



Is Riskwashing Inevitable?

This article is a follow up to "Riskwashing is All Around Us!" published in the Winter 2023 issue of the vPSI newsletter H-E-A-R Say which can be downloaded from the newsletter page of our website.

"Riskwashing" refers to a situation where an organization engages in superficial or insincere actions to create the appearance of addressing a particular risk or issue, without actually taking substantive action to address the underlying problem. Incident investigations are a common source of activities that can be labeled as "riskwashing", due largely to a deep human and organizational need to do something (anything!) after an incident even though there may be no real way to prevent it from happening again. This is especially true after an unplanned event occurs which realizes significant actual consequences, even when such outcomes were extremely unlikely.

Post-incident, humans feel a sense of responsibility to take action based on a natural instinct to restore a sense of control and reduce feelings of helplessness, as well as a desire to learn from experience and improve their future. This desire for action can be motivated by a com-

ination of psychological, social, and practical factors. Individuals and social / work groups feel a sense of responsibility to themselves and others to take action with the goal of protecting against the negative consequences should similar incidents occur again in the future.

Psychologically, humans want to feel a sense of agency and control over their environment and may feel frustrated or powerless when something unexpected or negative occurs. These feelings are exacerbated in cases where it is not possible to come up with real risk reduction measures. Taking action, even if it may be riskwashing that does not prevent future unplanned events, can help restore a sense of control and reduce feelings of helplessness.

YOU ARE LOOKING AT THE PERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR SAFETY

The business environment produces additional practical drivers for riskwashing after an incident. The desire for post-incident action is particularly strong in the corporate world, where there are often legal or regulatory requirements for the organization to conduct an investigation and take action. Employees, customers, internal and external stakeholders all have expectations that create additional pressure for action, mak-

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ing it important for corporations to appear to have a proactive approach to incident management, even in the case of unpreventable, or not reasonably preventable, unplanned events. This is especially the case in high profile industries which are sensitive to their social license to operate, such as oil and gas.

C-suite occupants may find themselves asking, if we remove all riskwashing options from our post-incident menu, what other tools are left? In fact, there are situations where there is no choice other than to accept, or even require, riskwashing, which in this sense can be seen to have benefits at the enterprise risk level. In other words, it is easier for the organization to look "serious" about safety by doing something (anything!) than it is to persuade stakeholders that the exposure behind an unplanned event is actually a tolerable risk which logi-

ONE PERCENT SAFER: Live & Direct '23



Where can you hear from the world's great safety minds? ONE PERCENT SAFER: Live & Direct '23 will be a blast of online sessions from 24-28 April.

This is a last minute reminder to pony up a measly \$25 for the benefit to you of hearing from safety legends like Andrew Hopkins, Dom Cooper, Rosa Antonia Carrillo and Scott Geller. The benefit at the other end of the process is felt by the recipients of

grants and bursaries from the #onepercentsafer foundation, so far more than 100 risk and safety professionals from India, Egypt, Ghana, Nigeria and Pakistan. Ultimately, grant and bursary giving is what One Percent Safer is all about, and the reason such an outstanding group of safety big thinkers are pleased to provide content for the #onepercentsafer: Live & Direct '23 events, which you can access for just \$25. One of the sessions is even FREE!

If you are a health and safety assistant, adviser, coordinator or manager, or hold an equivalent post, you qualify for a free place at our virtual sessions. Likewise if you are an affiliate, student, associate or graduate or tech member, or equivalent, of a health and safety professional body you can register for free to hear from some of the most exciting and most respected thinkers about safety leadership and culture. Register at onepercentsafer.com and use code OPSDEV at checkout.

Combining Business with Pleasure

Members of vPSI Group were recently in Midland, TX training employees of Endeavor Energy Resources in Learning from Incidents (Including Post-Event Data Acquisition and Human Performance Factors). While there, they visited the Permian Basin Petroleum Museum. This museum is highly recommended to anyone in or interested in the oil and gas industry. They also have a large rock and mineral collection, worth the visit just for that.



vPSI Co-Founder and Director Norman Ritchie recently returned to his home base of Scotland to attend the Offshore Energy UK HSE Conference in Aberdeen at the P&J Live event venue. While there, he took some time to visit the Scottish premier of the groundbreaking Doctor Who exhibit at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh: Doctor Who Worlds of Wonder, which explores the science behind the long-running television show. One part of the exhibit was dedicated to the “villains” of Doctor Who, including the three shown above: a Weeping Angel, a Cyberman (with the various heads through the years), and Davros, the creator of the Daleks.

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cally deserves no additional management.

In the context of workplace safety, taking action after an incident, even actions identifiable as riskwashing, can have a positive impact on employee perceptions of a company's safety culture and foster a sense of trust and engagement. In contrast, inaction post-incident can be seen extremely negatively by employees. In a study published in the *Journal of Safety Research* (Ref 1), researchers found that employees' perceptions of their organization's safety culture were significantly influenced by their perceptions of the organization's responsiveness to safety concerns and incidents. Specifically, employees who perceived their organization to be responsive and proactive in addressing safety concerns and incidents had more positive perceptions of the safety culture than those who did not perceive the organization to be responsive. Thus, while no single riskwashing activity will move the needle significantly, consistent action over time may have value in the development and maintenance of an organization's safety culture.

A danger with incident investigations is that their output may consist solely of riskwashing activities, with no real corrective actions, which may instill in the organization the delusion that the underlying risk(s)

have been managed when in reality it has not. Unfortunately, riskwashing activities are deeply rooted in the safety profession and are trotted out with regularity across all kinds of organizations, despite their negative impact on the credibility of the safety function in

Coffee Cup Lids



When Riskwashing gets more attention than the Real Risks



other departments and functional groups. Given that many practitioners firmly believe in their value and have done so through their entire careers, it will be a significant challenge to change their mind-set and dislodge them.

Conventional thinking is not the only cause of riskwashing emerging from incident investigations. Generating real corrective action from investigative analysis requires that recommendations be transitioned into reality, and those directly involved in the investigation rarely have the authority to make that happen. Until someone with the power of the pen says yes, the investigation output is aspirational, and aspirations do not reduce risk. Knowing this, and hav-

ing perhaps experienced the difficulty in gaining approval for the implementation of systemic corrective actions, there may be a tendency for investigation teams to take the easy way out, and recommend actions that they do have control over the implementation of, and those are likely to involve riskwashing.

Given the serious problems associated with riskwashing, it should undoubtedly be minimized. One way to confront and minimize proposed riskwashing is to utilize the vPSI Test, which demands a "reverse" cause and effect analysis be conducted to validate that a planned action will in fact lead to the desired effect. Unfortunately, even if such causality cannot be demonstrated, meaning there is no logical justification for wasting an organization's time, energy and resources just because "we have to do something", it must be accepted that riskwashing will never be eradicated completely, given the strong forces driving it. Recognizing the riskwashing activities that may have cultural or enterprise risk management benefits, and eliminating those that do not, however, will save an organization time and resources, and slow the growth of bureaucracy.

Ref 1: Clarke, S., & Ward, K. (2006). The role of leader influence, tactics and safety climate in engaging employees' safety participation. *Journal of Safety Research*, 37(4), 413-423.

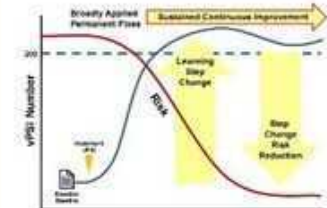


The vPSI System™



Data Quality Ladder

FACT	Checked accounts, numbers, measurements, logical inferences
Deduction	Deriving ideas or generalizations
Assumption	Not based on objective evidence
Opinion	A strongly held conviction
Belief	Not based on objective evidence
Hearsay	Not based on objective evidence
Guess	Not based on objective evidence
Fantasy	Not based on reality



The vPSI System™
Integrated Incident Investigation & Learning Process

—

Now also available as the vPST® Digital Toolkit

