



MANAGEMENT Risk

Change happens, as they say, and success largely is a measure of how change is anticipated and ultimately handled.

When it comes to safety culture, whether change is good or bad depends on the starting point. Naturally, we applaud changes for the better. However, I cringe at the harmful change that could be inflicted by management hotshots arriving in their new executive positions not simply full of ideas, but with firmly held beliefs that they know all they need to know. When they encounter issues beyond their experience, some tend to discount the importance of what is not already in their operating plan.

The company does not have to be in trouble for a new manager to have this mindset; the very fact that the new manager has not been in charge is sufficient evidence for some to believe that major changes are essential.

While I am concerned mostly about conscious management actions, harm also may be done without a conscious decision — to slight this safety program or that aspect of the safety culture — by allowing a small wedge of neglect to begin a drift away from best practices and proven procedures. This discussion applies mostly to corporate aviation

departments, suppliers and maintenance operations, but this drift has occurred at major airlines with sterling technical reputations; no organization is immune.

The defense of safety programs is made difficult by the fact that when they are performing well, there is an absence of accidents and incidents. A new leader may come to the conclusion that since there is no safety problem, safety is not a problem. And while a safety management system (SMS) or a flight operational quality assurance program is not costly in the big scheme of things, it is difficult from a traditional beancounter point of view to clearly identify a program's cost-benefit justification for a newcomer who lacks an appreciation of the real risks that aviation presents. Difficult, that is, until something regrettable happens, the kind of proof we are working to avoid.

A safe operation is the product of dedicated, relentless efforts. Guarding against a reduction of those efforts is one of the reasons that SMS involves the firm's CEO (ASW, 1/08, p. 18). The CEO's direct involvement, along with endowing the SMS with the blessing of the top corporate officer, helps to eliminate the possibility that a lower-level manager will make unilateral decisions that might degrade an effective safety culture.

A written safety policy statement from the CEO also provides protection from tampering from lower levels and can serve as a legacy document to influence future CEOs, impressing upon them the importance of maintaining the effort. It strikes me that getting some buy-in from the chairman of the board and several board members also would be beneficial in deeply embedding the safety focus into the corporate DNA of any organization.

The last line of defense against potentially risky corporate trimming is the operational people, those with the deep knowledge of aviation and its lurking threats, those with a vested interest in maintaining the culture. The fight for aviation safety generally is in ascension, but episodic retreats must be anticipated and battled.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J.A. Donoghue".

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