

Monthly rambling musings of suitably qualified people

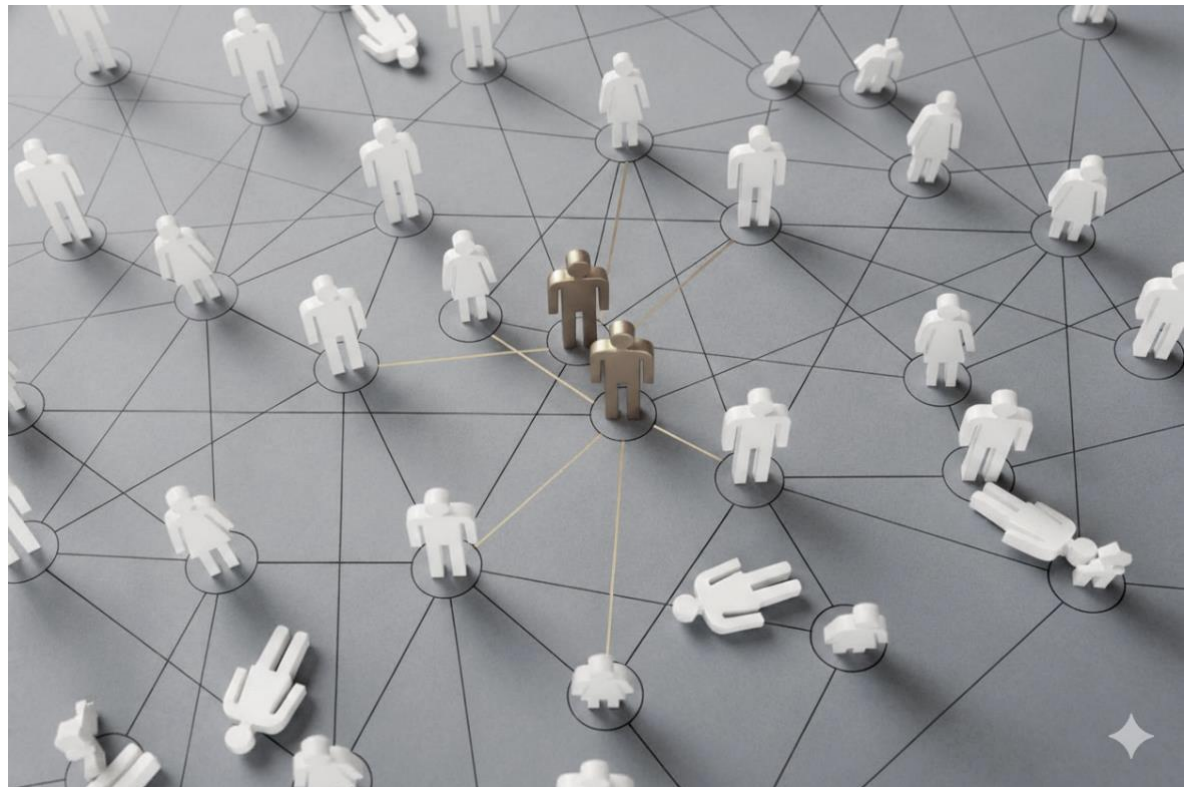
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The “Miracle” in the Manual: Two Times Training Saved Everything

By Andrew Swann

When budgets get tight, the training department is often the first to feel the chill. It’s frequently dismissed as a “soft” expense—something that happens in a fluorescent-lit classroom while the *real* work waits outside.

However, history tells a different story. In the most high-stakes moments of the last two decades, the difference between a global tragedy and a “miracle” —or between a corporate collapse and a cultural rebirth—has come down to a single factor: **The quality and frequency of training.**

Here are two examples when rigorous, repetitive, and cultural training saved the day.

The “Miracle on the Hudson”: When Muscle Memory Takes Over

On January 15, 2009, US Airways Flight 1549 struck a flock of geese just three minutes after taking off from New York’s LaGuardia Airport. Both engines failed completely. At 3,000 feet over one of the most densely populated cities on Earth, Captain Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger and First Officer Jeff Skiles had seconds to make a decision.

The result is famous: all 155 people on board survived a ditching in the freezing Hudson River.

Why it was a training victory: While Sully was hailed as a hero, his own response was telling: *“That’s what we’re trained to do.”* * **CRM Training:** Aviation uses “Crew Resource Management” (CRM), a training philosophy that encourages teamwork and decentralized decision-making. Despite having never worked together before that day, Sully and Skiles functioned as a single unit because they had been trained in the same “language” of crisis.

- **Simulated Stress:** Pilots spend hundreds of hours in flight simulators, practicing for “low-probability, high-consequence” events. When the engines died, they didn’t have to think; their hands followed the checklists they had practiced a thousand times.

The Lesson for Management: Training is not about what your staff does on a sunny Tuesday; it’s about ensuring they have a **predetermined script** for when the world falls apart.

The NUMMI Transformation: Turning “America’s Worst Factory” into its Best

In the early 1980s, the GM Fremont plant in California was a disaster. Alcoholism among workers was rampant, absenteeism was at 20%, and some employees were reportedly sabotaging cars by leaving half-eaten sandwiches inside the doors. GM shut it down in 1982.

Two years later, it reopened as **NUMMI**, a joint venture between GM and Toyota. They hired back the *same* “problem” workers, but with one massive change: they sent the staff to Japan for intensive training in the **Toyota Production System (TPS)**.

Why it was a training victory: Toyota didn’t just teach the workers how to turn a wrench; they trained them in a new **philosophy of empowerment**.

- **The Andon Cord:** Workers were trained that they had the power—and the *duty*—to pull a cord and stop the entire assembly line if they saw a defect. Under GM, stopping the line was a fireable offense.
- **Kaizen Training:** Every worker was trained to be a process engineer. They were taught to look for “Muda” (waste) and suggest improvements.

Within a year, the same workforce that was once considered “unmanageable” was producing cars with the highest quality ratings in the United States and the lowest defect rates in GM’s history.

The Common Thread: Training as a Culture, not a Course

In both of these cases, the “day was saved” not because of a one-off seminar, but because training was integrated into the **identity of the work**.

1. **It was proactive:** The training happened long before the birds hit the engines or the cars reached the line.
2. **It was universal:** From the pilot to the flight attendant, and from the plant manager to the assembly worker, everyone was working from the same playbook.
3. **It shifted the burden:** It moved the responsibility for “quality” and “safety” from a distant management office to the hands of the people on the front lines.

Conclusion

Whether you are navigating a dual-engine failure or trying to turn around a toxic corporate culture, training is the only tool that scales. It turns individual expertise into organizational resilience. As the saying goes: *“We don’t rise to the level of our expectations; we fall to the level of our training.”*