HRO Report Carl Vinson

26th January 2012
Marc Otten and Bert Slagmolen
Apollo13 Consult, The Netherlands

1 Introduction

This report contains some observations made by Marc Otten and Bert Slagmolen during their Distinguished Visitors trip to the Carl Vinson – US Navy Aircraft Carrier CVN 70. The visit was made from Tuesday November 29 till Friday December 2, 2011.

This memorable trip was made possible by Tom Mercer (retired Admiral US Navy and formerly commander of the Carl Vinson). Daved Van Stralen also put a lot of effort in realizing this.

2 Objectives of this report

One of the main goals of our visit was to observe a High Reliability Organisation in action. Or at least to have a closer look at an organisation that was the starting point of an important study on reliability carried out by Karlene Roberts in the early nineties (*Roberts, K. H. (1990). Some Characteristics of High-Reliability Organizations. Organization Science, 1, 160-177*). The Carl Vinson was the first organization labelled as an HRO and was referred to in many publications since then.

Whether the Carl Vinson still is an HRO is not very relevant to us. We expected to see a ship in full operation that would be in any case Reliability Seeking. Like Karl Weick stated: *organizing is not about a stable solution to achieve but a developmental process to keep active*. Our objective was to observe and discuss: how do they keep their developmental process active and in what direction are they developing.

In this report we address the following topics:
— Our perspective and conceptual framework used in our observations
— Most important observations we made
— Translation of these observations into learning
— Follow up

3 Perspective and conceptual framework

Firstly, we, observers, are consultants for organizational change and organizational learning. We focus on organizing and as a consequence focus on interactions between people, sense making in groups, group dynamics, process of socialization, change and intervention strategies. As consultants we try to deliver added value by helping people in organizations to make their developmental process more effective and sustainable, and/or to address fixations that block or hinder change and development. The concepts and knowledge base of HRO are quite important in our work. We are less dealing with psychological theme's (related to the individual) or structural topics (related to formal systems). Key concepts are the five hallmarks of (collective) Mindful Organizing and conditions for developing Mindfulness (like shared

references, heedful relations, informed culture and redundancy in organizing).

Secondly, we use Weick's work on the Social Psychology of Organizing as a frame of reference for our analysis and strategies. Key concepts are related to his definition of organizing (*a consensually validated grammar for reducing equivocality by means of sensible interlocked behaviour*) and to some important aspects of organizing like: enactment, selection, retention, feedback loops, assembly rules for double interacts, and so on.

Thirdly, we base our interventions for change on concepts related to 'socialization' as described by among others Berger and Luckmann (*Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality, 1966*) and applied by for example Kotter in his work on sustainable change.

4 Important observations

For our obeservations we looked specifically at 'sensible interlocked behaviour' and key aspects of interlocked behaviour like: attitude, spoken and body language, physical arrangements, double characteristics of interacts, misunderstandings, and the like.

In our observations we try to filter out specific actions and behaviours that are related to the military (being prepared to take high risks) and to a high tech environment with machines that are operated at the limits of what is possible. These observations on interlocked behaviour are important to demonstrate which type of interactions, organizing principles, are basic to Mindful Organizing, Reliability Seeking, High Reliable Organizing, and so on.

— While walking around almost everybody engaged with you in one way or the other: they looked at you, they were polite without being subservient, they greeted, they hardly showed annoyance or impatience when they discovered we were a group of 15 (passages were quite small sometimes). Apparently, 'interaction' and 'being open to interaction' is a key value to all.

— People were always prepared to walk along with you to show the head or the wardroom. Without knowing who we were. Of course we were visitors, but nobody behaved disconnected. Apparently, they practice what is preached, making no distinction between colleagues, officers, visitors, or subcontractors.

— It was no problem to get very close into social situations where people were 'organizing'. Nobody felt uneasy with very close camera positions. Either people are used to it (meeting a lot of strange visitors) and/or they know they are important and it is 'normal' that others are interested and/or showing others are welcome to contribute to interactions.

— When interviewing people everybody was quite open to answer questions, to be very open, to show interest. At the same time only few people asked were we came from and what we were doing here. We are still a bit puzzled.

— Officers and Petty Officers from Navy and Air Force sat together around round tables in comfortable chairs in nice environments. Again an open atmosphere, like a small village, without getting too close, but close enough to be attentive and alert (we presume).

- The Intercom is used by the captain to announce news or to stress again his 5 principles (see further) and the importance of everybody's work. This was done quite often in various social settings: introducing us as visitors, giving information about the job people did, thanking people for their support, and the like. Socialization ('what is our task to fulfil and our process to keep active') is constantly put into words, examples, interactions.

- We asked quite a few people about their major challenge. The first answer was: moral, to keep everybody in their team motivated, to signal people that have (psychological) problems, to act directly if something is not going well. About 10% of the sailors need attention: fighting, boredom, homesick, driving under alcohol. We think 'moral' is another word for knowing the members of your group, being alert to weak signals, making explicit that one cannot 'cut corners' or 'not comply with rules'.

- A lot of physical language(like waving with hands), not only because this is necessary due to the noise, it also is a form of symbolic interaction, making others clear what is at stake. E.g. one of the shooters counted the number of people in our group with his hand again and again (making visible to others that we were a group of rookies everybody should take care of) and marking lines (to us and to his colleagues).

- Petty Officers are quite important in keeping the organization grammar validated. On the one hand they drill the sailor in getting to know the grammar and all of its recipes, on the other hand they invite everybody to take part in the validation process, nobody is a number. Indeed, all people have a name on their uniform.

- After dinner, the XO prepared a short speech, inviting 4 servants and 2 cooks to stand up, again making clear that they were important, that they were the core of the organization, and performed excellent. People are continuously involved in socialization processes.

- The new Captain coming to us, demonstrating leadership, infusing us with values, motivate and again and again telling about what is important.

- Housekeeping is part of the daily routine AND part of the socialization process. 'It is your ship' and we all have to contribute to that. Cleaning is an essential part of the culture. FOD walk on the Flight Deck (Foreign Object and Debris) is the ultimate expression of cleaning. The parts found are shown as trophies. FOD walk is voluntary but also an unique opportunity to go outside and meet the others. The FOD take place in an area where the Carl Vinson makes the difference.

- To keep moral high (it was said) quality of food is important, and the ports you will embark, to have email contact with the folks at home, to prepare for Christmas, to buy personal things like chips and drinks, to do sports. Life goes on, even on the ship, however it is important to make a clear difference between 'working time' and 'private time'.

- Officers had a very good overview of the whole organization. They are very eloquent. In face of visitors they demonstrated their proudness and competency. Colleagues were always interested.

5 Five principles

The Captain had 5 principles. He tells them often. In direct contact or when talking over de intercom. It was printed on posters. The principles function like a mantra. We do not know who invented them.

- High level of knowledge, lifelong learning is important
- Use formal communication, formality is important, standard language
- Strict procedural compliance, our procedures are written in blood
- Questioning attitude, for yourself, and to help the other, together finding out how things work
- Forceful back-up

Furthermore values were mentioned. Integrity, learning from mistakes, operational risk management, leadership. I'm your leader don't cut corners. Learning is about discovering mistakes, means teaching on the job. Also important is to make clear when something will be fixed. 'Directly' or for example 'we will repair this in April 2013'.

The work 'HRO' was not mentioned at all. They did not know the history. Statistics about safety were not mentioned. Benchmarking was not extremely relevant. They knew some figures but in motivating people it is not relevant. The registration of OSHA's is for the safety experts. A rigid focus on facts might demotivate or give you the feeling you are safe. The Captain said: it is not my tool. It is important to register incidents but it should not become a goal in itself. Nobody felt miserable about the number of visits to the doctor.

Leadership is: have the vision, share the vision and execute the vision

6 Learning points

Involvement of all in validating the organizational grammar or at least the sub-grammar someone is operating in.

Using positive feedback from 'retention' (comply to the rules) and negative feedback (questioning attitude) at the same time.

Investing constantly in shared concepts and shared ambitions by making them explicit, by illustration, by behaviour.

Explicit attention for group dynamics, and interactions and relations between members of a group or team.

Investing constantly in making a shared picture (making the bubble) of the ship, the situation, the group. Creating and sustaining an informed culture.

Not incidents are the prime trigger for looking at the culture and its weak spots – but small deviant actions, unexpected things, etc.

7 Follow up

Well we would like to make a second visit and really zoom in on interactions and organizing. How are all these principle practiced, how do they cope with deviation, how do they created and maintain this culture in daily operational work.