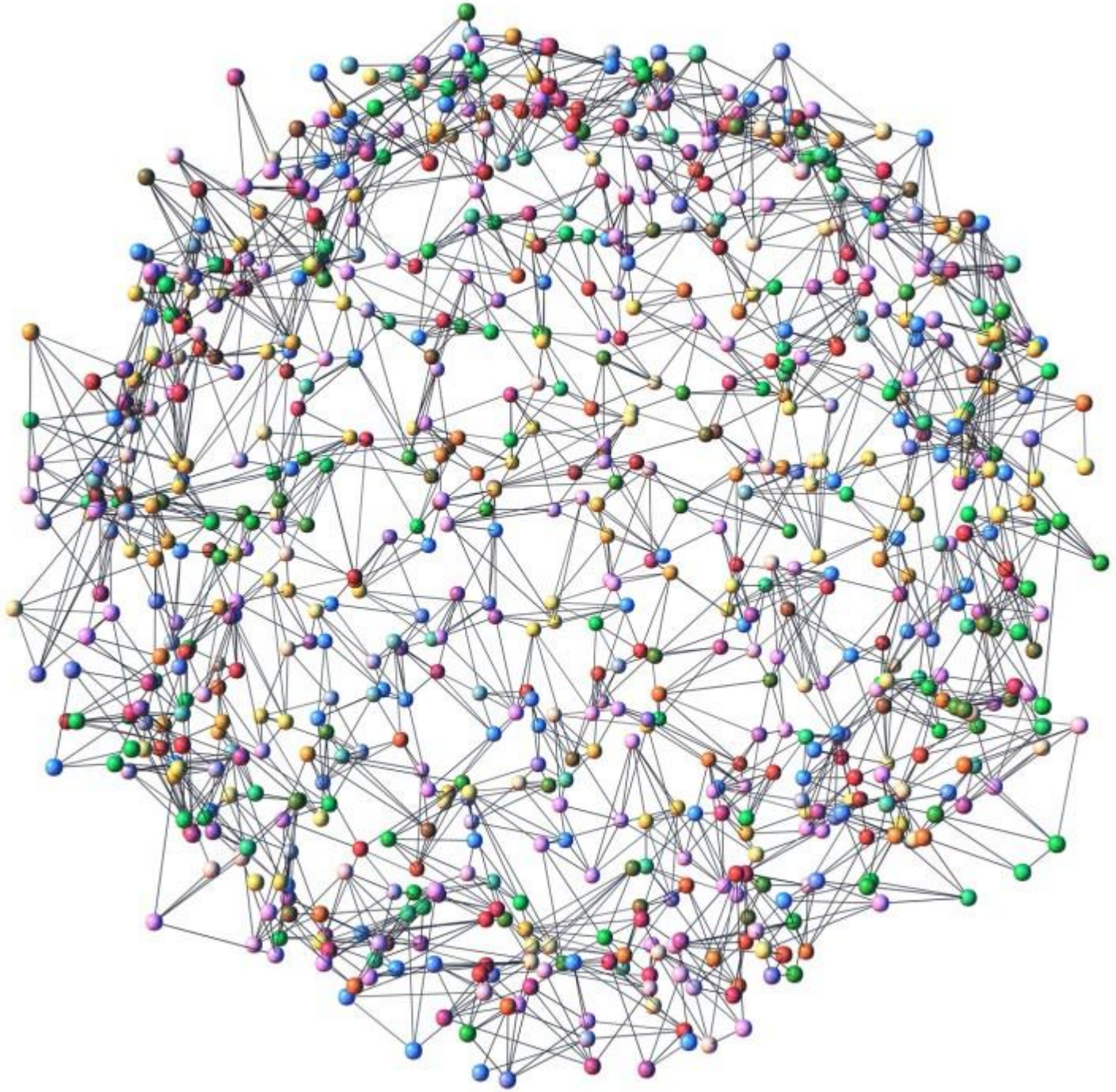
October 2025

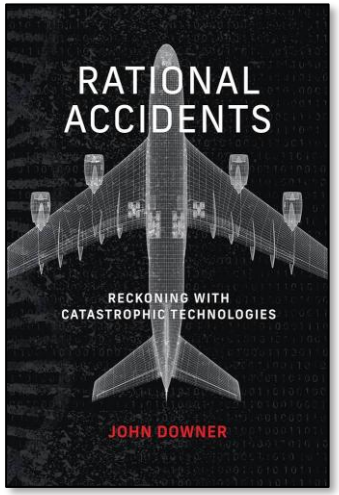
Background

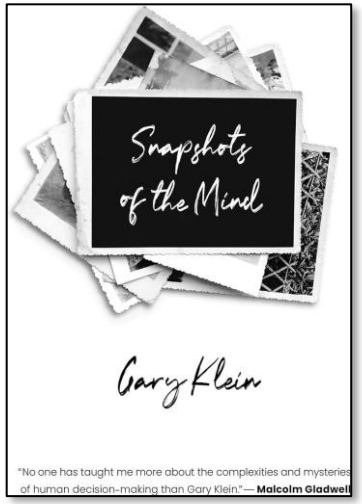
Why the interest?

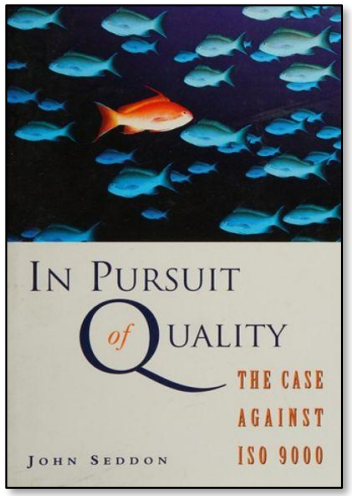


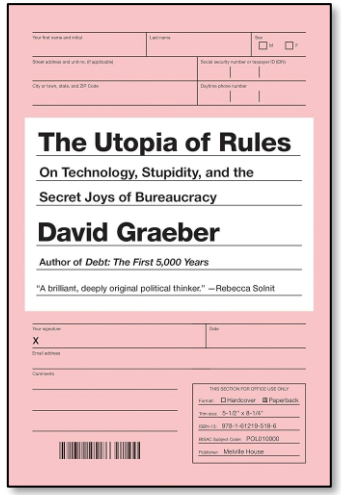
Questions, doubts and uncertainties

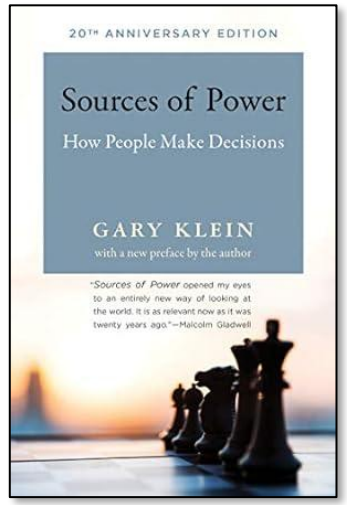
Thinkers who've shaped my views

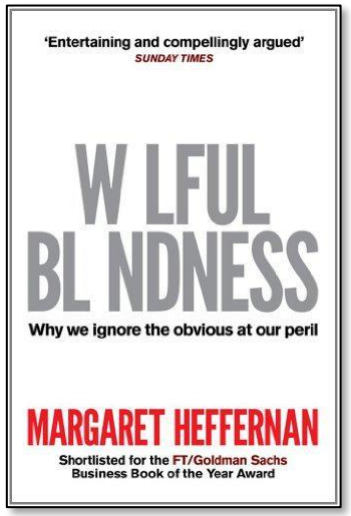


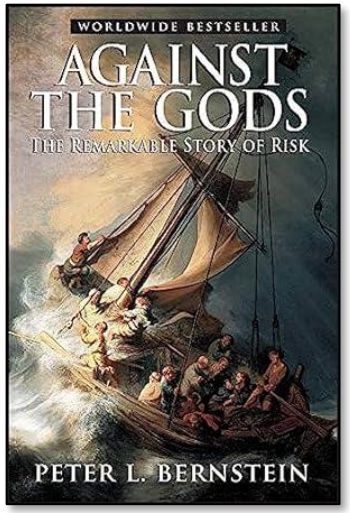


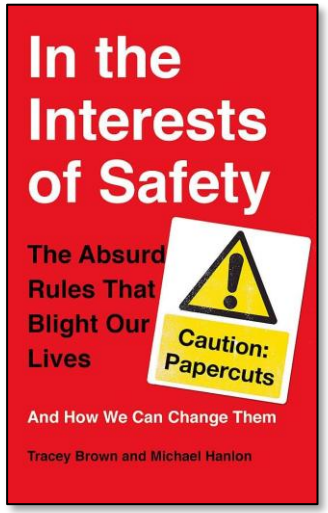


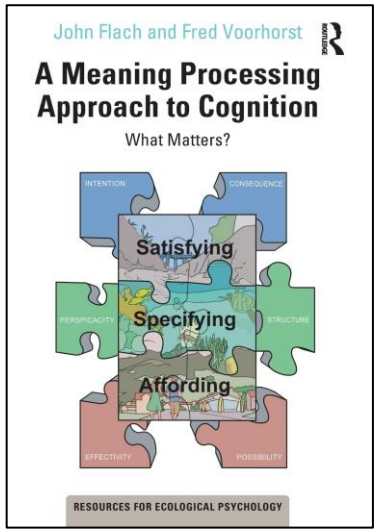


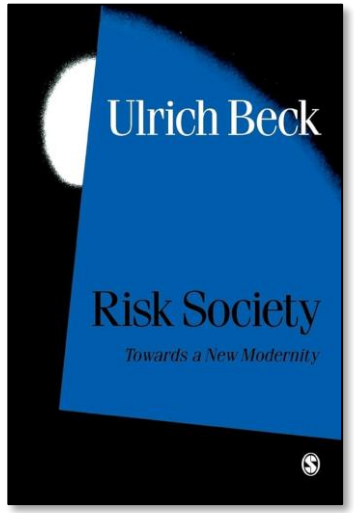


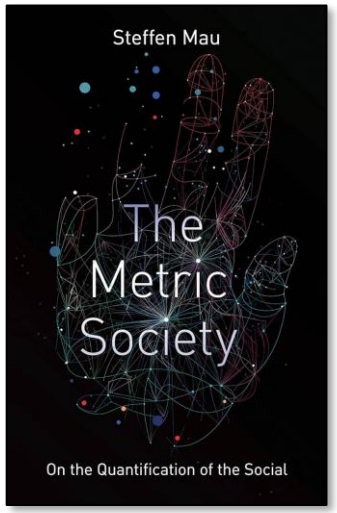












I will argue…

We're often working in complex situations that we don't recognize

Risk management tools are far more subjective than we ever want to acknowledge

The artifacts of risk management frequently create a false sense of security

There is much more we don't know or understand than we admit

Too often, plans are created in stable and predictable contexts, and focus on the routine

We downplay the power of rhetoric – words do indeed create the worlds that we work in

Step 1.

Hazard Identification

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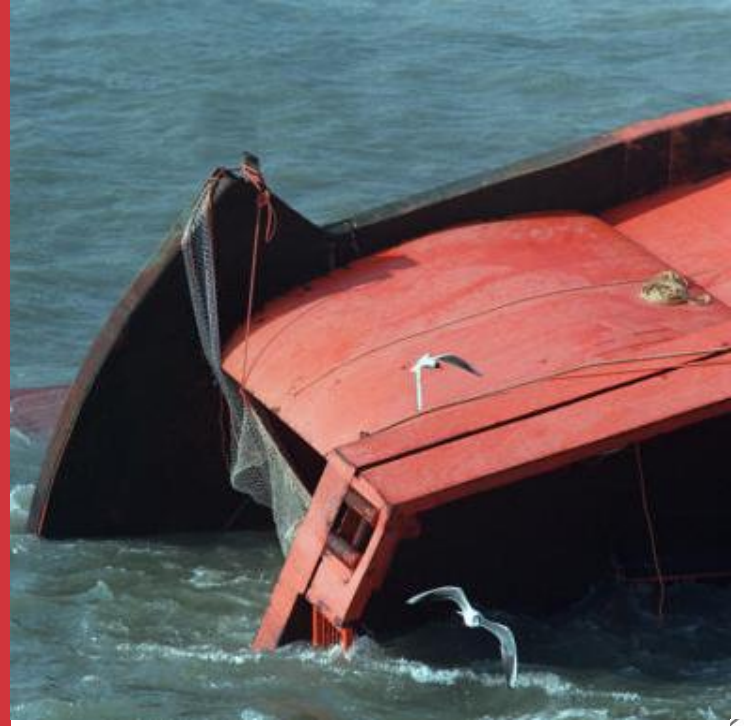
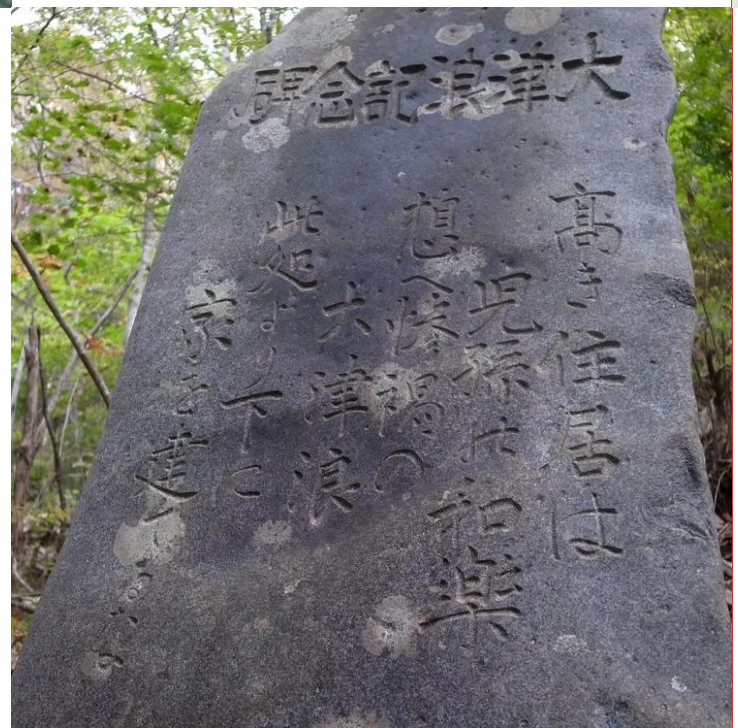


What happened yesterday shapes what hazards we identify today

We identify hazards using individual constructed categories, but they often materialize synergistically



We identify what are familiar with - the known knowns

Safety is understood through representations of work such as audits, metrics, targets, management systems, strategies, theorical models, awards, risk assessments, etc.

The Reality-Representation Gap

Safety is understood through the reality of work, such as time pressure, breakdowns, resources, fatigue, the environment, change, social life, etc.


Corporate Manager


Divisional Manager


Site Manager


Team Manager


Supervisor


Worker

The greater the distance from the reality of work, the more safety is understood through representations. We need representations to simplify the complexity of work, but like mirages in the desert, they can deceive us into believing that they are reality.

Step 2.

Assessing the Risks

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The McNamara Fallacy, placing trust in numbers above all else, including experience

Risks vs. scenarios. Most organisations had identified a pandemic was due, but no one predicted how the scenario would unfold

Step 3.

Managing the Risks

Managing the Risks

The paradox of planning: Mindlessness or mindful anticipation of the unexpected

The presumption that ever-greater controls leads to increased safety. Complexity often increases structural vulnerability

Plans are often created in stable conditions and carry many assumptions and biases

False Assurance is a common theme found in many disasters

When the metrics are green, the incidents are lean, and the audits are clean.

FALSE
ASSURANCE

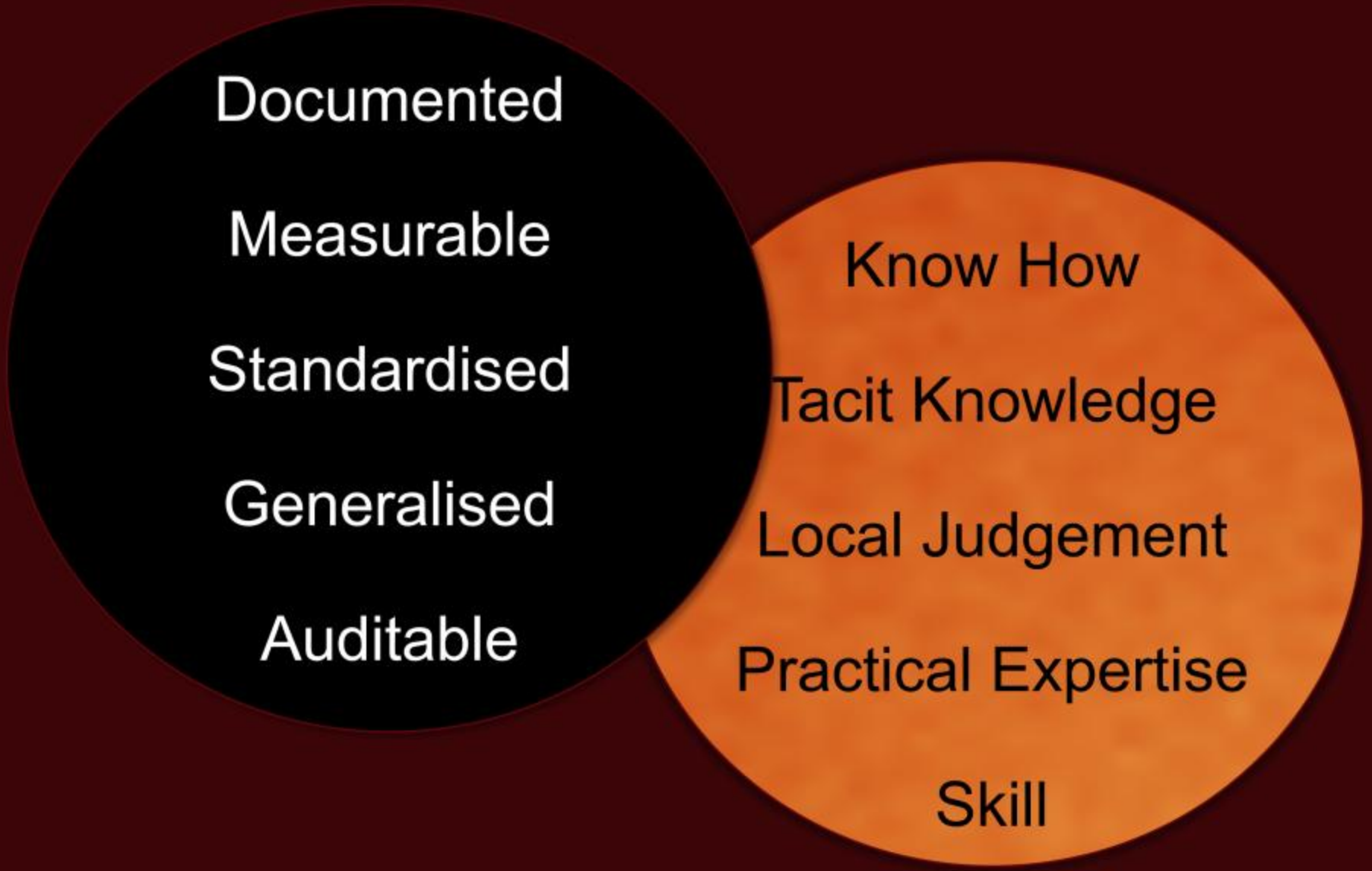
FALSE
ASSURANCE

Step 4.

Ensuring Competency

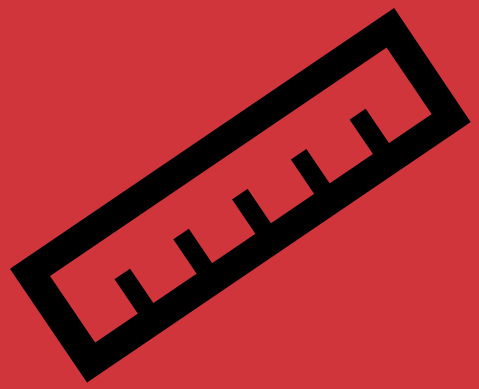
Knowledge Displacement

When formalised knowledge eclipses local expertise and know how



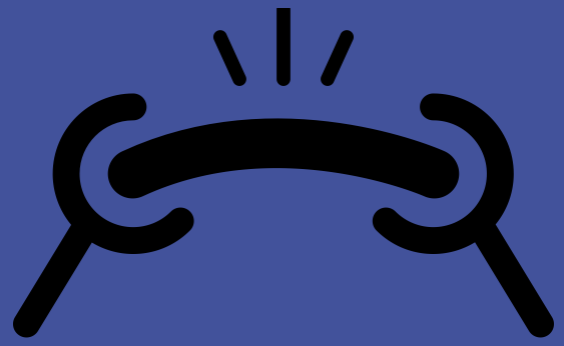
Six Takeaways

1-3



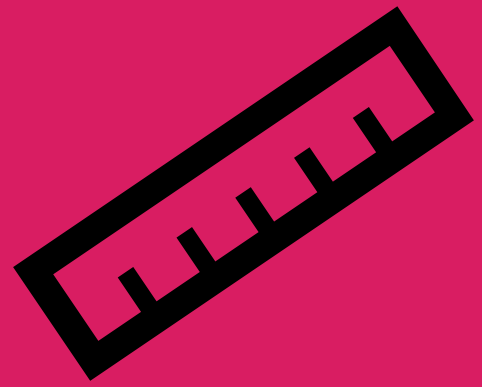
Scenarios vs. risks and categories

Significant incidents rarely involve individual risks; assumed controls frequently fail.



Agility vs. rigidity

Focus on agility, and the ability to diagnose and adapt to the circumstances.



Tacit knowledge vs. models and metrics

Be alert to the biases of measurement and the dismissal of experience

Six Takeaways

4-6

Ensure strong feedback

The ‘secret sauce’ of aviation safety is recursive practice – learning from in-service experience

Plans vs. realities

Be alert to potential delusion of plans. Focus on the realities that workers must address.

Additional safety controls ≠ 100% safer

Greater safety measures can increase complexity and vulnerability

The Last Word

“We should reject ‘mechanical strategies’ that seek to identify, quantify and prioritise risks, but rather enable managers to understand and make sense of situations, so they are alert to respond and adapt to emergent problems.”