

Integrating Safety in Everything You Do

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To ensure that your unit operates safely from top to bottom, safety management systems and training are critical.

On the surface, a unit that operates under a safety management system (SMS) should structure its training program to evaluate and minimize risk while maximizing mission effectiveness. But digging deeper, one realizes that training is not an isolated, independent component under the SMS concept. Training must be integrated with other areas of a unit's operation to effectively manage risk.

Too often, aircrews encounter missions that they have never been trained to perform. They may attempt such missions under intense pressure, either with the best of intentions in mind or to be a hero. If they succeed, the uninformed may publicly or privately consider them heroes. If they fail, everyone points their fingers at them, and their agency may be exposed to significant liability. In the worst-case scenario, someone may get injured or killed and the unit dissolved.

But even if the crew succeeds, management has a responsibility to objectively evaluate the incident, not for the purpose of punishing someone (although accountability is a vital component of a SMS), but for the purpose of evaluating the incident from a safety, training and policy perspective. Failure to do so can reinforce in the minds of personnel that it is acceptable to perform missions without the proper training or equipment, and it is acceptable to take unnecessary risks. Recurrent problems often point to a breakdown in management's oversight of the unit. This can destroy the confidence of personnel in management's ability to do the right thing. Identifying unnecessary risk and risk takers is essential to reducing the potential for accidents.

When an airborne law enforcement unit entertains the idea of performing a new mission, training will be an important part of getting started. But long before the unit begins to train, important questions need to be asked and answered. We need to know not only if we are capable of performing the mission, but also if we should be performing the mission. Are there other reliable resources available that are better equipped and trained? Or would the aviation unit be providing a valuable service to the agency and community by incorporating the mission? Does the agency support the mission? Top-level management must authorize and support each mission that a unit is tasked with performing. There may be political, liability or financial reasons for not authorizing a mission. But if the answer to these questions is yes, then we need to know how we're going to perform the mission, and that makes training necessary.

When a unit incorporates a new mission, there must be a mechanism in place to develop a training program. That mechanism should be part of the SMS. An effective training program should include input from not only training personnel, but also safety, maintenance, unit management and perhaps other personnel with relevant expertise and experience. This is an effective way of evaluating risk from multiple perspectives. Someone will think of something that the training staff doesn't.

The training program must also include objective performance standards that meet or exceed industry standards. This is the best way to help trainers objectively evaluate the skills and abilities of unit members. Objective performance standards also help trainers modify the training syllabus to meet the specific needs of the unit.

There is almost never a reason to reinvent the wheel here. Learn from the mistakes and successes of others. Contact other agencies that have a record

of safely and successfully performing the same mission, and ask them for help. Or hire professional trainers with subject matter expertise and work with them to create a structured training program that is tailored to meet the needs of the unit. Policies and procedures must be developed that prioritize safety, but just because a mission has a relatively high risk factor doesn't mean that it shouldn't be performed. That's what risk management is all about: identifying, understanding and minimizing risk through training and education and making the go-no-go decisions with good judgment and a thorough understanding of the associated risks.

Even missions that will be performed infrequently might warrant a training program. The decision on whether or not to incorporate a particular mission should be based on the totality of circumstances for individual agencies. But if a mission is authorized and supported by the agency (financially and philosophically) and unit members are appropriately trained, equipped and proficient, the unit can be a more valuable asset to the agency and community. The commitment to proficiency, however, must be ongoing and clear, and training is the key to proficiency.

From Unit to Unit

When supplying in-house training for emergency-procedures, there's not much room for interpretation. The techniques involved in performing autorotations in ASTARs are very similar from agency to agency. From a law enforcement perspective, however, the tactics of different units can vary widely from agency to agency, even though agencies perform the same mission with the same aircraft and equipment in similar environments. Most people usually associate the tactical aspects of airborne law enforcement with the success or failure of missions, but tactics have a significant effect on aviation safety.

Ineffective or improper tactics have contributed to the cause of many accidents. Hovering, or flying very low and slow while searching for armed suspects, for example, gives bad guys something to shoot at. A surprising number of law enforcement aircraft and crewmembers have been hit by small arms fire and crashed.

In one incident described in the National Transportation Safety Board accident database, a fatal law enforcement accident resulted when the pilot was taught to fly missions in an unsafe manner. He was taught to arrive at burglary alarms at 200 feet AGL so the TFO could conduct a FLIR search. The low-time pilot did exactly what he was taught to do, but as soon as he turned downwind, he encountered a loss of tail rotor effectiveness. With no altitude to recover, he crashed. Both crewmembers were killed.

It's not unusual to find aircrews performing missions today in exactly the same manner that they were performing them 20 years ago. It's even more ironic when one considers that the agency may unknowingly be exposing themselves to unnecessary risk while operating with the most sophisticated technology available—technology that when used efficiently can enable them to operate safer and more effectively.

This can be difficult to overcome for a variety of reasons. Leadership is the key, but leadership doesn't always come from management (although it makes the process a lot easier when it does). Under an effective SMS, a unit's training program is always being evaluated to ensure that missions are performed as safely and effectively as they can be. It starts by understanding the risks to which aircrews are exposed when performing missions.

For example, while orbiting a scene, do we routinely fly so low that the likelihood of performing a successful autorotation would be in question if our engine failed? If so, we need to ask ourselves why. Could we incorporate different tactics to minimize our exposure to that risk and still be effective? Are our weather minimums adequate? Inadvertent flight

into instrument conditions continues to be a killer, so we should ask ourselves if our weather minimums provide us with an adequate margin of safety.

The San Diego Police Department recently made its weather minimums more conservative. The unit could have mandated instrument proficiency, but that would have required an unrealistic amount of ongoing flight time for each pilot. In the end, the unit decided to incorporate unusual attitude recovery training, reducing the exposure to inadvertent IMC by raising weather minimums.

Weather minimums should be clearly defined in a unit's operations manual with no room for interpretation. When risks are identified and policies written to reduce exposure to those risks, aircrews must be held accountable. The first time someone willingly violates such a policy and nothing is done, it sends a clear message to everyone that there is no policy. This bleeds into every other segment of the unit's operation.