From August 2011, over a period of three and half years, 18,000 aviation specialist personnel working across the Royal Navy, the British Army, the Royal Air Force (RAF), and Defence Equipment and Support (DE&S) will engage with the recently established Military Aviation Authority (MAA) in a significant aviation safety improvement investment project worth £2.3m. In a move that will benefit the entire UK defence aviation community and driven by a need to reduce risk to life, the MAA is implanting a pan-Defence Aviation Error Management System (DAEMS). Following an MoD competitive tendering process, aviation safety consultancy Baines Simmons was selected to work alongside the MAA to provide collaborative technical and expert safety support for the introduction of this project.

By the middle of 2012, lessons drawn from an early Field Development Phase of the DAEMS project, which included close work with the RAF, have informed: how the new Error Management System (EMS) is implemented, role specific competence development and, most importantly, cultural change.

An overall project plan has been developed, and RAF Leuchars was the first to switch on its EMS in February 2012. The benefits quickly became apparent, with a number of potential hazards, system failures and human errors highlighted and addressed in the first few weeks. In launching the EMS, the Station Commander for Leuchars and Air Officer Scotland said: “At RAF Leuchars we are rightly proud of our achievements and our reputation for excellence. In order to preserve and continuously improve our standards and working practices we must adopt an open and honest reporting culture. In a just culture, honest and well-intentioned mistakes are not punished, they are learned from. If you have the courage to admit your mistakes, submit an EMS report, and so play your part in preventing the same mistake being made again, you will have nothing but my thanks and admiration.”

By the end of March, moreover, one of the warrant officers at Leuchars stated: “Apart from the obvious benefits we have experienced from the introduction of an EMS across the station, which usually manifest themselves as an increase in the number of reports submitted, there is another less tangible indicator that is far more significant. "For some time now there has appeared to be a perception that it was not a good idea to admit that you had made a mistake.

"Since we rolled-out the EMS across the whole station this ‘credibility’ issue seems to have gone away. It seems we have removed the perception that admitting to making an error makes you a less-capable tradesman. I firmly believe that there is now a genuine acceptance of EMS as a service-wide vehicle to make things better and, because it is across the whole station, my guys are more willing to use it. This may well be an intangible aspect of what we have sought to achieve, but it is a far better indication of the effectiveness of the system than just the number of reports raised.”

The MAA is thus succeeding in driving new attitudes and behaviours across the defence air domain. It is clear that a new safety culture is being built, which is critical to the future of defence, and the early results from RAF Leuchars are testament to its emergence. This shows considerable progress and, in the words of Haddon-Cave, illustrates that a safe and airworthy fleet is also a more capable and effective fleet – something to be welcomed.

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