

RULES VERSUS Safety

I spend quite a bit of my time trying to explain modern safety concepts to a lot of important people. Many of them do not know aviation and have never contemplated the realities of human error. Gaining their comprehension is often an uphill battle, and I am beginning to realize that it is because I am glossing over a critical point that people often do not grasp: Compliance does not equal safety. The people who govern us assume that good rules and quick punishments can actually prevent crashes.

I guess we shouldn't be surprised; many of these people are in the "rules and punishment" business. Politicians get elected by being tough and demanding accountability. Reporters look for situations where rules are overlooked and they label it as corruption. Prosecutors enforce the rules with the heartfelt belief that rules will save lives if the right people are punished.

It is difficult to persuade these people that compliance can only take us so far. It sounds like a "sellout" to industry, even though it is really our best hope. It is an even worse problem for regulators who are trying to sell safety management systems. They live in a political world, and no politician expects to win popular approval by supporting voluntary reporting.

So let's take this issue on directly.

First, we have to acknowledge that while compliance with rules is important, it is not enough. If compliance guaranteed safety, we would only need one rule: "Don't crash." Obviously, it takes a lot more than that.

We have been writing rules in the name of safety for a long time, and that road has become a dead end. When I had to make the argument for a safety management system standard at the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO),

I pointed out that the ICAO audit team had identified more than 10,000 international standards that states had to translate into local law. When the team counted all of the other recommendations and technical specifications that needed to be considered, the number of rules swelled to 30,000.

That's a lot of rules. I asked the question, "If we write another 1,000 standards, will it make things safer?" The consensus of the countries around the world was "probably not," and that more rules wouldn't necessarily give us more safety. It was time to look toward better safety reporting and better safety systems.

The international aviation community gets the point, but the rest of the world needs convincing. They need to understand that by taking on things like safety management, reporting systems and risk management, we are not turning our back on the rules. Rather, we are simply moving beyond them. Compliance is still important, but we can no longer allow compliance to lull us into complacency. We must continue looking for the next risk, the next potential error, whether it involves a rule or not.

I ask all of you to help us do a better job of communicating our intent to those in power and those in the news media. We are not an industry trying to free ourselves from regulations; we are an industry trying to free ourselves from the dangerous illusion that regulations are enough.



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