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A Poisoned Safety Culture

A few years ago I was teaching a human factors course to a helicopter operator in the United States. About halfway through the course I was ready to teach the module about communication skills, specifically addressing the issue of assertiveness. At that moment there was a knock on the door and the Director of Maintenance (DOM) walked in asking if he could have a few minutes alone with the class. Though odd, I agreed and proceeded to sit in the waiting area for what I thought would be a few minutes. About an hour later the DOM exited the classroom and thanked me for giving him a “few minutes” with the class. Upon returning, I was told by the class attendees that the purpose of that interruption was so that the DOM could make it clear to employees that “what he says goes” and that the class should basically ignore what I was teaching regarding speaking up when acting in, or observing, unsafe conditions.

That DOM is no longer with the company but the event did illuminate the extreme end of a poisoned safety culture. In my over 15 years of teaching human factors courses all over the world I had never, and have still never, experienced something quite as brazen as what occurred that day. Authoritarian, toxic leadership styles have absolutely no place in aviation, or, for that matter, in any other high-risk industry. How can you work on attaining, or maintaining, a Generative safety culture when the role models of your organization are stuck in the Pathogenic mode? Does any of this sound familiar?