Silence is not golden!
A positive take on preoccupation with failure

- ‘Silence is golden’ (Thomas Carlyle, 1836)
- Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence
  - ‘Your inability to invalidate my hypothesis is not at all the same thing as proving it true.’ (Carl Sagan, 1997)
- Hypothesis: “no failure”
  - Falsify = ‘show to be false’ (Karl Popper)
  - What if attempts to falsify fail?
- Preoccupation with failure (Weick & Sutcliffe 2001, Sutcliffe & Vogus 2003)
  - In: Positive Organizational Scholarship (Cameron, Dutton & Quinn, 2003)
  - Positive Management
Listening to the sound of silence
Places where we may benefit from preoccupation with failure

• High reliability organizations (Vogus, 2013)
  • An organization that operates in a nearly error-free manner despite facing high levels of social and technical complexity
  • e.g. Nuclear energy, Air traffic control, Medical operations

• Integrity (Cambridge definition)
  • The quality of being honest and having strong moral principles that you refuse to change
  • e.g. Volkswagen, Russia doping scandal, Sepp Blatter

• It is difficult to hear the silence in all the noise
  • Dutch Education Inspection (2015) report on 2012/2013
    • ‘Number of fraud cases reported ... remarkably low.’
    • 1 out of 4 exam committees did not report fraud cases
Breaking the code of silence
A framework to guide preoccupation with failure

- A framework from knowledge management (Milton, 2010)
- Formal vs. Informal
- Connect vs. Collect
- Unknown knowns = hidden facts
The silent treatment
A practical tool to steer preoccupation with failure

• Informal collection method
  • Choose the right source of information
    • Those involved in primary process
  • Act informal with open-ended non-leading questions
    • What work related things keep you up at night?
    • What do you think is slightly odd at this workplace?
    • Which things do you know, but management do not?
    • What would people be embarrassed about if made public?
    • Which pieces of information would you rather not have known?
    • Note: do not directly ask for information about a taboo subject
    • Note: record the findings immediately after chatting
  • Use interviewers from the same level of hierarchy or lower
  • Create a safe and relaxed environment
Silent witnesses
Stories of past failures

- 4 students, 297 chats, 5 minutes each, 152 cheat stories

- Lecturers seem to facilitate cheating
  - Announcing contents of exam
  - Ignoring plagiarism
  - Grading reports that have not been turned in

- Supervisors also seem to facilitate cheating
  - Sleeping during exam sessions
  - Helping to answer a question
  - Ignoring blatant cheating