

# Organisational Safety Culture Competence

Within the aviation community safety is an integral element of operations and thus, within many organisations is a *familiar* concept. Indeed, establishing a safety culture is (commendably) the aim of the industry. But how do you know when your there? How does an organisation know when it has an entrenched safety culture?

Part of my career has been spent in the field of training. There has been a deliberate shift in emphasis over the last 20 years from a qualified individual to a competent individual. In essence, the difference is a shift from **ensuring that an individual is provided with the appropriate knowledge and skills to perform a task** to **ensuring that the individual can demonstrate competence in performing a task** – i.e a shift in emphasis from a belief that the path will lead to desired performance to an emphasis on proven performance which is the result of a number of enablers.

I believe that this approach can now be applied to high risk organisations. Many mature organisations can claim the existence of an entrenched safety culture. This can be proven by policy, procedures, training provided and possibly even validated by staff surveys citing safety as one of the organisation's prime objectives. But, how competent are the staff, and thus the organisation, in applying the theory, how competent are they in being safe?

When introducing changes within an organisation, I have found that it is the exception, rather than the rule, that safety procedures are followed. Reasons for non or partial (or even retrospective) compliance include:

- expedience;
- gut-feeling assessment that it was safe;
- too hard; or
- the proponent of change may not like the answer.

Clearly, from a reflective perspective, these reasons seem almost ludicrous and yet they are regularly rolled out by a variety of staff at all levels of an organisation.

The obvious question is WHY? Why would an individual potentially expose an organisation to an indefensible safety position? It's usually not a lack of training as in most situations many training courses have been provided. It's not a lack of safety awareness – typically this is well disseminated throughout the organisation and is a recurring theme in most staff communications. It's not wilful disregard, in most cases those involved do not believe they are doing anything which is not safe. So what is it, why does it occur?

The excuses listed previously are not the reason, they mask the answer. It is my experience that less-than-optimum adherence to safety procedures and safe practices occurs because of a lack of real understanding of an individual's responsibility. I believe the individual sees the safety risk as being a communal responsibility and, accordingly, the rest of the community will ensure that the end result will be safe. If every individual approached a task with the perspective that they would be held personally accountable for the safe implementation of a change then adherence to processes could almost be guaranteed.

It is when this level of performance, this acceptance of safety responsibility by all individuals within an organisation, this is when an organisation can claim competency in operating safely and thus have a true safety culture.

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