



Motivating Ground Crew Safety

The author believes that ground crew safety may be influenced by a variety of factors. Management must actively address them and be aware that some of the factors may be very subtle.

by

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Motivation is an internal process that causes individuals to do things that satisfy their needs. Individual safety consciousness must evolve from individual participation. Ground personnel are not necessarily motivated by error-free operations or quality workmanship simply because they like their jobs. A ramp employee, for example, may be motivated to haste and carelessness in the interest of meeting a turnaround schedule or in attempting to comply with a minimum ground time criteria. A shop mechanic may be motivated by exceeding quantitative production standards.

Where employee work attitudes may be less than optimum, a good motivation program is required. The philosophy of developing a positive motivation program that would contribute to improved safety involves three basic policies:

1. Program makes every effort to achieve and maintain positive work attitudes in the work force.
2. Where positive work attitudes conflict with boredom, frustration or insecurity, positive attitudes are built by calling attention to quality workmanship.
3. Program should plan and implement specific systems and techniques to improve work performance, error reductions and accident prevention.

Motivations Vary, but Resistance To Change Is Common

No two persons are motivated by exactly the same things. We do know that attitude and motivation problems seem to follow certain patterns. One problem that frequently surfaces is the human trait of resistance to change, an unseen enemy of positive work attitudes and safety.

Arguing and threatening usually change few attitudes. Persons do not give up a way of thinking just because a person in authority mandates an order or a procedure. Human stubbornness often is an ally of resistance to change.

Aviation organizations have found that an effective method of developing quality safety motivation is to allow employees to play an active role in decisions that affect their work. There are four levels at which ground crew employees may participate in decision making:

1. Ground crew supervisors make the decision.
2. Ground crew provides recommendations to decision-maker.

3. Ground crew learns from the decision-maker the alternatives being considered.
4. Ground crew is informed after a decision has been made.

Generally, motivation is maximized when employees are allowed to participate in decision-making. It is possible for high-level decision-makers to allow participation by asking for recommendations and by clearly communicating the reasons for the final decision. One of the surest ways to kill motivation is for management to make arbitrary decisions and then communicate them to employees without any apparent rationale or explanation.

It is important to realize that the use of participative methods does not mean a loss of management control; participation does not indicate a permissive or weak management. When correctly applied, the limits of participation are well defined.

Behavior Meets Needs

All behavior meets some need. Some needs are *material* and can be satisfied by the money an individual earns on the job. Other needs are *psychological*. Persons need to have their abilities and achievements recognized. They need social acceptance as members of a group; they need to feel a sense of personal worth; and they need to feel secure. They may also need the freedom to exercise discretion; and they may even need a feeling of power.

Employee oriented management tends to be more effective than operational or production oriented management. Experience has shown that a supervisor who is concerned about the needs of his ground crew, is likely to have more production and a safer operation than production oriented management.

Ground crews are influenced by positive incentives and negative incentives. A positive incentive is to a reward or a reinforcement to satisfy a need or personal goal. A negative incentive is a punishment or deprivation of satisfaction of a need. A few generalizations can be made about the role of incentives:

1. Individuals are more motivated by positive incentives than negative ones. For example, fear of punishment for violating an aviation regulation or company policy is usually not as strong a motivation than expectation that a need will be satisfied.
2. Monetary compensation is an important incentive, but beyond the subsistence level the amount of compensation is not necessarily as important as non-monetary rewards. Witness labor strikes initiated because of a desire for better working conditions or a safer environment in the work place.

3. The effectiveness of incentives diminishes rapidly as time elapses between the action and the reward or punishment administered for it. It is important that reports from line chiefs on ground crew performance be acted on quickly.
4. A person who perceives his or her work as being worthwhile or important is more highly motivated than one who does not.
5. A person needs to know, on some fairly regular basis, whether the results of his or her efforts are regarded by the supervisor as being satisfactory.
6. Persons are receptive to learning better ways of doing things only when they personally recognize the inadequacies of their present behavior.
7. Individuals differ in their needs and their reactions to incentives of various types. An important function of the manager or supervisor at each level is to adapt his application of the management control system to the personalities and attitudes of the workers that he supervises. The control system includes the safety doctrines which must be followed.

There are many other generalizations regarding individual motivation that have evolved from decades of management and work experience. Consider the following examples:

The *tough guy* feels he is smarter, stronger and less easily hurt. He feels he has firm fast reactions, but sometimes he uses more muscle than skill in doing his job. His possible need may be recognition for being tough.

1. Point out the impact of his leadership on less experienced employees.
2. Enlist his help in pointing out unsafe practices and conditions, and take his suggestions seriously.
3. Help him to see that minor injuries can become big ones and result in disability. Use actual examples if possible.
4. Use him to instruct in proper procedures.

Believe it or not, these suggestions get results with careful coaching . . . and include a pat on the back when the employee does well.

The *show off* needs recognition even more than the tough guy. This attention getter is basically unsure of himself or herself. Some suggestions:

1. A firmness in job performance standards is a must.

2. Merited praise should be given, and legitimate gripes dealt with.
3. Give assistance. The approval of other workers is what is wanted. If members of the safety committee or other employees “help him to remember,” he loses his audience.
4. Listen to the emotional meaning of the person’s words. Frequently the hidden meaning says, “Pay attention to me.” Do so.

The *sloppy worker* consistently puts out poor quality work, or is careless in work habits. Some suggestions:

1. Consistent firmness may be the answer. The worker usually knows better but has developed bad habits. Standards should be emphasized and the worker should be carefully supervised. It may take time, but the entire ground crew will be watching and learning.
2. Enlist the help of the supervisor who is around the sloppy worker most of the time. A firm discussion about the employee’s prior performance, along with specific directions to improve it, may be necessary.

The *day dreamer’s* mind is elsewhere, and this worker may be prone to fall-off ladders and stumble over equipment.

1. Place the person on a suitable job that demands full attention.
2. Team the worker with a conscientious employee and avoid assigning the day dreamer alone to perform tasks.
3. Off-the-job activities or personal problems may be affecting the employee’s on-the-job performance. An offer to listen may help identify the problem.
4. If an employee is obviously “some place else,” emotionally upset or physically exhausted, consider sending the person home; keep the person from tasks that could endanger anyone.

The *practical joker* is a person who does not have enough work to do. Often the joker is not aware of the serious consequences of showing-off. A special caution in handling the joker: this person may turn things around and cause the workers to laugh at a supervisor. Joker is often liked by other employees. Some suggestions:

1. The serious consequences of practical jokes — the danger of “shooting” compressed air at other employees — should be addressed.

2. Probe beneath the joke. In humor there is often hidden truth. Jokes often cloak bitter feelings. The supervisor may seek insights from a senior member of the group who may understand the real issue.
3. Avoid reminiscing with tales of past jokes. The power of suggestion is strong and it may encourage the joker’s unwanted behavior.
4. Consider assigning the employee to work alone and out of view by other employees.

The *accident-prone* person probably isn’t really accident-prone. The idea of accident-proneness may emerge when a worker has an injury or two more than other ground crew personnel. It is usually due to inattention, preoccupation, lack of skill or job dissatisfaction.

Research shows true accident-proneness to be rare. An accident-prone person is “one who does not think as fast as his/her hands move” — motor dexterity exceeds mental ability or capacity. This problem can respond to training.

Accident-proneness is almost always a temporary condition of a particular time, job or relationship. The concept of accident-proneness is popular because it tends to pass the buck for accident causes to the employee alone. Ask the following questions when a ground crew person becomes an accident repeater:

1. Is the error or accident rate significantly higher than chance expectancy?
2. Are accident-prone situations presented by the work environment, facilities, tools or ground crew support equipment?
3. Is this a conscientious person who reports all errors, incidents and accidents? (If yes, the employee is atypical.)
4. Is management at fault?
5. Does the accident-repeater need moral support, debt counselling or other assistance?

Here is a case history concerning an aircraft mechanic accident repeater:

The worker averaged two injuries per month while working in an air-conditioned shop doing welding and metal fabrication. He felt that he was being unfairly disciplined by his supervisors and that he was not given the safest equipment to work with. (This was not so.)

When the mechanic transferred to airframe overhaul, a wise foreman sized up the situation and said, “Max, I’m told that

you don't do a good job and that you have had quite a few accidents. Now I think you're a lot better person than that. Because your record is bad, I'll be watching you; but I expect that you will get busy, do a good job, and not get hurt."

The record shows that Max became a better than average mechanic and he had no accidents or injuries.

Training Integrates Safety

An aviation organization's safety program is no better than its safety education and training. When a ground crew is taught the correct way to perform a task, it is usually impossible not to teach the safe way. Because this axiom is so true, safety often loses its identity when it is part of other instruction. Good training integrates safety as part of the program. The most important effect of safety education is that it develops a safe environment without the presence of enforcement pressures. Sometimes ground crew and their supervisors fail to grasp the importance of the fact that accidents are human-caused and can be controlled.

Safety education and training prepares a person for a specific job. It enables a person to work safely alone and without constant supervision. It prepares the worker to be fully aware of potential hazards, and safety practices required to prevent them from occurring.

"Hear and forget." "See and remember." "Do and understand." These axioms are directly opposite the one that relies on punishment and fear: "Grab them by the hair and their hearts and minds will follow." In teaching ground crew, the supervisor who uses the following techniques will be more successful in safety training:

1. Tell the employee.
2. Show the employee.
3. Let the employee tell you each step as you do it.

4. Let the employee "do and tell" each step.
5. Correct the employee *until the task is performed correctly*.
6. Supervise the employee *while the task is performed correctly*.
7. Spot-check frequently when the employee is left alone.

Experience has taught most aviation organizations that there are two sets of safety rules: one is published and the other is informal, but the informal rule often comprises the procedures that are actually used. It takes a serious accident for some supervisors to discover how often iron-clad rules are violated. In making a safety rule, management should publish what they mean, and mean what they publish. This will reduce the informal safety rules and make the published rules creditable.

If accidents are human-caused so is motivation. Safety consciousness requires nurturing through personal motivation. The span and dynamics of aviation operations sometime go counter to the optimum conditions required for goal setting, satisfying needs and other behavioral influences. Any aviation organization that must direct and control people in distant places, has a difficult job. New technologies, global communications and work-saving computers influence whether management will be depersonalized and dispassionate. Enlightened management recognizes the need for personal involvement. The tempo of peak traffic periods, distant stations, odd work-hours and variable weather, all combine to produce faceless employees whose performance varies.

Management must face the challenge. Progressive motivation techniques by all management will thwart the conditions that allow accidents to creep into the environment of the ground crew. Optimum management recognizes the threats to optimum motivation and acts to anticipate and correct such an environment.

As Pogo, a newspaper cartoon character, once observed: "We have met the enemy — and they is US."

AIRPORT OPERATIONS

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