

Why Do Big Companies Continue to Make the Same Safety Mistakes?



Researchers from the University of Texas at Austin and the University of Colorado Denver recently examined why large organizations as diverse as NASA and BP have a tendency to make the same mistakes again and again, sometimes with serious and far-reaching consequences.

The study, which was published in the journal *Organization Science*, shows that organizations across all industries actually go through cycles of learning and forgetting, and the periods of forgetting can have tragic but preventable outcomes.

The learning stage of the cycle typically occurs after an organization has just experienced a significant incident, referred to as a 'serious error.' Serious errors push firms toward a focus on safety, while pulling them away from other priorities, such as efficiency or innovation. But over time, the effect of a serious error on safety weakens or is forgotten, allowing alternative activities to emerge that lead to subsequent errors.

Organizations fluctuate between learning and forgetting because of pressures from:

- Internal forces, such as employee turnover, complacency (such as an extended period of no serious errors occurring), reorganization and changes in organizational culture, investor tension, and executive leadership
- External forces, such as the media, lobbyist groups, and governmental agencies pushing them toward accountability, particularly in the wake of major problems or catastrophes.

The problem, explains Associate Professor Francisco Polidoro, is that organizations can't operate with their attention focused equally on both safety and non-safety objectives. For example, while safety and profitability aren't mutually exclusive, they do compete. (Read about another study that found putting productivity ahead of safety hurts the bottom line.)

'What we have found is that organizations manage these conflicting goals by oscillating between them,' says Polidoro. 'One [goal] isn't necessarily better than the other, but there has to be a compromise.'

The key takeaway from this study: 'A period of no serious errors is not justification for weakening focus on safety,' says Polidoro. 'We need to make safety more salient in organizational decisions rather than only caring about pushing new products to market, for example. Being aware of our tendency to forget should inform our actions to sustain our focus on safety.'