

# Safety and Teamwork go



# HANDinHAND

Assessing current attitudes, expectations and practices and then collectively working toward a common, higher goal can reduce risk in your flight operation.

Each day, making choices in business aviation means balancing risk against financial constraints, reputational impact and the mission of customer service. Employees' expectations about their choices and their colleagues' choices essentially make up a flight department's safety culture.

"In my experience, a positive safety culture is at work in any organization that consistently supports employees when they make safe choices," says Bill Grimes, the safety officer at XOJet in Sacramento, CA and head of the NBAA Safety Committee's safety culture initiative. "That's especially important when those choices mean delaying a flight, choosing a different airport or making a go/no-go decision."

For the most part, expectations can be established in the flight department's foundational documents: its standard operating procedures (SOPs), employee handbook, safety policy statement and safety management system (SMS).

"Without those documents, everyone won't be singing from the same hymn book," said John Sheehan, former senior safety advisor to the International Business Aviation Council (IBAC).

And yet, written policies are just the foundation of a positive safety culture.

"Culture is a process," said Dr. Terry von Thaden, CEO of human factors consulting company Illumia and a professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. "A lot of places you go, people will say, 'We have a safety culture,' but they don't live it."



## Building Blocks of a Positive Safety Culture

One of the NBAA Safety Committee's Top Safety Focus Areas is positive safety culture. It can be hard to define, but experts point to some common characteristics of flight departments that have a positive safety culture.

When flight departments go through registration for the International Standard for Business Aircraft Operations (IS-BAO), auditors validate their culture against a checklist of 10 characteristics. While the list below is not comprehensive, it represents most of the important characteristics IS-BAO auditors look for:

**Top-Down, Bottom-Up Commitment** – A safety culture is built on the commitment of all employees to evaluate actions in terms of potential risk. This commitment starts at the top, should be stated in SOPs, and management needs to follow through on that commitment. "Instead of asking if something is safe, you ask, 'Can we measure the risk?'" said Sheehan.

**Open Communication** – Employees must feel comfortable reporting hazards, and management should encourage employees to express concerns. A positive environment is defined by the ethos: "If you see something, say something." If a line technician breaks the tow bar, he and his colleagues should feel equally comfortable reporting it.

Communication is a two-way street, and management needs to openly share feedback on reported mishaps and deficiencies.

"If I had to pick the two most essential characteristics of a positive safety culture," said von Thaden, "they would be communication and trust."

**No Blame Game** – "As human beings, we're fallible," said Grimes. "It doesn't always help to punish human error. You want people to feel comfortable coming forward."

In a "just culture" (the term Grimes prefers to the phrase "no blame game"), management responds to a mishap by getting the facts and applying a consistent standard of accountability. If an employee was reckless, there will be discipline, but if they made a mistake, it becomes a learning event; the focus is on how to avoid similar errors in the future.

Critically, a just culture requires that errors be treated according to the recklessness of the behavior, rather than the severity of the consequences.

"If you have a rushed departure and somebody forgets to pull the nose gear pin, then you can't retract the gear and have to land to remove the pin, that costs fuel, money, passenger time and reputation," said Grimes. "If you're really going to live by your principles, you have to ask: How would you deal with the same mistake if the consequences were different?"

**Allocation of Resources** – Safety does require spending time and money, but not necessarily on every audit or outside consultation. "At the minimum, you have to spend time writing SOPs," said Grimes. "And you need to pay for training and dedicate manpower to the safety function. You get the level of safety you strive for."

One way of simplifying this is by addressing the challenges of under-staffing, inadequate equipment, inexperience and patchy training in terms of risk, rather than just seeing these issues as budget items.

**Continuous Improvement Through Measurement** – In the long term, safety culture requires a commitment to continuous evaluation and improvement. This means adopting proactive goals, measuring your progress toward achieving them and having a process for change management.

That makes shifting to a positive safety culture more challenging than just writing new policies or buying SMS software. "You can't just wave a magic wand and say this is your culture," said Sheehan.

Culture is a mix of lots of intangibles: values, expectations, behaviors, attitudes and practices. But it can be shaped, and it can be measured.

## Start With a Survey

"To get a sense of where your safety culture is, you need to start with a survey of employee perceptions," said Grimes. There's no one way to conduct a safety survey, but operators and experts insist it must be confidential. Many point to a checklist developed in the 1990s by Dr. James Reason that can be used as a template. Any survey should ask about trust, how employees feel about reporting hazards, how managers react to mishaps, and other attitudes and behaviors toward safety in the flight department.

While a company can do a safety survey in-house, it's best done from outside the flight department, such as by human resources, to avoid bias in the way questions are presented to employees. Even more effective is a survey by an outside provider.

"It's hard to judge yourself, but many organizations can help," said Grimes. "Your insurance carrier can do a safety audit, or you can swap safety officers with another operator on the same airport. An outside survey allows you to benchmark your safety culture against other operators."

Many of the characteristics of a positive safety culture are embodied in the International Standard for Business Aircraft Operations (IS-BAO), and departments registering for IS-BAO Stage 2 or 3 will go through a survey as part of the process.

## Work Together Toward a Theme

The next step is to go through the survey responses and set goals for the flight department.

"Look for an overarching theme in your survey responses," said Sheehan. "For

example, it could be that you need to improve on measurement or trust." Then set goals to support that theme.

Cultural goals "give everyone in the flight department a point on the horizon to aim for," said Sheehan. "A cultural shift needs to be a team effort focused on risk. If you just plop a binder in someone's lap and say, 'Here's the SMS,' that's not going to work."

Grimes and other operators recommend starting with a discussion of the survey responses. While the work of developing new safety tools or processes may fall on a few people within the flight department, the key to success is to involve as many people as possible.

"Cultures aren't built overnight, so it will take time, but I'd resist the sense that you need to do more," said von Thaden. "A few critical changes can be more effective than adding a lot of complicated processes." Making processes more complicated "could even make things less safe."

If some team members resist the change – whether it's rewriting the SOPs or just scheduling a weekly safety lunch – it's often better to rely on peer pressure, rather than management pressure, to get everyone on the same page.

"Everybody needs to commit, but don't start by pointing fingers," said Sheehan. "If you can get 80 percent of your people on board, eventually the others will make a choice to be part of the new culture or not."

## Anyone Can Be a Safety Leader

A cultural shift needs a leader, or as Sheehan says, a "spark plug," but that leader doesn't need to be the director of aviation.

"I've seen wonderful examples of the up-and-coming people in the flight department – the line techs and line pilots, schedulers and dispatchers – taking the initiative on safety culture, even when the management isn't ready to," said Sheehan. "Sometimes it's

someone recently promoted to safety officer. That person needs to be the champion."

Anyone finding themselves in a new role as the safety officer, or with responsibility for leading the evolution of the department's safety culture, will have a fine line to walk.

"Start by acknowledging what the people who've worked there the longest have already accomplished. It may just need to be tweaked," said Sheehan. "At the same time, don't be afraid to ask questions or rethink assumptions in terms of risk."

Whoever leads the day-to-day safety processes needs the backing of company leadership. This means educating the CEO or COO and securing their buy-in.

*Safety expectations can be established in the flight department's foundational documents: its standard operating procedures, employee handbook, safety policy statement and safety management system.*

"It's become a cliché to say that safety culture needs to be 'top-down and bottom up,'" said von Thaden. "What that ignores is that there's usually a few middle managers, such as safety officers, getting pushed from both sides. In a positive safety culture, the company leadership and the director of aviation don't just say, 'Make it happen.' They support middle management in carrying out the safety mission."

## Are We There Yet?

While there are industry benchmarks for validating a department's safety culture, such as IS-BAO registration, experts point to a few simple things to look for when evaluating your progress.

"Flexibility is key," said von Thaden. "Culture is changeable. What the



safety culture looks like in one year [from now] could be totally different than it is now."

One way to design flexibility into the culture is through a program for change management, a way for employees to bring ideas forward in a context of continuous improvement.

"Unexpected challenges will come up," said Grimes. "They will be your first opportunity to trust the process. If you can be nimble and react to events outside your plan while still doing things safely, you have a strong culture."

Grimes and von Thaden also point to positive reinforcement as an important element. "We tend to dwell on things that go wrong because they're aberrations," said Grimes. "You should be looking for ways to recognize employees for making safe choices."

Counter-intuitively, a flight department that generates a steady flow of hazard reports is also living its culture. It doesn't necessarily mean that the operation has more hazards; it just means the team is catching them.

"What I've seen in the best flight departments," said Sheehan, "is everybody working together across disciplines, and they're talking about risk." ♦

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about positive safety culture and review the NBAA Safety Committee's list of 2015 Top Safety Focus Areas, visit [www.nbaa.org/top-safety-focus-areas](http://www.nbaa.org/top-safety-focus-areas).