

BY PETER V. AGUR JR.

# Co-Responsible *for Safety*

Passengers and aviation departments  
must close the gap between safety  
expectations and actual performance.



Patients and passengers have a lot in common. Everyone wants to believe their physicians and their pilots are the best. In the vast majority of cases, that deep trust is well earned. But is trust enough?

The medical profession has pushed for patients to be directly involved in their health care decisions. It works — despite the fact that most patients have little medical expertise. It works because most doctors are professionals and openly welcome their patients' involvement. Accidental death rates of patients have declined.

Like patients, business aviation passengers need to be directly involved with their aviation service providers.

I recently was talking with the CEO of a major company about the parallels between the trust we put in our aviation departments and that in our doctors. He smiled and said, "There is one major difference. If my pilots make a mistake, they die, too. And my pilots are not suicidal." He said aloud what many passengers trust to be true.

Trust was not enough, according to Robert L. Sumwalt III, one of the five members of the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board. One of the board members' jobs is to deliberate and determine findings and probable causes of aircraft accidents. Sumwalt recently shared with me the story of a construction company that had a private plane. Their chief pilot was a retired Navy commander. Over the years, he earned the owners' trust through his professionalism and performance.

Unfortunately, a downturn in the economy required that they sell the airplane. With better times came a new plane and a new chief pilot. The company's owners invested a deep trust in their new chief pilot, too. This time it was not justified.

One foggy morning they were on approach into Hot Springs, Virginia, U.S. In an effort to complete the landing, the pilot chose to descend below the approach minimums. They flew into trees short of the airport. A post-crash fire began to engulf the airplane as the two pilots and all four passengers scrambled to safety. Among the stunned survivors was one of the owners of the company: Sumwalt's father. Sumwalt's dad lived to learn that trust is *not* enough.

As an NTSB member, the younger Sumwalt is in a unique position to be intimately familiar with the facts of many professionally flown aircraft accidents. He sees a significant gap between the level of safety, or risk management, that passengers expect and what is actually delivered by their aviation service providers. He cites the Challenger 600 accident at Montrose, Colorado, U.S. (ASW, 7/06, p. 10), and the Platinum Jet chartered Challenger 600 accident in Teterboro, New Jersey, U.S. (ASW, 10/07, p. 38) as examples. These accidents garnered a great deal of media and industry attention. Each had passengers who probably assumed they were in great hands. Each passenger was wrong. But were they uniquely unlucky or is there a pervasive gap between expectations and performance?

To find out, I reviewed the data from dozens of audits our firm has conducted in recent years. Our clients, who tend to be large companies and very high-net-worth individuals, are demanding. This means our clients have a bias toward high performance *and* they have the ability to pay for those results. Their aviation service providers work hard to exceed those expectations. Knowing this, I examined the data surrounding several key issues:

*What standard of safety do most owners, customers and passengers of business aviation expect?*

*Answer:* The vast majority expects best practices, or better (see sidebar, page 20). Best practices is a typical standard in their core businesses. It assures intended outcomes through proactive application of resources, processes and procedures. It exceeds standard practices, or compliance with regulations designed to prevent failure.

*What standard is actually achieved by most business aviation providers?*

*Answer:* The average audit was scored in the standard practices or compliance range, at 3.3, compared with a top score of 4.0 for best practices. To validate our findings, we routinely ask our clients if our observations are fair and accurate. The overwhelming reply is, "yes."

Best practices,  
not a generalized  
"safety," is the goal.

*Is there a correlation between the size of a company or the wealth of an individual and the quality of their aviation services?*

#### Actual performance

Answer: No.

#### fell into two distinct groupings: those who got what they expected and those who did not.

I conducted formal research to determine if these observations were accurate. The results of that study were presented in a paper titled “Selling Safety Uphill” at Flight Safety Foundation’s 2010 Corporate Aviation Safety Seminar. The subjects of that study were 48 companies whose average annual revenues were nearly \$15 billion, as well as nine individuals whose net worth averaged about \$8 billion. The results confirmed that there is a gap between what many passengers say they want (safety best practices) and what is actually being delivered.

Who is responsible for this gap? The data clearly show that the aviation manager has the greatest influence on safety. Analysis confirms that the aviation manager directly affects the performance of his or her service delivery team, positively or negatively. Not so obvious is the finding that a highly capable aviation manager also can have a strong positive impact on how the company’s senior management supports avi-

ation safety through proper funding, policies and practices.

Based on the data, you could assume the performance of the aviation leader is the primary avenue to closing the gap between safety expectations and actual performance. However, Michael Mescon, dean (emeritus) of the school of business at Georgia State University, often said, “If you don’t like what you see at the bottom, look at the top.”

He was right. In reviewing 57 case

studies, it was found that the vast majority of passengers expected the same standard for safety: best practices. However, actual performance fell into two distinct groupings: those who got what they expected and those who did not. The difference between these groups was how proactive and consistent the company leaders were about safety.

The four most common managerial errors in the underachieving group were:

1. Lack of clarity about expectations
  - If you aren’t clear, concise and explicit about what you want, you are not likely to get it. Most aviation departments don’t get routine feedback about their performance. They hope that “no news is good news.” But that is like looking for landmines with your toes while you plug your ears. Any news is likely to be bad for both the customer as well as the service delivery team.
  - If you say you want your operation to be “safe,” you will get a “motherhood and apple pie” response: We are safe. No reasonable person, passenger or pilot, wants to believe otherwise. But if you say you want your operation’s risks to be aggressively managed, you will prompt a much more productive dialogue. Ask your aviation manager to give you his or her list of the five most important things that could be done to reduce your operation’s risks. Then be prepared to address the list.
2. Executive-imposed variances from best practices standards
  - Do you push for extended crew duty days?
  - Do you have a cabin safety attendant on your large-cabin airplane on every passenger leg?
  - Do you not allow your crew to give you a full safety briefing on at least the first leg of the day and when each new passenger comes aboard?
  - Do you not require all frequent passengers to go through a couple of hours of cabin safety training at least once each year?

### Scoring of Safety Practices

- 4.0 Best practices — *Assures* outcomes through a proactively applied balance of resources, processes and procedures.
- 3.0 Standard practices — *Prevents failure* by meeting the basic standards established by the FAA, the U.S. Occupational Health and Safety Administration, the original equipment manufacturer, etc.
- 2.0 Substandard practices — *Assumes some slight or moderate risks* of failure, typically to achieve service or cost goals.
- 1.0 Unacceptable practices — *Deliberately takes unnecessary significant risks* that can lead to catastrophic failure.



If you religiously demand and comply with safety best practices, you are demonstrating your commitment as well as your expectations for others' performance. If you do not, you are declaring that the performance of safety is a variable rather than a constant. This is confusing to your aviation staff. They will be constantly trying to guess where the line really is drawn.

### 3. Under-investment

Many companies and high-net-worth individuals invest heavily in their aviation hardware (aircraft and avionics). But they skimp on the aviation staff and their training. Yet, the people side is where you want to be most deliberate about your investment because about 70 percent of accidents are human-sourced. The most common under-investments are:

- Pilot staff — Too few or not high enough quality.
- Staff training and development — The airlines require training twice each year in a full-motion simulator. Business aviation crews need even more training and development because so much more is demanded of them.
- Cabin safety attendant — The passengers of a large cabin aircraft should not be flying solo.

### 4. Inappropriate reporting structure

Private aviation is typically a critical strategic service for the company. Its passengers tend to be top executives. Deciding who the department reports to is like the story of the three bears.

Having the department report to a mid-level manager (Baby Bear) is likely to lead to slow or tactical decision making (i.e., high focus on costs over strategic outcomes).

Having the department report to Papa Bear sounds great, except that the CEO rarely has the time to effectively oversee the aviation department. Plus, there is no point of appeal in the case of a critical difference of opinion between the leader of the company and the leader of aviation services.

Mama Bear is just right. This is someone who is a top leader within the company, has policy and budgetary authority, and can also, if necessary, challenge the CEO on critical points.

Robert Turknett, founder of Turknett Leadership Group, is a respected executive leadership coach and psychologist. He has worked with a number of major corporations and their aviation services teams. He observes, "Most corporate executives do not know business aviation. They trust their lead aviation expert (chief pilot or director of aviation) to take care of everything involving aviation. Without stimulus to the contrary, the executive perceives all is well. Interestingly, the pride of personal professionalism often prevents the crews from letting the passengers see the real condition of the organization.

"Pilots often see their reference of professional excellence to be their stick-and-rudder skills, as well as their ability to please their passengers. But it is very rare for pilots to have a natural aptitude for business, plus the career development that truly prepares them to be effective business unit leaders."

Turknett also points out, "Most pilots and technicians are intellectually open to continuous improvement but tend to be comfortable with the status quo." In other words, to achieve continuous improvement, an aviation team must be well led.

To illustrate Turknett's point, few hospitals are run by physicians. They are normally run by professional

business managers. Not so with aviation departments. Most are managed by aviation professionals. Many of them struggle because they do not have the benefit of the structured and rigorous career development invested in other business unit leaders.

Why are aviation departments not overseen as well as other business units? Jerry Dibble, a California-based organization design consultant who has worked with numerous companies with aviation services, says, "Many companies manage their core businesses very differently than they do their aviation unit. The aviation department's business and operational standards and practices are not closely monitored, the budget is handled separately, executive oversight is sporadic and audits are rare.

"Why? Because they believe aviation is 'different.' This happens because CEOs aren't usually as expert about aviation as they are about their core business. They tend to trust their aviation staff implicitly. After all, they are passengers and by definition, not in a position of control when they are in the aircraft. A complicating dynamic occurs when senior executives welcome close personal relationships with flight crewmembers. After all, friends don't harm friends."

Dibble recommends that executives look at the investment in aviation services as one made to create strategic results: getting key people to critical meetings for the benefit of the enterprise. With that goal of aviation safety oversight, service and costs can then be put into appropriate perspective. It can be viewed as a "strategic service unit" and managed accordingly.

Dibble also indicates that most successful businesses have become very sophisticated in the way they measure their critical goals, processes

and outcomes. Historically, aviation safety was measured by “no damage, no injuries,” or the number of takeoffs equaling the number of landings. Today aviation safety is measured by the probability and severity of risks and how well those risks are mitigated.

A quick way to measure any gap between your expectations for safety and their actual performance is to take the following short test. Each question focuses on a near- or long-term area of high risk. Each is an industry best practice. Give yourself 10 points for each “yes” answer.

1. Is your aviation department immersed in implementing its safety management system (SMS)? This includes cultural processes and tools for identifying and proactively managing risks. Minimum compliance with SMS is becoming a regulatory standard in the European Union and elsewhere. Organizational commitment to SMS is best.
2. Have you had an aviation services audit within the past two years? You audit your core business functions routinely. But don't settle for a mere “regulatory compliance audit.” Insist that you audit for best practices.
3. Does your aviation department routinely use a change management process to assure safe performance? The first 100 hours of flying a new aircraft have the highest accident rate because the change is often managed casually. An effective change management process greatly reduces risks.
4. Do your pilots train as a crew? Almost everyone trains in full-motion simulators. Sending your crews to train as a team takes it to the next level because they practice as a team.
5. If you have a large-cabin aircraft, do you have a cabin safety attendant aboard every passenger-carrying leg? Privacy in the cabin is nice, but the safety of your passengers and the aircraft is critical.
6. Do you have an active succession plan for your aviation department's key leaders? Retirement may be fast approaching for some of your pilots and technicians. Be certain your aviation department is set up to continue its legacy of success through an effective leadership transition.
7. Do you know the data behind your crew fatigue management? There are three key metrics with their potential consequences to focus on: maximum length of crew duty day (acute fatigue); crew rest minimum between duty days (acute fatigue); and maximum crew workdays in a row (chronic fatigue). You should know what variances from the fatigue policies have occurred, how frequently and how the risks were mitigated.
8. Is your aviation department properly staffed? Pilot work units are flight days, not flight hours. The normal number of pilot duty days available (flight and standby) can be as few as 200. A 365-day operation needs three pilots plus substantial contract pilot support per aircraft. And a “five days a week” operation needs three pilots because the plane typically flies 10 to 15 percent of weekend days, too. In addition, the aviation manager shouldn't be considered as part of the core pilot pool. How can a manager fly a full load and also have the time to effectively manage a multi-million-dollar business unit?
9. Is your aviation staff properly experienced and being developed to become the best and brightest? Your aviation services are one of the highest-risk endeavors of your company. The qualifications of your aviation staff and their continual development are critical. Are your managers seeking the National Business Aviation Association certified aviation manager (CAM) qualification? Is your scheduler seeking a U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) aircraft dispatcher certificate? Do your people routinely attend industry conferences and workshops?
10. Do your most frequent travelers go through passenger safety training at least bi-annually? A cabin safety briefing is only a minor refresher. Cabin safety training is a proactive step in assuring that your people are as well prepared as they can be if an event does occur.

If you score 80 points or higher, your trust is likely to be well matched by your aviation department's performance. A score of 70 or lower indicates you should take action to confirm your aviation department's strengths and opportunities for even higher performance.

So, now you know the score: you are co-responsible for your personal and corporate safety. Today, the best practice is to trust *and* verify. ➔

*Peter v. Agur Jr. is managing director and founder of The VanAllen Group, a management consulting firm to business aviation with expertise in safety and security. A member of the Flight Safety Foundation Corporate Advisory Committee, he has an airline transport pilot certificate and an MBA. He is an NBAA certified aviation manager.*