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5 Ways to Build a Safety-First Culture

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Today's move-fast-get-it-to-market-yesterday product development culture puts a lot of pressure on companies to innovate quickly. Such circumstances can make defined processes and comprehensive documentation look unsexy and uncompetitive… even when they're in the best interest of the organization.

In October, Jama Software and kVA by UL co-hosted a kVA Automotive Lunch & Learn at the Hyatt House in Silicon Valley. kVA by UL is a technical and management consulting group focused on functional safety and the ISO 26262 standard. Bill Taylor, Managing Director of kVA, spoke to a group made up primarily of automotive industry engineers, many of whom are working on autonomous vehicles.

Taylor presented on the topic of "Creating a Safety-First Culture in Automotive Development," but the points he made could easily be applied to any complex product development where public and/or user safety are a primary concern. Here are five key take-aways from Taylor's presentation.

Don't Fall for the Smart Folks Fallacy

When we get on an airplane, do we trust that our pilot and co-pilot are experienced, well-trained professionals? Do we assume they really know what they're doing and that they've done it many times before?

Of course, we do. So, why do the airlines — and the military, and every other aviation employer —make their pilots use checklists?

It's so they don't have to think about it. The checklist is there so a distraction doesn't cause the pilot to miss or forget a small but crucial step in their procedure.

But many who innovate for a living — especially those who face pressure to innovate rapidly — don't like checklists. Checklists feel cumbersome, tedious, slow, and perhaps even antiquated. They're constraining. They don't let you work the way you want. Checklists force you to work to their dictates.

But checklists are great for safety, says Taylor. They force you to take all the prescribed steps.

Taylor warns against a phenomenon he sees often in the automotive and tech industries, which can roughly be described as the "Smart Folks Fallacy." He describes it with a fictional conversation, which we'll paraphrase:

"Hey, who's keeping us safe?"

"Oh, don't worry, we've got some smart folks over there…"

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