

1.3 Safety Diiferently-Innovative and critical safety thinking

Can safety renew itself?

Is the safety profession uniquely incapable of renewing itself?

For a profession that is organized around the elimination, reduction and control of risk, innovation can be a tall order.

Innovation means taking risk. It requires a critique and a questioning of assumptions that under lie our practices. Such a critique, such questioning, can be unwelcomed. These are assumptions and practices, after all, that (many believe) have got us to where we are today, that keep many of us in business. Innovation is risky. It entails reputational risk, psychological risk, financial risk, practical risk even.

Safety innovation, then, is not just an oxymoron. It could be what philosophers call a performative fallacy. By stating itself, it denies the very possibility of what it states. Safety and innovation do not work together, because innovation is per definition unsafe. Or at least it is seen as unsafe by all kinds of stakeholders.

Fear of innovation, of thinking and acting differently, has dogged humanity forever. Yet humanity has always found ways to conquer that fear. The European Enlightenment is an example of a wholesale shift in intellectual thinking, lifting up the power and freedom of human reasoning over hand-me-down truths from Church or Crown.

Immanuel Kant, one of the great Enlightenment thinkers, argued that Enlightenment was our release from self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is the incapacity to use our own understanding without the guidance of someone else or some institution. Tutelage is the ultimate run for intellectual cover. Tutelage means relinquishing your own brainpower and conform, so as to keep the peace, or keep a job. But you also help keep bad ideas in place, and keep dying strategies alive.

Crucially, Kant blamed not a lack of intellect for us submitting to such tutelage. He blamed a lack of determination; a lack of courage. His rallying cry for the Enlightenment became Sapere Aude, or “Dare to Think!” Innovation depends on such courage. It depends on the freedom from constraint, on freedom from the shackles of a current paradigm. It depends on a relentless curiosity, on an impatience or dissatisfaction even with what other people want us to know or do. We are caught in a paradigm that has us confirm to each other what we think we already know.

This is how we train and educate vast cadres of new safety professionals. But innovation means thinking differently from what we think, to how we think. It means, as Michel Foucault once said, straying far afield of ourselves, seeing differently from how we see. It means becoming free from ourselves. Dare to think!

But can safety professionals do that? There is, perhaps, something indelibly conservative about the safety profession—it is a field characterized by a dogma of risk adversity, by an inclination to preserve that which we know (or hope or pray) still works for us. Daring to think could mean playing with fire. It could mean biting the hand that feeds us. Perhaps taking risk is precisely what we do not want to do.

Or is it?

Please help prove that we can dare to think, and change, too.



Immanuel Kant
1724-1804