

Organizational Culture:

It Can Impact Safety

Changing organizational culture is difficult, but it's the best way to ensure that your unit operates more safely in the future.

By Officer Michael W. Sedam, California Highway Patrol, Central Division Air Operations Unit, Fixed-Wing Pilot and Safety Officer

On Jan. 28, 1986, the Space Shuttle Challenger, carrying a crew of seven, exploded 73 seconds after lift off as a nation watched in horror. The technical cause of this tragic accident was the failure of a solid rocket booster o-ring. Although this explanation was exact and pinpointed the root of the technical failure, the culture that existed in NASA at the time also contributed to the accident.

The culture at NASA normalized behavior that contributed to the decision to launch. It has been argued that the culture at NASA was one that conditioned decision-makers to such an extent that they were able to overlook warnings concerning possible o-ring failure. Organizational culture is intrinsically tied to safety and should be a topic of discussion as a way to positively affect the safety culture in law enforcement aviation units.

Professor Edgar Schein, the author of *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, defined organizational culture as “a pattern of basic assumptions...developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration.” The culture of law enforcement aviation units can differ significantly from one unit to the next. The philosophies, values and expectations we share within our units can be considered the culture of the organization in which we exist. The safety practices we develop within our respective units are born from the culture of our organizations. Every unit has a safety culture. The question is whether or not safety is a priority.

On April 24, 1997, Jim Hall, the chairperson of the National Transportation Safety Board, discussed three basic ideas concerning organizational culture:

- The beliefs held by workers and managers in the organization about the way operations ought to work.
- The practices and customs that have become the norm.
- How various factors are valued either positively or negatively.

These three ideas are applicable to our aviation units. First, the beliefs of pilots, flight officers, maintenance personnel and management with respect to operations all affect the safety culture of our aviation units. Some units are extremely mission oriented and willing to push the envelope. For these units, weather minimums, maintenance requirements and aircraft performance requirements have been and will be exceeded in order to accomplish the mission.

Placing the mission ahead of safety concerns can have tragic results. Being mission oriented is not bad; however, when a strong focus on the mission begins to affect safety, the only way to change it is to concentrate on organizational culture.

Practices & Customs

Organizational culture comprises the normal practices and customs of aviation units. Some of the practices and customs which have become normal in our aviation units do not place safety first. For instance, adjusting shifts on a weekly or daily basis can cause normal sleep patterns to be disrupted, and flying a set number of flight hours regardless of conditions places undue stress upon flight crews. These actions, as well as pushing the aircraft to the edge of its performance envelope, can become normal practices for some aviation units. Once these practices become norms and the aviation unit becomes used to them, they lose sight of possible danger. As aviators, the technical systems in which we exist are uncaring

and absolute with respect to mistakes. We must, therefore, be extremely aware of unsafe practices and customs that become normal and commonplace.

Some of the beliefs, practices and customs that exist in aviation units can be both positively and negatively viewed. In some cases, dangerous practices can be valued. Some believe that such practices can show superior skill and are viewed as a way to prove one's ability. In other cases, safe practices, such as not flying fatigued and not flying when weather is at minimums, can be viewed negatively by air operations units or their management.

So, how do you determine what your unit's safety culture is? Once you are able to ascertain the unit's safety culture, how do you affect this culture?

Commitments & Culture

Organizational culture is not easily defined. No mathematical formulas or set rules exist to determine an existing culture. Culture is something for which you must get a feel. When attempting to discern the culture of a particular aviation unit, you should step back in an effort to identify the commitments of the unit.

Richard Fenno, a political science author, described this method as "soaking and poking," while Robert Behn, a public policy management and researcher, described it as "groping along." In essence, you have to separate yourself from the daily activities and conversations of the unit so that you can observe and determine the cultural elements of the unit. Anne Khademian, who researched the use of culture as a management tool, lists six strategies to understanding and changing culture:

- Identify the commitments that form the existing culture.
- Identify the connections between the roots of culture and commitments.
- Think about what needs to change and articulate the change.
- Understand the management of cultural roots as an inward, outward and shared responsibility.
- Relentlessly practice and demonstrate the desired changes in culture.
- Capitalize on incremental change and institutionalize it.

These steps can be applied to the safety culture of an aviation unit. What are the commitments of your unit? Do you place mission completion above all else? What connects the roots of culture to those commitments? What needs to change in order to foster a more safety conscious culture?

Practice Change

If the safety culture of a unit is to be changed, the changes must be demonstrated and practiced on a continual basis. The toughest thing about changing culture is that without someone focusing on keeping the changes permanent, the culture usually reverts back to the way it was. Finally, the changes must be incremental and institutionalized.

If you truly wish to affect your unit's safety culture in a positive way, first take a step back so that you are not intertwined with the unit's culture. Listen, watch, ask questions and get a new perspective on what your unit's safety culture is. From there, implement changes in culture which are safety-oriented. Own the changes you make, demonstrate them and believe in them. However, be forewarned that if the changes to culture are not a constant focus, the unit will revert back to the way things were prior to the implementation of changes. Many unsafe practices result from organizational culture and become a normal part of unit operations.

Therefore, in order to overcome unsafe norms, we must be willing to change the culture that has normalized unsafe practices. NASA was conditioned by its culture to make decisions that were not knowingly dangerous. Had the culture been affected, the decision to launch on Jan. 28, 1986, may have been different.