

Developing a Just Culture

By Hooper Harris, Federal Aviation Administration Accident Investigation Division

One of the attributes of a safety management system is safety promotion. This is usually thought of as posters, slogans, awards and other positive motivators, but it also includes the concept of a “just culture.”

Since the word “just” means having a basis in or conforming to fact or reason, and “culture” means civilization, a just culture is a civilization that bases its actions on fact and reason. But what does this mean to a law enforcement aviation unit? Perhaps the best way to understand is to examine a possible event and take a look at some of the options available to unit management.

Imagine the crew of a wheel-equipped landing gear helicopter is returning to base. En route, the main rotor transmission chip detector light illuminates with no other indications of transmission problems. The crew decides to divert to a nearby airport and safely lands the helicopter on the runway. The airport is small and has no separate taxiway, so the crew decides to ground taxi down the runway and turn onto the run-up area.

But while taxiing to the end of the runway, the crew turns too early and the left main gear falls off the pavement into the soft earth. The forward motion of the helicopter overloads the stuck gear, and the landing gear and support structure fail. The damage to the landing gear and fuselage is substantial, ultimately grounding the aircraft for months and costing hundreds of thousands of dollars to repair.

As manager of this crew, what would you do? Here are some options:

- 1 Make someone accountable—Fire the pilot-in-command or give the second-in-command a 30-day suspension.
- 2 Like the bumper sticker says, “Stuff Happens!”—Accept the loss and stock up on landing gear parts.
- 3 Get someone else to pay—Sue the airport or the manufacturer.

If you get rid of the pilot-in-command, the person with the best knowledge of the incident leaves your agency and takes his knowledge with him. Putting the second-in-command on the ground for 30 days just means he’ll be less current when you put them back on the line. Choices two and three are even less productive.

However, the just culture model, as defined by the International Helicopter Safety Team’s Safety Management System Toolkit (see chart below), gives us an alternative that guides the decision on the basis of fact and reason.

Following the model shown in the toolkit, you would ask and answer several questions:

Q: Did the crew know what was expected of them?

A: Yes, they were to operate the helicopter safely.

Q: Did the intended result occur?

A: No, they didn’t mean to damage the aircraft.

Q: Did they knowingly violate procedures?

A: No, they did not violate a specific company procedure.

Q: Would I have done the same thing?

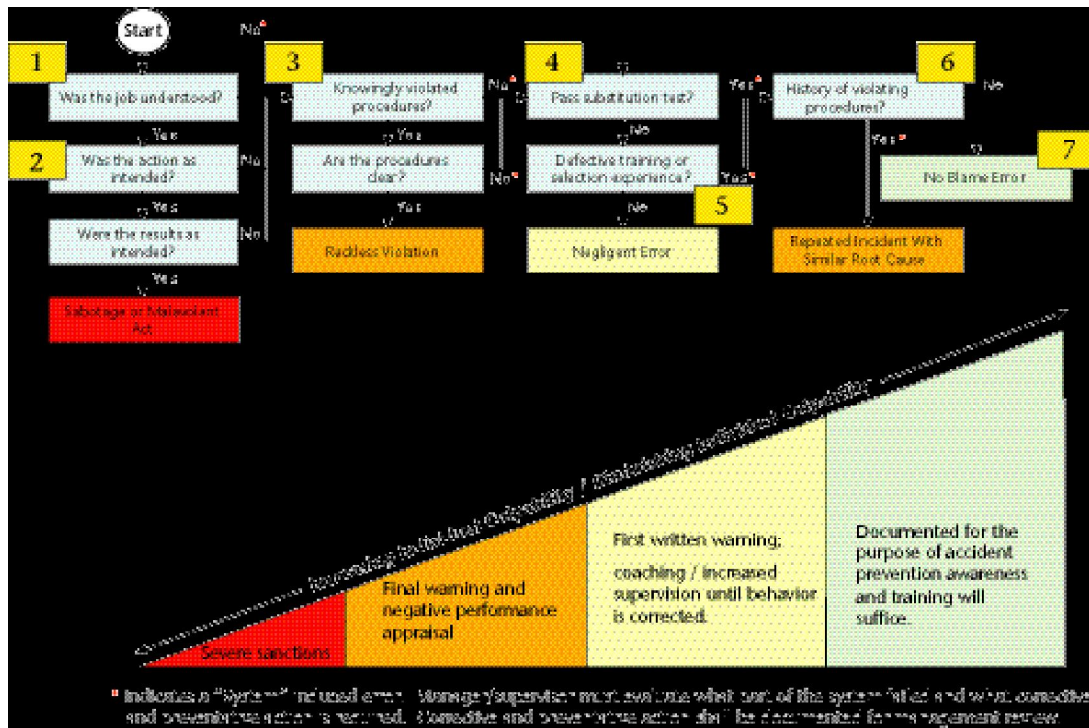
A: No, I would have made every effort to stay on the pavement.

Q: Does the training program or the Operators Manual address this situation?

A: No, both are silent on this issue.

Q: Has this crew done this or something like it before?

A: No, this is their first mishap.



As expensive as the incident was, according to the answers to the above questions, this is a no-blame error, meaning that the organization's training and procedures, or lack thereof, are at least as much a part of the problem as anything else.

To rectify the situation, you must change your training program and/or the operations manual to address this issue. Better yet, ask the crew to discuss the mishap at a training day. Even if you believe that the pilot should not have let the gear get off the pavement while ground taxiing, the event is at worst a negligent error, meaning that the crew should be counseled and a written record made.

A just culture is not about giving everyone a free pass for incidents or even accidents; it's about finding out what really happened, why, and dealing with the causes. Should this crew have known not to let the aircraft get off the pavement? Of course, but the training program and operations manual should have reinforced that.

In the final analysis, a just culture allows an organization to learn from the mistakes of its members. That makes the entire organization better and safer.

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