My name is Sidney Dekker, I’m a Professor at Griffith University and for the past 20 years I have studied why things go wrong. Why a patient dies of a medication overdose in a hospital for example, or why an airliner crashes.

So, why do things go wrong? Well we used to believe that things go wrong because somebody makes an error or something breaks. Today, however we believe, and we have since the mid to late 1980s, that things go wrong because lots of things, lots of little things, larger things, inside the organization are wrong, have been wrong, for a long time. These are things relating to procedure, culture, design of equipment, supervision, work practices, and all these things can combine to create the potential for an accident.

Now, this has been an extraordinarily empowering idea. It has shifted the focus upstream, to the system surrounding the work that people do. We now expect organisations to have vast systems in place that are all supposed to look for these holes, this little wrongs, and fix them, before they can combine to create trouble. The risk becomes that we invest in safety work that focuses on the higher frequency but lower consequence events, such as people not wearing their safety glasses or having a coffee in a cup without a lid on it, and that we then mistake low counts on those things as a statement of the general safety health of the process or operation as a whole.

So we used to know that we were safe if we had competent managers and people at the sharp end who knew what they were doing. How do we know whether we are safe today? We have the paperwork to show them we are, and then we blow stuff up. How did we end up here? Here’s how! We still see people as the problem. We believe that as long as have great systems in place and that as long as people conform and stay within the narrow bandwidth that we have assigned to them, things will be ok! But this is an illusion and it is increasingly a dead end. People are not the problem that we need to control. People are the solution that we should harness.

I don’t believe that things go wrong because things go wrong, that’s a tautology, it’s saying the same thing twice. I believe things sometimes go wrong because they usually go right. Think about it. What does a successful organization need to do to survive in a dynamic, resource-constrained world? These organisations make sure that they optimize locally, they hunt for local efficiencies, but the problem is, the cost of those gains may be born in other parts of the system through a series of interdependencies and interactions that they don’t know about. Successful organisations will make small steps to make productivity gains but by doing so they borrow against their safety margins in ways that they don’t measure. Now these are normal things for successful organisations to do, so if you are successful as an organization make sure you have people on board who are capable of questioning and critiquing the way in which you achieve that success. Make sure you have a diversity of viewpoints. And if you want to stop failure, if you want to prevent failure, stop looking for it, start looking for what makes your organization successful.