Safety Management Systems - What is the Problem?

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Introduction

I was asked a few days ago what the introduction of State Safety Programmes and Safety Management Systems were trying to fix? A client had just finished reading the 2009 large aircraft accident statistics which show a continuing decline in the ten year trend for accidents. The decline is slowing but it could be inferred that the current system seems to be working.

He was correct! Accident rates continue to reduce and aviation remains safe. It remains safe because as an industry we are never prepared to accept that we are good enough and the current system requires that we search for continuous improvements. We are safe because we have taken deliberate and intended actions to stay that way.

What are the problems?

So what problems are State Safety Programmes and Safety Management Systems trying to fix?

The problem is it is no longer acceptable to simply say that you are safe and move on, or that you are safe because you haven’t had an accident, or because you are audited regularly. Customers, clients, staff and shareholders all live in today’s world that expects transparency and accountability.

We have been shaped and influenced by history outside our industry as well as within it. In 2002 the financial world in the USA saw the introduction of The Sarbanes-Oxley Act. It was introduced to bring transparency and accountability to the corporate financial world. President Obama came into office on a message of change and transparency, UK politics has learnt the hard way that the voting public demands to know where its taxes are being spent and expects people in public office to be accountable for their actions.

History changes cultures and this is what effective safety management must do in aviation. All airlines say and believe they are safe. The clever ones that will grow, thrive and survive may well be the ones that can demonstrate why!

ICAO’s principles for SSP and SMS challenge the existing value system within organisations to move to a position of proof. Proof that an organisation does not accept it is safe but can demonstrate from the top down that it has taken every reasonable step to identify the hazards that can impact on its operation and mitigate their effects to a level that is as low as reasonable practicable.

It will be a difficult journey too because organisations will have to reflect on some difficult realities.

- Every company has multi-dimensional risk but many do not know what it is.
- Every employee in a production-driven organisation takes risk at some level, but many don’t know how risky their actions really are because they do not understand the system in which they work.
- Middle managers can have strong incentive to hide risk, based on the way they are measured and rewarded.
- Senior managers believe that their managers and employees will tell them about significant risk but experience suggests they won’t in many cases.
- Senior managers don’t believe they have significant risk, because their managers or employees haven’t told them.

- Senior managers don’t want to know about risk, because they’ll have liability to fix it which costs money they do not have to spend.

Having taken a number of companies on the Safety Management System journey however, we have seen firsthand that they are now significantly stronger and than they were before. They have recognised that many of their hazards were not catastrophic, very few are, but they were affecting production and efficiency. Having assessed their risks and implemented robust mitigations beyond re-training, new procedures and a poster campaign, they are removing re-work and duplication and improving profitability. They are becoming safer and this safety is good business because they are more reliable.

The accountability SMS brings permits the use of collated risk-based data to improve what your company does and lead the way in product safety and improvement.

The hardest step is always the first one and that is tackling the realities listed above. This is where we can help.

The benefits we as an external company can bring are; we are not constrained by internal factors such as reporting lines and politics, we can independently and objectively assess your culture and systems as they are today enabling you to focus on your business’s efficiency and profitability.

An effective SMS is a powerful business process that we can help you realise.