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A questioning attitude: what does it mean?

A questioning attitude helps to ensure that safety is considered before taking a decision or action. It feeds into an accurate understanding of workplace situations at all times and alerts individuals to:

- potential hazards;
- weak signals;
- the critical stages of an activity;
- situations that could lead to errors and other unknowns in the working environment.

Finally, a questioning attitude encourages individuals to stop and deal with these alerts or unknowns before work continues.

Asking questions is good for you

The professional's worst enemy is over-confidence in his or her own skills and abilities. Therefore, a questioning attitude begins with yourself: the aim is to systematically evaluate your own

skills, perceptions, and physiological and psychological state with respect to the requirements of the situation to be managed.

An example at the physiological level is a lack of sleep. Here a questioning attitude can be a firewall that protects against errors. It puts in place a systematic self-check process that precedes decision-making. Any doubt can lead the person to take more time, increase his or her safety margins, ask for help, or to be replaced.

At the psychological level, questioning your perception of the situation makes it possible to check whether all of the information necessary to diagnose the situation is available. It is a defence against various cognitive biases.

Human reliability techniques that have emerged from the nuclear and aeronautical industry in particular, often highlight the development of a questioning attitude.

Some examples of best practices that support a questioning attitude to work

include: pre-job briefings, the 1-minute stop, self-checks, etc.

Asking questions is good for the team

Questioning the behaviour of your colleagues reflects the idea that no individual, by themselves, has all of the answers to all of the problems that can be encountered. This shared vigilance also applies when your colleague is more experienced, or a recognized expert in the field. The questioning attitude is therefore a sign of the professionalism and cohesion of staff. The questioning attitude is also an opportunity for creation and innovation, and fosters the emergence of improvements to the system, procedures, etc.

What can my organization do?

Nowadays, the philosophy of human and organizational factors is increasingly accepted by industry, and companies want to encourage their employees to adopt a questioning attitude. It is a sign



that the professionalism of staff is acknowledged: everyone contributes to improving risk management.

This attitude is typical of high-reliability organizations (HROs) and learning organizations.

However, certain prerequisites must be met for the questioning attitude to become routine:

- strategic trade-offs must have been identified (notably any occasional loss of production time to improve safety);
- learning must have been identified as a key priority for the organization;
- the illusion that procedures and processes ensure safety must be combatted;
- it must be acceptable for the decisions of supervisors to be discussed and improved.

These prerequisites are closely linked to the organizational culture and the role of doubt. To illustrate the idea, David Woods (Professor at Ohio State University) takes the example of an operator who has

stopped operations at his site because he is unsure about the safety of an ongoing process. The company checks, but doesn't find a dysfunction or anomaly. How will the company respond the next time there is a request to stop production? Will doubt be seen as a contribution to safety or as a loss of production?

I'm a manager: what do I do next?

Although the questioning attitude appears easy to put in place, it must be reinforced on a daily basis. The commitment must go beyond a fragile promise. It must be a brick in the company's culture, backed by managers and supervisors.

On a daily basis, managers can:

- establish a climate of trust with employees;
- highlight the questioning attitude of leaders: the ability to debate trade-offs and decisions, a curious attitude during field visits, etc.;

- encourage the workforce to ask questions, rather than blindly follow what is prescribed;
- reward examples where doubt has benefited safety;
- avoid sanctioning cases where the doubt proved to be unfounded.

The maturity of an organization's safety culture is reflected in what it does and refuses to do in order to maintain safety. The weight given to the questioning attitude in its activities and the extent to which doubt is defended are two indicators of the organization's commitment to risk management.

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