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A word from Anne and her team



## The Normalisation of Deviation



Recently, I was reminded of a previous case I had worked on that focused on a serious, yet thankfully non-fatal, accident in the workplace. The conclusion of the case was that systematic, poor processes had crept into a business's everyday actions with very meaningful consequences. Employees had, over time, strayed from the business's safety standards and guidelines, using their own judgement to make decisions that were based on saving time. It's what we refer to as the Normalisation of Deviation. In laymen's terms, it's cutting corners to get things done that little bit quicker. And it is perpetuated by the habits being passed down to others to copy.

It's something that can quite easily affect businesses of all types and something that I believe we should all be aware of. So, what does the Normalisation of Deviation look like? How is it spotted? And, what can you do to mitigate and, ultimately, eradicate it?



### The Nimrod Review

Perhaps the best known case that addresses the Normalisation of Deviation can be found in the Nimrod Review of 2009, an independent review conducted by Charles Haddon-Cave QC into the tragic loss of the RAF Nimrod MR2 Aircraft in Afghanistan in 2006. RAF Nimrod was lost on a mission over Afghanistan when she suffered a catastrophic mid-air fire, leading to the total loss of the aircraft and the death of all 14 service personnel on board.

In his review of how the incident occurred, Haddon-Cave argued that the processes to ensure the aircraft was safe and able to fly were lamentable – a story of incompetence complacency and cynicism. Moreover, the safety of the aircraft was fatally undermined by a general malaise and a widespread assumption that the Nimrod was safe anyway because it had successfully flown for 30 years. Its safety case, before the tragic incident occurred, had become a mere tick box exercise, and safety was poorly planned, poorly managed and poorly executed. He concluded that work was rushed, and corners were cut. The Normalisation of Deviation had resulted in a terrible tragedy.

### Examples that are closer to home

In everyday business operations, simple examples could be as basic as not wearing a seatbelt for a short journey or driving a few miles over the speed limit to get somewhere quicker. If you do this, and there are no repercussions, many people will think "so what?". They'll maintain that the deviation

hasn't led to any safety issues and has just made their life that little bit easier. But their actions, intended or otherwise, will have two major implications.

### It affects everyone

Firstly, the standard of safety has changed, and not just for the individual concerned. It affects everyone who interacts with them; in this instance other road users and pedestrians and, in the workplace, other employees, contractors, third parties and members of the public. Yes, they may well have got away with it on this occasion, but that encourages them to do it again and eventually, the law of averages dictates, something bad will happen.

### From small acorns

Secondly, and perhaps more worryingly, it starts a process that will inevitably lead to more substantial deviation. Because once a deviation becomes the norm and embeds itself as acceptable practice, people will look for the next way to further cut the corner. This means that safety standards have been further modified and the business is opening itself up to even greater safety risks – and the serious implications from doing this. As breaches of policy become acceptable, the well-intended, original safety guidelines frankly aren't worth the paper they are written on. Perceived efficiency has taken precedent over risk evaluation. It's the very definition of a vicious circle.

### It's hard to see it coming

The real challenge for most businesses is that Normalisation of Deviation can be hard to identify if an incident never occurs as a result of it, because it's such a gradual evolution of behaviour and policy. It creeps and creeps and without systematic, everyday evaluation of practices, most people don't see it coming. Businesses must ensure they are constantly checking adherence to guidelines to minimise deviation and, ideally, eradicate it. Businesses set their guidelines up for entirely the right reasons - because they provide the right structure, the right guidance, the accepted level of risk and unwavering consistency. Straying from these is dangerous, because if something does happen it can have dramatic and long-lasting consequences, as RAF Nimrod so tragically proved.



### How to spot Normalisation of Deviation in your business

- Are there any behaviours that are accepted today that wouldn't have been accepted originally? Have safety guidelines changed to accommodate deviations?
- Is safety equipment up to standard? Or has it been allowed to degrade/fall out of date?
- Have safety policies become more relaxed? Is there less emphasis on adhering to policies?
- Are decisions made based on in-depth risk analysis? Or have past successes solely been used to validate decisions being made?
- Have you ensured that training on safety policies is given to all employees regardless of experience? It can often be more experienced employees that think they know a "better" or "quicker" way to get a job done.

### What action can you take?

- Frequent and rigorous reviews of all safety policies to ensure employees are operating to the standards you originally set.
- A continual programme of training that ensures everyone in the business understands what is expected and adheres to the guidelines you have set.
- Regular reviews of safety equipment to ensure it remains fit for purpose and functions as it should.

### In Conclusion

The Normalisation of Deviation is a very real and meaningful threat to businesses. Small deviations from accepted and well-designed guidelines can have very serious consequences, so businesses' must

do all they can to ensure it doesn't find a home in their everyday operations.

Best Wishes,

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### Poll:

The following poll is entirely anonymous, so I'd appreciate you answering it truthfully.

On average, how often does your organisation rigorously check the process that your employees undertake to check they are adhering to your company policies?

Answer now



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