



Chest Bumping Led to America's Largest Environmental Disaster

by Elizabeth J. Agnew, MS, June 2010

Mike Williams survived the blowout on The Deepwater Horizon and he shared his story on 60 Minutes in May. What I found fascinating, in addition to how he survived, was his description of a catalyzing moment in the board room, just one of the many leadership mistakes that led to the disaster.

The rig had been working for seven years, and was just finishing up the largest drilling project to have ever been completed. The crew was preparing to close the cap of the oil well. Managers from BP were on site to celebrate a successful completion.

Here's an excerpt from the 60 Minutes interview explaining what happened the morning of the accident:

Williams says, that during a safety meeting, the manager for the rig owner, Transocean, was explaining how they were going to close the well when the manager from BP interrupted.

"I had the BP company man sitting directly beside me. And he literally perked up and said 'Well my process is different. And I think we're gonna do it this way.' And they kind of lined out how he thought it should go that day. So there was short of a chest-bumping kind of deal. The communication seemed to break down as to who was ultimately in charge," Williams said.

The largest environmental disaster in US history starts because of chest bumping! This may not be surprising, but it certainly is ridiculous, disappointing, and embarrassing.

This highlights the importance of communication in the engineering world. I was told that the technical communications course I took senior year at Cornell would be the most important course I took. And I've found that to be true. What if there was a way (and there is) for those two men to have seen themselves on the same team, to have put their different ideas in a pile, then agreed on a way discuss the project that would result in the best all-around process? What if they were trained in how to maintain sight on the bigger picture, on all the forces at play, and not just on being "right"? What if the system was set up so that "being right" was the same thing as "finding the right answer together"?

Later in the segment we learn that if BP hadn't won the argument, there probably wouldn't have been a blowout:

In finishing the well, the plan was to ... place three concrete plugs, like corks, in the column. The Transocean manager wanted to do this with the column full of heavy drilling fluid - what drillers call "mud" - to keep the pressure down below contained. But the BP manager wanted to begin to remove the "mud" before the last plug was set. That would reduce the pressure controlling the well before the plugs were finished.

"If the 'mud' had been left in the column, would there have been a blowout?" Pelley [the CBS interviewer] asked.

"It doesn't look like it," Bea [the expert; a UC Berkeley engineering professor] replied.

In all the cleanup work and ongoing efforts to stop the leaking, let's not forget how this mess started. The way we're working together IS. NOT. WORKING.

We need to:

Bring real leadership and communication training to all ruff-n-tuff engineering leaders out there
Teach leaders how to deepen their identity to Self so they get their egos out of the damn way when solving technical problems that have widespread, multifaceted implications.
Provide technical tools and processes for the skill of communicating so that when differing ideas are put on the table there is a reliable, impersonal way to choose the best one.

We NEED to change the way we solve problems together if we are ever going to a) avoid the next mega-disaster and b) fix all the mega-disasters that are already ruining our planet.

Source: <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/05/16/60minutes/main6490197.shtml>

Liz works with individuals and organizations in technical fields needing tailored leadership development that speaks their language. Liz has logged hundreds of hours coaching individuals from companies such as Jet Propulsion Laboratories, Google, HP, SETI, Lockheed Martin, VNUS and Sun Microsystems. Her background includes experience in adult education, team facilitation, and public speaking. She offers complimentary coaching consultations – call or email today to schedule yours.