

# Fuel for Thought

## Expecting the Unexpected

*Bruce is back, but hot off the plane, so I thought I'd let him down easy and stand in for him in this column one last time...*

Like most employers in Gladstone, QER takes safety very personally. We are all committed to making sure that our workmates go home safely every day. One of the key safety principles we talk about at QER is mindfulness and I thought I'd share with you what it means to us, and why we think it's fundamental to safety.

I was very interested to read about research into how people maintain safe working practices and culture in complex and potentially risky work environments like aircraft carrier flight decks, nuclear power plants and air traffic control towers. One of the key reasons that very few serious incidents happen in those environments is that when something unexpected happens, people are more likely than not, to take follow up action.

We spend much of our day on automatic mode – humans are very good at that. We follow our routines, and generally things go to plan. But sometimes little things don't happen exactly the way we've come to expect. For example, we turn on the car and a dashboard light stays on for longer than usual. Now we have a choice...either to follow it up – or dismiss it and get on with our busy day. You may have found yourself saying: "It's probably nothing" or the Australian classic: "she'll be right".

In high reliability organisations, people are more likely to resist the temptation to ignore or rationalise those small events away. They recognize them as a little bell indicating something is not quite right, and by following up, they can often identify and fix a problem before it gets out of hand. They know that accidents are often the result of a number of little things going wrong at the same time – leading to a much more serious event.

Looking at unexpected events as a warning bell is not a bad approach to take in our lives, both in and outside of work. It's very human to fall into the trap of acting on the basis of 'wishful thinking'. While we often 'get away with' doing that, eventually the wishful thinking can catch up with us, leaving us in a situation we wouldn't wish on anyone!

Have a safe weekend.

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