

Cultivating a Safety-Centric Culture in Aviation: Leadership in Asia Pacific

1. Introduction

The aviation sector stands as a beacon of human ingenuity, enabling global connectivity and fostering economic growth. Yet, inherent to its operation is a spectrum of risks that must be meticulously managed to safeguard passengers, crew, and assets. In the Asia Pacific region, a dynamic epicenter of aviation growth, the challenge of maintaining and enhancing safety standards has become increasingly complex. Rapid expansion, diverse operational environments, and varying degrees of safety culture maturity across organisations have spotlighted the need for a concerted focus on the underlying cultural dimensions of safety.

Recognizing the pivotal role of leadership in cultivating a safety-centric culture, Flight Safety Foundation's Asia Pacific Centre for Aviation Safety (AP-CAS) embarked on an ambitious initiative aimed at understanding and enhancing safety culture leadership. This initiative was driven by a compelling need to understand and improve the mechanisms through which leadership behaviours, organisational structures, and communication practices interplay to foster a safety-first ethos across the aviation sector.

2. Project Genesis

The genesis of the Safety Culture Leadership Project was rooted in the observation that, despite significant advancements in technology, procedures, and regulations aimed at enhancing safety, the aviation industry's incident and accident rates in the region suggested room for improvement. Anecdotal evidence and preliminary analyses pointed towards the less tangible, yet critical, elements of organisational culture and leadership as areas ripe for exploration and intervention.

3. Objectives and Scope

The project set forth a dual objective: to unearth the current state of safety culture leadership within the Asia Pacific aviation industry and to delineate actionable insights that could lead to measurable enhancements in safety outcomes. Focusing on a wide array of organisations, including legacy carriers, low-cost airlines, and emerging market entrants,

the study aimed to capture a comprehensive snapshot of leadership practices, communication strategies, and training methodologies influencing safety culture.

The scope of the investigation was carefully designed to encompass multiple dimensions of leadership within the aviation safety domain. By examining leadership behaviours from the executive level down to frontline supervisors, the project sought to uncover the multi-layered dynamics that either facilitate or hinder the propagation of a strong safety culture.

4. Methodological Approach

Employing a robust methodology that included surveys, workshops, and in-depth analyses, the project leveraged the collective insights of hundreds of aviation safety professionals across the region. This approach not only facilitated the gathering of empirical data but also enabled rich, qualitative insights into the challenges and opportunities facing safety culture leadership today.

5. Findings and Recommendations

5.1 Leaders as Role Models: Perception vs. Reality

In the intricate tapestry of aviation safety, the figure of the leader stands not just as an accountable executive but also as a beacon of the cultural ethos that permeates an organisation. The Safety Culture Leadership Project shed light on a pivotal discovery: While aviation executives are perceived as exemplary role models in championing safety, a notable gap emerges when translating this high-level commitment into the everyday realities of operational practice. The impact of these role model behaviors appears to dissipate when perceived through the lens of day-to-day operations and scheduling pressures, especially at lower levels of management. This finding underscores a complex interplay between leadership ideals and the operationalisation of safety culture on the ground, revealing the nuanced challenges of embodying safety leadership beyond the confines of the boardroom.

Survey Insights:

- **Executive Role Modeling:** Ninety-two percent of respondents acknowledged the exemplary role model behaviour exhibited by executive leaders concerning safety. This commendation spanned various organisational levels, indicating a strong foundational belief in the commitment of top-level management to safety.
- **Operational Discrepancies:** Despite the high regard for executives as role models, 73 percent of middle management and frontline supervisors reported experiencing a disconnect between the safety-first messaging and its application in day-to-day operations. This discrepancy was particularly noted under the pressures of meeting operational deadlines and schedules.

Detailed Recommendation: To bridge the gap between leadership’s safety messaging and operational reality, it’s imperative to implement a structured program of regular, transparent communication and visible leadership actions. This includes executive participation in safety forums, direct engagement with frontline teams, and a clear, unequivocal reinforcement of safety over operational pressures in decision-making processes.

5.2 Communication Roadblocks: Identifying and Addressing Challenges

The integrity of safety systems within the aviation industry fundamentally hinges on adherence to established protocols and guidelines. The Safety Culture Leadership Project brought to light a concerning trend: Instances of noncompliance are often the downstream consequences of communication roadblocks within organisations. This realisation underscores the critical importance of ensuring clear, open lines of communication regarding safety expectations and the repercussions of noncompliance. By dismantling these barriers, organisations can enhance compliance rates, thereby reinforcing the foundation upon which safe operations are built.

Survey Insights

The Safety Culture Leadership Project provided compelling data underscoring how communication barriers within aviation organisations directly contribute to instances of noncompliance. This phenomenon, rooted in systemic communication failures, manifests through various dimensions, as evidenced by the project’s findings:

- **Assumptions:** Middle managers from operations and maintenance, as well as safety and quality managers, appeared to be making assumptions about what their leaders need to know regarding critical safety information. Forty percent of operations and maintenance middle managers and over 50 percent of safety and quality managers perceived there is little need for them to inform senior leaders about emerging safety issues. Follow-up discussions during the managers’ workshops indicated a variety of reasons why they perceived this to be true. These included the limited communication channels available, and the inability to meet with senior leaders on a frequent basis due to their own workloads as well as those of executives.
- **Fear of Reporting:** Over 30 percent of operations and maintenance middle managers surveyed revealed that they know of workers who were “afraid to approach leadership with safety concerns for fear of getting in trouble.” This clearly inhibited the upward flow of critical safety information and is indicative of a weakened safety culture and safety management system. In a poll conducted during a workshop with middle level managers, an overwhelming majority of the participants (82 percent) indicated that “they fear getting themselves or one of their team in trouble for it” as the number one reason employees do not report near misses or incidents they observe or are involved in.

- **Priority Misalignment Perception:** More than one in four middle managers perceived that daily operations do not align with a “safety first” priority advocated by executives. A second survey question looked at how this impacted increased risk acceptance under schedule pressures. Over half of safety and quality managers believed that their leadership team was willing to accept more risky behaviours when the organisation was under schedule pressures. Similar findings were present at lower levels of leadership across all functional areas. During workshops with executive leaders (CEOs, presidents, vice presidents), it was clear that this was a surprising finding and not aligned with their intent.

Detailed Recommendations

To address the root causes of noncompliance arising from communication roadblocks, the following multi-pronged strategy is recommended:

1. Establish a Culture of Open Communication

- **Safety Reporting Systems:** Implement or enhance non-punitive safety reporting systems that encourage all staff to report safety concerns, near-misses, and noncompliance without fear of retaliation. Senior executives can play a crucial role in shaping the reporting culture by clearly stating that safety reporting is a critical duty of every job function, and, further, that subordinate leaders at all levels must reinforce this positive trait. CEOs may wish to communicate the results of this study to the other three levels of management, indicating their commitment to addressing the lack or fear of reporting, even if this is perceived to be the contrary to mainstream practices. This should be done in a positive and supportive fashion that facilitates change.
- **Regular Safety Dialogues:** Facilitate regular safety meetings and dialogues that include employees from all levels, providing a forum for sharing concerns, discussing noncompliance issues, and brainstorming solutions collaboratively.
- **New Communication Channels:** Establish open and effective communication channels at all levels to ensure that safety concerns and perspectives are shared and addressed promptly. These should involve more face-to-face meetings to improve dialogue.

2. Reinforce Safety as the Top Priority

- **Leadership Messaging:** Ensure consistent and clear messaging from top leadership that safety is the organisation's paramount concern, above operational efficiency or schedule adherence.
- **Visible Commitment:** Encourage senior leaders to demonstrate their commitment to safety through regular participation in safety training, audits, and walk-arounds, visibly aligning their actions with their safety-first messaging.

3. Enhance Communication Skills and Strategies

- **Training Programs:** Develop and deploy training programs focused on effective communication skills for leaders and managers, emphasising how to convey safety expectations clearly and to listen actively to safety concerns. There is a need to promote safety culture leadership and commitment at various levels of leadership, especially at the middle manager and first-line supervisor levels.
- **Communication Channels:** Evaluate and improve the existing channels of communication within the organisation, ensuring there are multiple, accessible ways for staff to voice safety concerns and receive feedback. Regularly review and adapt communication strategies to ensure they meet the needs of different levels within the organisation.
- **Cross-functional Communication Teams:** Create cross-functional teams dedicated to improving communication between different levels and departments, ensuring a more unified understanding of safety priorities.

4. Foster a Nonpunitive Reporting Culture

- **Just Culture Training:** Educate all employees about the principles of just culture, emphasising that errors and noncompliance often stem from systemic issues rather than individual negligence, and that reporting them leads to improvement rather than punishment.
- **Accountability and Learning:** Establish clear guidelines distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable behaviours, ensuring that genuine mistakes are used as learning opportunities while willful violations are addressed appropriately.

5.3 Training and Resources: Empowering Safety Leadership

At the heart of fostering a robust safety culture lies the need for continuous learning and resource allocation. The project's insights reveal a pressing need for targeted training and resources specifically tailored to enhance safety leadership capabilities across all echelons within the aviation industry. This finding points to an opportunity to empower leaders not only with the intent but also with the means to instigate meaningful cultural change. Through the development and deployment of comprehensive training programs and practical tools, organisations can significantly bolster their safety leadership framework, ensuring that leaders are equipped to navigate the complexities of fostering a safety-first environment.

Survey Insights:

- **Mentorship and Training Gap:** 80 percent of respondents acknowledged the occurrence of peer-to-peer mentorship among experienced and new employees. However, there was a concern regarding the content of this mentorship, especially about safety practices versus production pressures.

- **Resource Desire:** There was a strong call for additional resources, including a specific Safety Culture Leadership Toolkit. During the workshop with chief executive officers, a polling question addressed the desire for a toolkit specifically designed for new and emerging leaders. All responders agreed that they would like to have a safety culture leadership toolkit, with 82 percent strongly supporting the development of such a toolkit. Such tools are sought to better equip leaders at all levels to foster a safety-first culture.

Detailed Recommendations

To effectively elevate the safety culture within aviation organizations, a nuanced approach that extends beyond traditional training methodologies is required. The following recommendations are tailored to address the identified gaps and leverage opportunities for enhancing the foundational aspects of a robust safety culture:

1. **Increase Leadership Involvement:** Encourage more active participation from senior executives in safety culture training sessions to reinforce the importance of safety leadership at all levels.
2. **Tailor Training to Specific Roles:** Develop role-specific training modules that address the unique safety challenges and responsibilities of different job functions within the organisation.
3. **Enhance Practical Application:** Incorporate more hands-on exercises, simulations, and case studies into the training to improve practical application skills, especially regarding just culture principles.
4. **Establish Continuous Learning Programs:** Implement a continuous learning program that includes periodic refresher courses, workshops on recent safety incidents, and updates on best practices in aviation safety.

6.0 Conclusion

Concluding this comprehensive exploration of enhancing safety culture within aviation organisations, it's evident that fostering a pervasive and enduring safety culture transcends mere compliance with protocols and procedures. The insights garnered from detailed data analysis, coupled with feedback from across organisational levels, underscore the multifaceted nature of safety culture — one that demands a concerted effort from all stakeholders, anchored in robust training, transparent communication, and unwavering leadership commitment.

As we chart the course forward, the Centre will serve as a pivotal facilitator and resource, committed to engaging stakeholders across the region through workshops, seminars, and collaborative initiatives. This proactive engagement aims to continuously advance the safety culture within the aviation sector, ensuring that the momentum gained through this project is not only maintained but also built upon.

It is imperative for aviation organisations to embrace these recommendations not as endpoints, but as steppingstones toward cultivating an environment where safety is ingrained in every action and decision. The journey towards a heightened safety culture is continuous, requiring persistent evaluation, adaptation, and commitment to improvement.

By prioritizing safety culture enhancements and leveraging the support and expertise of the Centre, the aviation industry can not only achieve a reduction in incidents and accidents but also foster a working environment characterised by vigilance, resilience, and shared responsibility for safety. Together, with a unified approach and the Centre's guidance, the path to a safer aviation future becomes clearer and more attainable.