

## **May 2, Threat, Error, and Resilience in High Hazard Settings Assignment**

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People's habitual ways of thinking and reacting emotionally are an invisible part of disaster planning and, particularly, response. These invisible thought and feeling processes influence how successful disaster planners and responders, working in either physically and socially risky environments, are at achieving their goals.

When and why do intelligent, well-trained people in high-morale enterprises make mistakes that lead to catastrophic outcomes? How can they learn not to do so when the stakes are high? Developing less brittle, more resilient internal cognitive and emotional responses are key barriers or defenses (see Reason chapter for description of defenses) against unsafe outcomes in high-hazard situations. This assignment uses student's own difficult and challenging work conversations to excavate some of the layers of this process. The assignment starts with two premises: First, people can become emotional and tense when they have to act quickly in the face of potential threats to their own and other people's physical safety or to their reputation, identity, relationships (See the Staw, Sandelands and Dutton article for more detail). Second, each person's ingrained thinking, talking, and emotional responses are remarkably stable across different social and professional situations, especially when threat is involved.

For this assignment, we ask you to prepare a short (1-2 page) case related to a difficult or challenging situation in your work (or if no work examples come to mind) your personal life. The best cases address an issue with some emotional heat for the case writer that recur over and over. Follow the case template outlined in the Rudolph, Taylor, and Foldy article and the following instructions developed by Action Design, a consulting firm focusing on reflective practice (Action Design, 2000: [http://www.actiondesign.com/resources/case\\_writing.htm](http://www.actiondesign.com/resources/case_writing.htm)). Write only the case, don't do the case analysis (we'll work on some cases in class.) When you are finished, please post your case. *Please bring 4 hard copies of your case to class.* (We will pick some cases to analyze together in small groups in class.)

As an historical note, this type of case analysis originated in the department of Urban Planning here at MIT with the work of Donald Schön, who was interested the tacit cognitive routines embedded in the work of urban planners.

### **The Action Design Case Guidelines:**

Left-hand/right-hand column cases are a powerful and versatile learning technology. By writing a case describing an actual situation you focus your learning on what is most important and relevant to you. Reconstructing what you and others said in the right-hand column helps make the learning actionable. Reconstructing your thoughts and feelings in the left-hand column makes it possible to reflect on your reasoning and to see opportunities to reframe the situation.

This page describes how to write a left-hand/right-hand column case for use in an Action Design workshop. The quality of your case will have a major impact on what you learn. The best cases focus on moments that illustrate a key theme, issue, or recurring difficulty that you would like to learn to handle more effectively. It usually takes about an hour to write a case.

1. Think of an episode that illustrates a difficult or challenging issue in your work. Please choose something in which you were personally involved and which you would like to learn to handle as productively as possible. State what the challenge was (e.g., creating a cross-functional culture in a planning team; disagreeing with an authority figure).
2. Please describe the context briefly: who was there, the purpose of the encounter, what had just happened. Make up the names if you wish.
3. Describe what actually happened by reconstructing key moments in the conversation. Divide your paper into two columns as shown in the attached example. (A template is provided for you, below.)
4. On the right hand side of the page, write what you and others actually said. It is not important to remember the exact words spoken. Your best recollection will be fine. It is essential, however, that you write dialogue, as if from a play.
  - On the left hand side of the page, write down any thoughts and feelings that you had at the time and did not say.
5. Please note any concerns or puzzles that still linger about the incident. Write down also what help you would like from others when we discuss the case.

### An Example

<u>My Thoughts and Feelings</u>	<u>What We Said</u>
<p>Frank doesn't like to lose. More hyperbole; more pushing his own view. We've heard all this before. If he's right we're already dead.</p> <p>He's preying on Steve's (the CEO's) fears. Why doesn't he offer ideas about how we could make this work.</p> <p>Like hell I did.</p>	<p><b>Me:</b> I don't understand why you have a problem with what I'm suggesting.</p> <p><b>Frank:</b> Let me say it again. This will not work. We'll get into trouble sooner or later.</p> <p><b>Me:</b> Yours is an argument for doing nothing. If we cannot fix this business, we might as well sell it.</p> <p><b>Frank:</b> We've been through this before. We cannot afford the risk.</p> <p><b>Me:</b> I'm not saying there's no risk; I'm saying that doing nothing is not the answer either. Your guys were there when we put the plan together and they didn't see it as that big a risk.</p> <p><b>Frank:</b> You browbeat them. They said you wouldn't listen.</p> <p>(and so on. . .)</p>

## Format for left-hand/right-hand column case<sup>1</sup>

(Respond to questions 1, 2, and 4 by inserting the cursor just after the “.” mark and typing. Respond to question 3 by inserting the cursor in one of the cells of the table and typing.)

Name:

1. The challenge or theme illustrated by this episode:
2. Brief statement of context:
3. The conversation

(After each statement by one person, use the **tab** key to go to the next row of cells for the next person’s statement. When you reach the last row of pre-formatted cells, using the **tab** key will create a new row. Putting each statement in its own cell will improve the formatting when the case is printed.)

My Thoughts and Feelings

What We Said

4. Linger concerns, puzzles, or questions:

When you are finished, please post your case. **Please bring 4 hard copies of your case to class.**

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<sup>1</sup> Developed by Action Design, Inc. Go to [Action Design.com](http://ActionDesign.com) for more details on productive conversations and reflective practice.