

# TOUGHER Words

It has been a rough couple of months for safety management in the United States, as discussed in this *AeroSafety World* and in last month's edition.

The basic problem is that the underlying concepts of safety management — voluntary reporting, risk management and collaboration — have been largely dismissed by politicians and the general news media as weak and ineffective safety regulation. They like things simple; for them good enforcement equals safety. That is a notion that can be sold in a short sound bite and sends the type of “get tough” message that will win votes. Of course, that is also the type of thinking that will set aviation safety back 20 years.

This setback was not much of a surprise. Only last year a very similar chain of events played out in Canada, as one of the world leaders of safety management was effectively put on trial in front of his Parliament for advocating “lax oversight” and “industry self-regulation.” He was being pushed by Canadian labor organizations and politicians to put more inspectors on the ramp to ensure safety exclusively through enforcement. And while it seemed as though common sense would prevail and safety management would survive, a recent report has emerged to pose a new threat.

This is a difficult situation. Many of us have dedicated our lives to the protection of public safety, but the public doesn't see it that way. The intellectual founders of safety management have left us with a powerful tool set and a language to describe it that is terribly flawed. Politicians and the press do not react to realities; they respond to words and initial perceptions. The words we have used to discuss safety management within the aviation community are not the words that will sell safety management to the public.

Let me give you some examples. Safety professionals celebrate the free flow of safety information

between regulators and industry. Critics see that as “collusion.” We celebrate voluntary reporting systems, but critics visualize tainted regulators handing out free passes to industry friends. We speak of “just culture,” but what is perceived is a system that advocates immunity from prosecution and a lack of accountability. The level of integrity and responsibility that pervades the aviation safety culture, we must admit, is rare in this fractious world, and is difficult to communicate.

Maybe it is time that the public hears about the tough realities of safety management in different terms. First of all, safety management is all about accountability. If an airline fails to uphold safety, the consequences reach the highest levels. There is nowhere to hide. Voluntary reporting systems are not an easy way out. When an airline admits a mistake, they have to submit to regulatory scrutiny as they fix the mistake and the underlying system that let the mistake happen. If an airline is caught trying to hide something, enforcement action is swift. In reality, voluntary reporting systems could easily be called compulsory disclosure and improvement systems.

Perhaps most importantly, the public has to understand that under safety management, airlines can still be grounded or run out of business. If an airline can't keep up with the program, surveillance steps up until either the risks are resolved or the airline is gone. In safety management, industry and regulators may work together, but that doesn't mean they are not working in the public interest.



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