Is Your Flight Department Stuck? Create an Operating Plan in 12 Steps

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Your flight department is likely very successful, having advanced through the stages of the IS-BAO registration process to Stage 2 or 3. Your safety record is outstanding and you seem to be satisfying the expectations of your executive passengers.

But do you ever find yourself nagged by the persistent question, "Now what?"

Flight departments often view IS-BAO Stage 3 registration as a panacea. Following the concerted effort that went into attaining it, they feel a bit lost and are not quite sure what to do next. What's wrong? The answer is quite simple: the flight department lacks direction. There's no "north star" on the horizon and nothing to shoot for.

The best way to set a new direction and continue the quest for operational excellence is to always have an active Operating Plan. An Operating Plan defines the flight department's priorities and sets its direction for the next 12-18 months. The best Operating Plans are created by an engaged Leadership Team and cascaded through the flight department by means of a process that involves everyone.

How to Create an Operating Plan for Your Flight Department in 12 Steps

Step 1. Engage the Leadership Team
Discuss the Operating Plan initiative with your Leadership Team. Be very clear on what it is, why it's being developed and what you want to accomplish with it. Make them "owners" of the concept so that everyone on the Leadership Team is aligned.

Step 2. Commit the Time
It's difficult to get everyone's attention when day-to-day issues are hovering right outside the conference room door. Effective planning requires undivided attention and that's best achieved away from the daily activities at the hangar. That way, your Leadership Team can dedicate their entire focus to the task at hand. Find an offsite location, perhaps at the corporate office, where
everyone can be focused.

**Step 3. Create the Right Environment**
A large conference room with plenty of space to move about is essential. Ensure that cell phones are turned off except for breaks and during lunch. Ask your leaders for their full energy and undivided attention.

**Step 4. Generate Ideas**
Use structured brainstorming to make sure that all ideas on flight department direction get out. Create a freewheeling environment of "safe space" where ideas can be generated without judgment. Make sure everyone is engaged. Don't let anyone go down the "rabbit hole" of solving. That comes later.

**Step 5. Capture the Ideas**
Use flip charts to capture every idea generated throughout the brainstorming. Encourage the use of "I Statements" throughout.

**Step 6. Nominally Group the Ideas**
Group the ideas that are generated into common categories. Eliminate those that are duplicative and combine those that are similar. Make sure that every idea is stated in an actionable way.

**Step 7. Prioritize the Ideas**
Identify which ideas and action items are most important and warrant immediate action.

**Step 8. Involve Everyone**
After the offsite meeting, cascade the outcome throughout the flight department, giving all team members the chance to weigh in on the work done by the Leadership Team. That'll ensure buy-in, and you'll get some great input that'll make the Operating Plan even better.

**Step 9. Implement with Precision**
Select the top two or three highest-priority actions. Set an implementation timetable to clearly define who will do what and by when. Without this follow-through, most planning processes fall apart.

**Step 10. Create Development Opportunities**
Ask for volunteers throughout the organization (not just among the Leadership Team) to become involved in the implementation effort. Use these as development opportunities. Watch those who come forward to volunteer as they are likely your future leaders.
Step 11. Follow Up Regularly
Assign short-cycle deliverables that are measured in days and weeks so that you can establish a regular cadence. Review the status every week.

Step 12. Celebrate Achievement
When an action item is completed, communicate the outcome widely. Show a "completed" notation on a highly visible Operating Plan Status spreadsheet that is posted throughout the department. You want everyone to see that things really are getting done.

Best Practices Recommendation
Consider using a facilitator for work like this. There's no effective way for you, as a flight department leader, to play the role of facilitator and participant at the same time.

The steps noted above are part of Gray Stone Advisors' The Way Forward™ process, an interactive and engaging offsite experience designed to produce a 12-18 month Operating Plan for a flight department. It also develops the flight department's Vision, Mission & Values statements, as well as a set of Aviation-specific Leadership Competencies. For more information on The Way Forward™, please visit us at www.graystoneadvisors.com.

Gray Stone Advisors
Gray Stone Advisors combines their experience both in leading businesses as well as managing business aviation operations in order to provide flight department leaders with strategies for improvement. For more than 20 years, they've been “simplifying the business of business aviation” by working alongside all layers of aviation personnel, senior executives and family office representatives to help them become truly adept in all of the aspects of operating a business within a business.

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