



***“That’s the way we have always done it...”
Are there ‘traditions’ that blind us to risk?***

As we approach July 4th, Independence Day in the US, we should take a moment to try to understand if we may be blinded to potential risk by our traditions or “that’s the way we have always done it.” I remember in the year 2000; I was an analyst on the collapse of the Texas A&M Bonfire stack that killed 12 people and injured many more. I distinctly remember in some of the conversations around the safety of the bonfire that when asked, “what makes the bonfire safe?”, people routinely answered, “because it always has been!” It started thoughts in my head even back then that, sometimes, our previous experiences can blind us to risk, just because things in the past have turned out okay. This article is about us stepping up at home, work, and play, to make things safer and more predictable when we think that things will be okay because they always have been.

When there is risk, especially significant risk, and things still turn out okay, it is usually because the people involved took actions to create the safety or good outcome, not because the risk was actually reduced or even compensated for. It is important to know and understand the difference.

As we approach this festive holiday, I am reminded of some more current discussions related to being blinded by tradition, or things being safe because they always have been. We were helping a western utility and started asking the questions “what are two things you do at work, and two things you do at home that have risk, but you may be blinded by tradition or ‘that’s the way we do it...’”? We were a bit shocked by the answers. After this initial contact, we have asked this of several large and small organizations, and amazingly (or not so much) the answers were very similar, regardless of the sector or size of the company. Here are a few things we learned that might help your organization.

- The workforce was amazingly candid about workplace risks that they felt like they were managing as employees, that would probably be managed better systemically by the organization. The overwhelming answer to “why haven’t you shared this with the organizations?” was “we did... but they either haven’t done anything about it or turned it around and made it my problem.”
- The workforce risks were very TASK specific, not job or occupation specific. In other words, there were specific tasks within a job and actions within a task that produced the risk that they had to manage. These were passed along from seasoned employees to newer employees as “here is how we do that” or “that’s the way we have always had to do it...” (sound familiar?).
- The home traditions and the reason for the timing of this Robservation started a flow of conversation. Here are a few to consider:



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- Home bonfires – it was amazing the number of people who not only thought this was risky (but do it anyway) but also know someone personally that has been impacted by this event done badly. I remembered many years ago; we were attending a church group bonfire at one of the member's farms. We were using the remnants of all the trees that had been cut or uprooted to plant a portion of their field, and the bonfire stack was BIG (about 25 feet across and 20 feet tall). One of the attendees went into the barn and found a 5 gallon can of gasoline. They poured it all around the base and splashed it as high as they could up into the stack of trees. Most of the rest of us were busy bringing out the food and setting up tables. You could smell it, but everyone underestimated the power of the fire when it was lit. When he lit the fire, the explosive “WHOOOOOSH” was so powerful it knocked him off his feet, and the power was felt and heard all the way in the house over 500 feet away. He and a few people nearby were singed, but not seriously hurt. Back then, I didn't understand risk or Serious Injury / Fatality (SIF) potential the way I do now. In general, we know far more now as an industry about SIF and need to use that knowledge in our day to day lives as well as at work. As I look back on that day, we actually joked about it, instead of recognizing it for the risk that it was. But I do remember one thing, and that is the person that poured the gasoline on saying “I've always used gas to light bonfires...” and then adding “well maybe not that much!” The TASK was different (this bonfire, in this configuration at this time), even though the job (lighting a bonfire) was the same.
- Fireworks wars (I know – right?) – As we started talking about this, person after person, company after company had a story about playing with fireworks (okay the discussion shifted from ‘wars’ to the general handling of fireworks). But at almost every turn, someone admitted to taking a Roman Candle or similar firework and aiming it or throwing it at another human. I remember when I was young, a dad was teaching his son, about 15 years old, how to hold a Roman Candle while it went off. I will never forget what happened when the first high-temperature, molten projectile came out of the end of that firework. The young man wasn't ready for the torque and power, and it twisted his wrist, sending that firework, not at the pond where it was aimed, but at the parking lot where the cars were! In an attempt to control it, he over-corrected, and the next few rounds wound up going into the group of parents and kids just sitting around and enjoying the evening. Once the firework starts to go off, you can't really stop it, and he never really got control, but he did try to gain more control by grabbing up the shaft of the firework, resulting in a small burn to his hand.


WE have the opportunity to make the connections to risk and SIF potential at home, possibly even more than at work sometimes. WE have the opportunity to set the example for recognizing and managing risk for those that we care about at home, work, or play. WE have the responsibility to




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Fisher IT, Inc.
271 Executive Park Dr. NE
Concord, NC 28025

 www.improvewithfit.com

 info@improvewithfit.com

 (888) 240-0119

use what we have learned as an industry over the last 10 years to make our lives better and have safer, more predictable outcomes. I hope you will take the opportunity to do it.

So, what can you do?

1. ASK your organization (crew level, department level, etc.) the following questions and then *pay attention to the answers*;
 - a. What do you do at work where you hear people say “that’s the way we have always done it...” where we could be blinded to the risk?
 - b. What are some things you see at home or play where tradition or fun could blind us to risk?
2. Use your Near-Miss reporting system to catalog, analyze and potentially correct or mitigate the risks they describe;
3. Feedback the fixes to the organizations and ask if there are others.
4. Teach the difference between tasks and jobs, and the importance of these differences to seeing and managing risk;
5. For the home examples, publish local examples with potential mitigations so families, neighbors, and colleagues can benefit from the knowledge.

If you have any follow-up questions regarding our capabilities, or if you would like to contact Rob for any other reason, he can be reached at +1 802-233-0760 or via email at Rob.Fisher@ImproveWithFIT.com .