embracing tensions:

Dealing with safety and security in high-risk organizations

Abstract

High-risk organizations worldwide have to cope with a rising number of risks and threats, from natural hazard risks (due to global warming for example) to intentional and malevolent threats (such as terrorist attacks, cyber-crime, insider threat). In order to do so, they developed over time departments dedicated to the prevention and protection at work. These departments were firstly oriented towards the protection against unintentional hazards and more recently against intentional and malevolent threats. Such departments performs advisory, controlling, sensitizing and executive tasks in the field of safety and security within the organization.

Analyzing this trend, scholars and international institutions from the 2000’s century increasingly advocated the integration of safety and security within high-risk organizations. This would, according to them, improve synergies between both and permit to avoid or overcome potential tensions that might arise from their interactions.

The paper reports from a project that aims to analyze the interactions between safety and security units from a safety department in a Belgian high-risk organization. Through a methodology based on onsite ethnography, interviews with members of the department, as well as with employees of the organization, and through document analysis, it focuses on tensions that may arise from their interplay. This project highlights *tension venues* as well as *areas in which tensions are absent*. Mobilizing a vulnerability approach, it argues that, in contrast with the vision portrayed by the literature, tensions should be embraced. Indeed, tensions between safety and security are viewed as inherent and necessary for the organization and, on the contrary, the absence of tensions is a sign of problematic management of both