

HOW MUCH SAFETY CAN YOU AFFORD?

By Dick Gilson, AvStar Media

Every airborne law enforcement agency is unique, and each must evaluate itself to determine how to make itself safer.

The recent rash of accidents has us looking in every nook and crevice for ways to prevent these situations and reduce an unacceptable accident rate among segments of the aviation community. Zero defects and zero accidents should be the objective. If we do not shoot for 100 percent, we will not achieve what would be considered an acceptable success rate.

For many years, I have suggested that aviation units evaluate their operations as if they have just experienced an accident or incident. This attitude will result in a realistic and critical evaluative model. Why wait until just after a problem to look for solutions to prevent it? It is cheaper and more responsible to justify the decisions you have made regarding safety before all the regulatory agencies, organizational experts, insurance representatives and hired guns inspect every aspect of your organization with the same critical eye that you should have used.

But the realistic part of this effort lies in determining how much safety we can afford. To answer the question, we must find the point of diminishing returns. There is no shortage of equipment to install, training programs to implement and personnel to hire, so how do we decide how much safety to buy? Unfortunately, there is no one answer. However, by understanding the variables that contribute to safe operations, learning from your mistakes, keeping good records and staying informed, you can make the changes necessary to improving your safety record.

Know the Variables

Some of the variables to consider are aircraft selection, aircraft equipment, training programs and aircrew experience. One aircraft may be better suited for high altitude operations, and another better equipped for flight in a cold weather environment. One operator may have crews that are better trained for IFR operations, and some may have more experience in over-water flying. It is the responsibility of the personnel in each agency to evaluate where their units are in the pecking order of aircraft model, equipment, training and aircrew experience. After this evaluation, they can decide what their operational envelope should encompass.

However, if you asked 10 people what a training curriculum should look like, you would get 10 different answers. It is extremely subjective. There is a threshold below which you should not descend and still operate. Once established, it should be held sacred. This threshold should not be reduced unless there is a good reason, and purely financial considerations should not be one of them.

Because many of our safety considerations are subjective, we often rationalize our selection of evaluation criteria that allow us to meet our preconceived financial objectives. Nor are our likes and dislikes valid considerations in maintaining a safety-oriented program. We avoid many of the things we don't like to do, even though it might be in our best interest to continue. We may not like vegetables, but everyone recognizes the beneficial effect eating them has on our overall health.

The Blame Game

I believe in the blame game following an accident or incident, not for retribution, but to find specifically what needs to be changed to reduce the chances of another accident or incident.

It can also be very useful to review close calls as if they were an incident or accident. Often in these cases, we have avoided an accident simply because we were lucky. All the causal factors for an accident were present, but we did not suffer the mishap because of a minor point that can be attributed to luck. Imagine flying into inadvertent IMC conditions in icing with vertigo, when suddenly a break in the cloud layer allows you to descend to VFR and land safely. While the outcome was successful, one would not consider the entire flight a success.

Another way to evaluate your operation is to look at what is working well. This is many times ignored, since it is an area that does not require constant attention. But strategies that work well in one area many times can be carried over into another. Copy success in your organization. If your maintenance is superb, it may be that you have the right number of technicians working reasonable hours, attending routine training, receiving sufficient guidance, maintaining a good exchange of information and properly tracking problem areas. All of these conditions can be applied to your flight operations.

Write It Down

Whether you are talking about your operations manual, standard operating procedures, training manual, or an after action report, it is important to write down information and procedures that affect your operation. The idea of writing information down is often considered a nuisance or an exercise that is designed to please someone else. However, manuals, like lesson plans in a training program, are working documents that should be more valuable to the user than any outside entity.

Without a training manual, you cannot determine what elements might be missing from your training program. Without an operations manual that serves as an opportunity for others to critique your operating parameters to identify any problems before they result in accidents or incidents, you can't know what procedure might be overlooked.

Seek Out Information

Aviation has become increasingly complex, and it is difficult to keep up with the new information and equipment available. Tradeshows and belonging to industry organizations can be useful if used properly. Make good use of professional associations to learn what is available that can affect the safety of your operation.

How many times have people at tradeshows hung around the booth of manufacturers of aircraft or equipment they have already purchased? This minimizes the opportunity to attend relevant technical and product

demonstrations that might have a positive impact on their operation. Use tradeshow and conferences to seek out information.

Make Change

In any situation that has produced unsatisfactory results, there needs to be change. Not change for its own sake, but substantive change directed specifically toward altering the unsatisfactory outcome. This involves an introspective approach to evaluating what might be wrong.

If the old adage is true that an accident can be avoided by altering any one in a series of events, then the changes necessary might be slight. We have developed acronyms and programs to address changes that are necessary to improve safety, but no one can do it for you. The best answer should come from within, through critical introspection, information and bold action. The money spent on these changes is an investment in safety. How much are you willing to spend, and how much safety can you afford?

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