



Aviation Chieftains Launch First Safety Charter for the Singapore Aviation Industry at Aviation Safety Forum 2022

Establishing and Sustaining a Strong Safety Culture

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You are Only as Strong as Your Weakest link

The English Premier League season recently concluded. My favourite team Leeds United barely managed to escape relegation. Although Leeds played an attractive attacking strategy, their weakest link was in defence.

It can also be said that any organisation is as safe as their weakest defence.

This is why it is imperative for safety culture to transcend the espoused corporate culture with a strong set of safety policies, accountabilities and responsibilities.

Importantly, it must be noted that culture is rooted in an organisation's people. Employees on the ground read and act according to the leadership's safety actions, which speak louder and clearer than any safety posters emblazoned on the wall.

Alexander Pope in his Essay on Criticism (1709) states "To Err is Human, to Forgive Divine" which reminds us that we are all vulnerable to mistakes, regardless of rank. This applies to all members of an organisation, from senior management to every frontline staff.

Organisational Safety Culture is an Ongoing Effort

Organisational safety culture must be established, continuously nurtured and strengthened.

Every organisation worth its salt emphasises Safety First. However, the reality in the

workplace is not always aligned with the desired safety corporate culture. I am inclined to say there will always be a gap. James Reason describes it as holes dynamically appearing in the Swiss cheese model of multi-layered safety defences.

Why is This so?

These gaps or holes are driven by the daily and constant demands for resources between Production and Safety. Production aims to deliver the aircraft or component on time to customers while keeping effort and costs down and meeting monthly sales targets. At the same time, safety is imperative through these processes.

This constant Production tug is compounded by the many interfacing demands from customers, suppliers, outsourced work, and legislation requirements.

Unseen, but also adding to the complexity, are latent conditions of management decisions and allocation of resources. Although these are typically separated in time and space from the shop floor, they may still induce the unintended consequence of creating human error preconditions e.g. over-lean manpower, too wide-spread multi-skilling, changing shift rotation, shopfloor layout changes with expectant reduction in cycle time, etc.

Establishing a Strong Safety Culture

If we recognise that humans will make errors given time and chance, would it be a paradox to suggest that the best defence is to strengthen the frontline staff's ability to recognise, prevent and report near misses and errors, ultimately preventing defective

products from escaping the organisation? By building and sustaining a strong organisational safety culture, we can put in place a structure that remedies inevitable human error. This safety culture should entail a set of endearing safety values and attitudes that are embraced and shared by every member, at every level of the organisation. Ideally, this must take place alongside a comprehensive understanding of human factors and how they affect human performance.



An important component of a positive safety culture is to establish a just culture, whereby management and frontline staff have a clear and common understanding of errors and violations. Every incident or open report of error committed must be thoroughly and fairly investigated based on a system approach, e.g. Swiss cheese model analysis whereby organisation processes/procedures, supervision and workplace conditions are examined for weaknesses in the defences. A well-received just culture will build trust and enable a reporting culture that empowers frontline staff to trust management to be fair and just, so that they feel comfortable sending feedback on identified gaps without fear of blame. This, in turn, continually strengthens the organisation's defences against human errors.

However, a just culture is not a blame-free culture. Errant violators must understand that they will be taken to task, and discipline meted accordingly. A healthy reporting culture of near misses, incidents, errors and unsafe conditions taps the power of "crowd-sourcing" in the dynamic workplace and enables a learning culture to be continually vigilant towards error prevention, and a panacea against complacency.

The Ultimate Goal: A Healthy, Robust Safety Culture

How would an organisation measure the health of their safety culture? Most organisations conduct a yearly or two-yearly safety climate survey. But it could be too little, too late to prevent accidents.

Perhaps there is another way. Using the analogy of maintaining strong and positive health and fitness, we see that the consistent achievement of adequate exercise, good nutrition and diet, quality sleep and work-life balance is necessary.

Similarly, an organisation committed to a strong and positive safety culture must consistently achieve specific goals that include: an unwavering Commitment to leadership (at all levels); Consistency to put safety first and walk the talk; provide Clarity on what are errors and what are violations; Communicate (timely) to the ground on lessons learnt, investigation outcomes and follow-up actions on near miss reports; and finally, have Compassion for the frontline staff who have made mistakes but owned up, and to encourage them to share their lessons learnt.

The 5Cs of Safety Culture

In today's world, it is expected that every organisation has established their desired corporate safety culture. It is also accepted that, given the reality of production versus safety in terms of competing demands and resources, gaps in the defences may dynamically occur. To put it simply, each organisation must consider developing leading indicators to monitor the pulse of their safety culture through the 5Cs of Commitment, Consistency, Clarity, Communication and Compassion to close these gaps and achieve their desired safety culture for the benefit of their members and consumers alike.

DID YOU KNOW?

CAAS launched the first-ever Safety Charter for the Singapore aviation industry at the Aviation Safety Forum on 7 March 2022, which expresses the shared commitment by leaders in the sector to jointly uphold safety standards and strengthen safety culture in their respective organisations. To date, some 100 key organisations across various domains in the Singapore aviation sector have signed the Charter as their commitment to safety, and more are expected to come on board.

View the full Charter and its list of signatories [here](#). Companies in the Singapore aviation industry who would like to sign the Safety Charter and pledge their commitment to safety may email CAAS_Safety_Promotion@caas.gov.sg.

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