Safety Management Systems: Beyond the Theory

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In the 10 years since the introduction of the International Standard for Business Aircraft Operations (IS-BAO), more than 620 general aviation operators around the world have registered and many other operators have implemented an SMS.

What's the next step? For starters, a time of reflection on the fact that SMS is a paradigm shift from the traditional single person approach to safety management. Everyone in the department is now responsible for flight safety, for general workplace safety and for personal safety. It can also be helpful to develop a policy of a "Just Culture," where everyone is encouraged to make an observation or speak of a safety concern without fear of retribution.

Implementing an SMS requires that changes be made in attitude as well as in procedures. Working risk assessment into the daily routine is a step-by-step process that ultimately leads to true success for the organization.

It doesn't seem possible. We are already celebrating the 10th anniversary of the introduction of the International Standard for Business Aircraft Operations (IS-BAO). It took some time to build momentum, but the last two years have seen remarkable growth in the number of organizations registered as being in conformity. More than 620 general aviation operators around the world are now registered and many other operators have implemented an SMS independent of any plans to pursue IS-BAO registration.

Most registered operators are at Stage I, a level that indicates the operator's SMS structure is in place, but not necessarily put into action. Some will take it no further. Having taken the big step of preparing and implementing a Safety Management System, and possibly incurring the expense of an IS-BAO audit, what should they do next?

One important step that is often missed is reflection. The organization should begin to feel different. SMS is a paradigm shift from the traditional single person approach to safety management. Everyone in the department is now responsible for flight safety, for general workplace safety and for personal safety. That is a very different approach than merely

advocating safety. Training should emphasize safety awareness in the workplace, in flight, and in life outside work.

One aviation manager encourages awareness by requiring everyone in the organization to submit at least one safety report a month. To add incentive, the manager links quarterly bonuses to the submission of the reports. Some employees initially pushed back on the belief that there are not enough reportable events each month. The manager encouraged everyone to be observant - stuff happens. The manager also expanded the reporting program to include support staff. Although the assumption may be that some people, e.g., schedulers, don't have as much opportunity to witness unsafe acts or conditions, the reports aren't limited to aviation events. Observations made on the highway, in the playground, or in the supermarket are just as valid as aviation oriented events. The manager's objective was to promote safety awareness by encouraging his employees to be more observant. But the process doesn't have to be mandatory. Use techniques that will work for you.

Another critical move, often missed, is to develop a policy of a "Just Culture." Everyone should feel free to make an observation or speak of a safety concern without fear of retribution. That includes reporting one's own mistakes for the benefit of the lessons learned. To encourage people to share honestly about safety concerns, there should never be any disciplinary action taken, including reassignment or any other adverse impact. This policy should be enacted with implementation of the SMS, although it may take some time for employees to gain confidence in its sincerity.

There are five tools in the SMS Toolbox:

- Risk Assessment
- Safety Reporting
- Policy Waivers
- Internal Audits
- Change Management

Flight departments with a new SMS will generally put these tools to use one at a time, as they become accustomed to their new procedures. I have listed them in the order in which they typically become part of the department's arsenal. This order coincides with frequency of use over time.

Risk assessments, both flight and maintenance, are a daily application and are generally incorporated right away. Reporting safety events or observations, if people are watching closely, is a frequent but not daily occurrence. Invoking policy waivers, internal audits, or change

management thinking occurs less frequently, but all are still important elements of safety management.

Incorporating each of these tools on a piecemeal basis is OK. After all, trying to do it all in one fell swoop could be overwhelming. Work risk assessment into your daily routine until it becomes second nature. Then start looking for opportunities to use the safety reporting process. Follow through on each report, digging down for root cause analysis on appropriate reports. At some point someone will move on to the next step with the observation, "We should write up a policy waiver before we do that." Eventually, all five tools will become familiar.

About six months after implementation of your SMS, the Safety Manager should assess the department's acceptance of the program. Is it well understood? Are you using all the tools? Is everyone engaged? Those who appear to be holding back may be brought into the fold by assigning them something specific to do - an internal audit, a safety report investigation, a training lesson on a particular subject, or responsibility to write up a change in policy or procedure.

Finally, recognize those who make contributions - this should be everyone, but rarely is. Openly acknowledge safety report submissions - and the action taken as a result of the reports. Recognize those who see a potential hazard and mitigate the risk while still accomplishing the assigned task. Reward people who raise the bar on safety and those who come up with good ideas for saving money or time.

Implementing an SMS requires that changes be made in attitude as well as in procedures. Bite off a little bit at a time, chew and swallow. Then take the next bite. Keep going until you consume the whole pie.

Baldwin Aviation Inc.
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