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aviation community is better positioned to uphold safety, efficiency, and inclusivity in increasingly diverse skies.

5.5 THE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE: SAFETY NORMS AND CREW RESOURCE MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Daan Vlaskamp

While much of the focus in this book so far has been on cultural differences in terms of national culture, this is not the only cultural factor that can influence safety in aviation. Where national culture is related to the shared values and beliefs of a specific group of people within a nation, professional culture concerns the shared values and beliefs held by people with the same profession. For example, many pilots share a sense of professionalism and a love of aviation. In this subchapter, the focus will be on organizational culture. Although organizational culture is influenced by national culture, it is a distinctly separate concept. The concept gained popularity in the 1980s. Barney (1986) defines organizational culture as "a complex set of values, beliefs, assumptions, and symbols that define the way in which a firm conducts its business." A subset of organizational culture is safety culture, which encompasses shared values, beliefs, and assumptions, specifically concerning safety. Several major disasters in the 1980s exposed organizational deficiencies related to safety and led to the rise of interest in the concept of safety culture in high-risk organizations. In the Challenger space shuttle disaster in 1986, for example, schedule pressure, poor communication, deficiencies in safety reporting, and the normalization of technical anomalies led to the dismissal of engineers' warnings against launching in cold weather, with catastrophic results. In the Chernobyl nuclear accident, also in 1986, factors such as fear of potential repercussions for decision-makers, structural secrecy, a focus on production, and a strong hierarchy contributed to the catastrophic reactor explosion and hampered the emergency response. Both disasters shifted the focus of accident investigations from blaming the human operator, to examining broader systemic factors, and helped put organizational factors, and safety culture in particular, firmly in the spotlight.

Thirty-two years later, in October 2018, Lion Air Flight 610 crashed into the Java Sea just minutes after takeoff from Jakarta, killing all 189 people on board. Less than five months later, Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 suffered a near-identical fate, crashing shortly after takeoff from Addis Ababa and claiming 157 lives. Both aircraft were brand-new Boeing 737 MAX jets. Both incidents put the focus on safety culture again. This time, fingers pointed to the safety culture at the aircraft manufacturer: Boeing. At the heart of the two accidents was a new flight control system: the Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS). It was introduced to improve the aircraft's stall characteristics. Information on the system was removed from the airplane's pilot manuals with FAA approval. One of the reasons for the removal of MCAS information from the manuals was economic pressure: conversion training from previous 737 models needed to be kept as short as possible. This way, existing customers of the 737 would be enticed to remain loyal instead of switching to the competition.

More incidents with Boeing aircraft followed, such as the blowout of a door plug on another 737 MAX. A Federal Aviation Administration (FAA, 2024) report harshly criticized Boeing and stated that cost-cutting measures, confusion among employees regarding safety procedures, and deficiencies in safety reporting all contributed to critical oversights. Many of the recommendations made by the FAA in the report raised concerns about Boeing's safety culture, which the FAA described as the "single most important influence on the management of safety."

Research into safety culture and the related concept of safety climate – a more surface-level snapshot of how safety is perceived and practiced in an organization –s demonstrates that a positive safety climate improves safety performance (Casey et al., 2017). In a strong safety culture, where safety is embedded into every level of an organization, workers are more motivated to work safely and to comply with safety regulations and procedures, leading to fewer incidents and accidents. They are better equipped with more knowledge on how to work safely and have the necessary tools to do so. Also, employees are more motivated to report safety issues. This has been shown to have a positive impact on the number of safety occurrences. However, fostering a strong safety culture has its challenges and takes time. It also requires a substantial financial investment, along with a genuine commitment from management. The benefits of investing in safety culture will not immediately be clear, as change takes time and actions needed to establish such a safety culture often clash with economic interests. Geert Hofstede, the famous cultural anthropologist, emphasized the importance of changing structures and systems, as changing culture by just focusing on employee behavior is almost impossible (Hofstede, 1991).

James Reason (1997) suggested that safety culture consists of five dimensions: an Informed Culture, a Reporting Culture, a Learning Culture, a Just Culture, and a Flexible Culture. These dimensions still form the basis of many airlines' safety policies. An Informed Culture ensures that an organization systematically collects, analyzes, and shares safety data across all layers of the company. Apart from automatic data monitoring, one of the ways in which data is gathered is through voluntary safety reporting by employees. In a positive Reporting Culture, employees feel confident that they can report safety concerns confidentially, without fear of reprisal. They should also be confident that the reports are used to enhance safety, and that reporting is thus useful and important. A strong Learning Culture ensures that the organization learns from its safety data and makes meaningful changes based on it. Creating a positive Learning Culture also involves motivating employees for continuous learning about safety. Another important aspect of safety culture is Just Culture. When reporting safety concerns, employees should feel confident that there will be no negative consequences for them personally, even when admitting to what could be perceived as mistakes or unsafe behavior. This makes employees less likely to conceal problems for fear of negative consequences, leaving important safety issues hidden under the surface. Just Culture is the opposite of a Punitive Culture, where individuals are blamed and face reprisals. That does not mean there is no personal accountability in a Just Culture: reckless, criminal, or negligent behavior still carries consequences. The disciplinary policy should be made transparent and known to the employees. Finally, a Flexible Culture helps the organization adapt to changing circumstances and demands and display resilience in the face of adversity. In the

Chernobyl and Challenger disasters, these safety culture dimensions showed deficiencies. After the Challenger accident, NASA committed to changing its culture and making safety the number one priority. Likewise, after the FAA report criticizing Boeing's safety culture and the 737 MAX accidents, Boeing put a lot of effort into strengthening its safety culture by encouraging employees to speak up, providing training in Just Culture principles, and establishing a digital safety learning platform. The result was an increase in safety reports by employees.

Numerous studies have identified management commitment as the most important factor influencing safety performance (such as Bosak et al., 2013). Investing resources in a safe work environment, involving employees in safety matters, performing job design according to safety principles, maintaining an ongoing safety dialogue, and, most importantly, putting words into action, are all examples of management practices that have a positive influence on safety. It is important for management to show a genuine commitment to safety. Recent research into organizational leadership in high-risk organizations has shifted from looking at the influence of leadership on productivity and efficiency to investigating the influence of leadership styles on safety outcomes. The concept of safety leadership (Flin & Agnew, 2018) emphasizes a style of leadership that motivates employees to prioritize safety in their work and has been shown to be beneficial to safety.

Pilots operate relatively autonomously when they are flying a plane. They do not interact with management daily, in the way that office workers who share a workspace with their immediate superiors do. This means that opportunities to strengthen safety culture and show management commitment to safety during training events and other such occasions become even more important. As well as mandatory simulator training and checking, pilots must undergo Crew Resource Management (CRM) training at regular intervals. The concept of CRM was developed in the late 1970s. In the early days of aviation, accidents often had technical causes. As technology advanced and aircraft became more and more safe, "human factors" contributing to aviation accidents became more apparent. Several high-profile crashes, such as the collision of two Boeing 747s on the runway of the airport of Tenerife, where communication difficulties and cockpit hierarchy played a role, put the spotlight on the human operator. CRM training initially focused on improving interpersonal skills (such as assertiveness), based on practices from management training in the corporate world and psychology. Now, CRM has gradually evolved to include the wider team outside the cockpit (e.g., cabin crew) and shifted to a more systematic approach. CRM training for airlines is mandated by law, and topics are prescribed by EASA and the FAA. One of the mandatory topics is the company's safety culture.

The way CRM is trained varies according to the airline. Most airlines use classroom training, while others lean more heavily on e-learning. CRM is also usually integrated into simulator training. Some of the training can be combined with other (non-flying) staff, which is known as joint CRM training. The CRM training environment is a place where company norms, attitudes, and beliefs can be communicated to and discussed with the wider workforce. The use of case studies and discussing incidents and accidents that have occurred in the company can be a powerful tool for establishing a Learning Culture. Through training and sharing safety knowledge, attitudes can be reinforced and crew members inspired and supported in working

safely. By emphasizing the concept of Just Culture and the benefits of reporting, pilots can be motivated to contribute to a positive and effective Reporting Culture. Sharing success stories and discussing improvements made as a result of pilot reporting helps convey the message that management is committed to safety and that reporting is useful. Expectations of acceptable and unacceptable behavior related to safety can be made clear to employees to avoid uncertainty and improve compliance. Although the benefits of CRM are hard to quantify, several success stories in aviation have been ascribed to the successful application of CRM. The "Miracle on the Hudson" in 2009, where an aircraft successfully carried out an emergency water landing following a double engine failure, and Quantas Flight 32 in 2010, which landed successfully after suffering an uncontained engine failure after take-off that damaged critical systems and triggered dozens of alerts, are two examples of these.

Other useful training topics related to safety culture that can be discussed in training include hierarchy, operational drift, operational pressure, the importance of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), risk-taking, and team dynamics. Operational drift refers to the gradual and often unnoticed shift from baseline performance toward less safe practices. This usually begins with small deviations from established norms, which often go unchallenged as they remain consequence-free due to built-in safety margins. Over time, these deviations can become routine. This is known as "normalization of deviance." Such drift is frequently driven by operational pressures, whether externally imposed or self-inflicted, for example, the urge to stay on schedule, save fuel, or meet passenger expectations. If not identified and addressed, these seemingly minor deviations can erode safety margins and compromise overall safety. Economic pressures can have a strong negative impact on safety culture. Dekker (2017) states that systems like aviation do not exist to be safe; they exist to make money. This inherent "goal conflict" creates pressure on frontline staff. There is also the risk of mixed messages by management: paying lip service to safety, but simultaneously emphasizing the importance of making money, flying on time, or prioritizing passenger service.

Psychological safety is essential for a positive safety culture, according to the European Cockpit Association (ECA). Psychological safety, a concept first popularized by Amy Edmondson, refers to a climate where everyone feels comfortable expressing their opinions, questioning decisions, or reporting concerns without fear. It is an important concept, both inside the cockpit and on a company level. It highlights that creating the conditions where people feel safe to speak up does not only require effort from the individual who does so, but also commitment from the leadership in setting those conditions.

Deficient safety culture due to financial pressures and a lack of psychological safety can impact safety (Agenzia Nazionale per la Sicurezza del Volo, 2008). The captain of a Boeing 737 from a low-cost airline had, only days before the flight, lost his young son after a distressing period of illness. In fear of potential repercussions were he to take an extended leave of absence, he reported for duty despite his mental state following personal tragedy, and did not report the death to his Chief Pilot. While on final approach for Rome Ciampino Airport, the aircraft encountered severe turbulence and rain associated with thunderstorm activity. The flight diverted to Rome Fiumicino, but on the second approach, the aircraft ended up dangerously low, finally

diverting again to Pescara, where it eventually landed safely. Both approaches in Ciampino and Fiumicino were unstable, with the captain showing signs of loss of situation awareness, cognitive overload, and impaired decision-making. These were likely exacerbated by the pilot's mental state and fatigue. The captain did not report the incident to the airline, again fearing reprisal.

Other forms of cultural differences can stem from individuals having absorbed different organizational norms and values over time. One example of these that has been shown to be particularly strong and enduring is the culture inculcated during training. This is one of the reasons why the role of instructors is seen to be so influential in establishing habits and safety culture. A captain and copilot can have a different training background (military versus civilian) or have spent years working in a different company (such as low-cost, legacy, or cargo) with a different organizational culture, even though they share the same national cultural background. Although the professional culture in aviation is relatively homogenous, these differences can influence everything from the way procedures are viewed to the authority gradient in the cockpit and can lead to misunderstandings and even conflicts, making them, if well established, even more influential over workplace behaviors than national culture. Emotional Intelligence is a skill that is more and more important in a globalized environment such as aviation. Developing Emotional Intelligence can mitigate the negative effects of cultural differences.

Training should not be used to offload organizational responsibility for safety issues on to frontline staff. As an example, although educating staff about fatigue and encouraging them to opt out of a flight when fatigued is important, management has an even greater responsibility to avoid scheduling that could lead to extreme fatigue. In a similar vein, emphasizing adherence to procedures is less effective in an environment where workers operate under strong operational or economic pressures. In the force-field between safety and efficiency, messages from management can send mixed signals, undermining the effectiveness of training. CRM training should never be a substitute for systemic safety measures. To be effective, training should also be tailored to the specific safety needs of the organization. Instead of relying on off-the-shelf training programs, a thorough training needs analysis should be carried out before developing training content.

Future developments in aviation will influence safety culture and CRM training. The rapid development of new systems such as AI is likely to fundamentally change the role of pilots in the cockpit and present new challenges in dealing with automation. The pilot's role will move further from active operator to system supervisor. The drive toward single-pilot operations by aircraft manufacturers also raises new challenges in terms of crew dynamics. It is likely to impact traditional CRM concepts as the "crew" becomes dispersed and expanded with ground-based actors, such as "remote pilots" assisting from a distance in case of emergency or during approach and landing. The multi-pilot model of a backup human resource in the cockpit will be absent, and the sole remaining pilot will have to rely mainly on himself. In this environment, the importance of continuous investment in a positive safety culture is even greater, driven by the need to align even more diverse parties with different interests and overcome additional communication and cultural barriers. As the 737 MAX incidents show, the success of technological advancements still depends on

continuous investment in the human component. A strong safety culture will remain an essential part of that.

5.6 CONCLUSION

Dimitrios Ziakkas

Multinational flight crews are no longer an exception in international aviation – they are the standard. In this increasingly interconnected environment, the ability of flight crews to collaborate across cultural boundaries is not simply a desirable trait but a vital safety competence. As this chapter has demonstrated, the benefits of cultural diversity – enhanced problem-solving, broader situational awareness, and adaptive resilience – can only be fully realized when supported by inclusive training frameworks, culturally attuned CRM practices, and regulatory alignment.

However, diversity in the cockpit also introduces complexity, particularly in high-stakes operational settings where miscommunication or culturally influenced hesitation can have immediate consequences. The role of regulatory bodies and training organizations is therefore not just to standardize procedures, but to cultivate the competencies that allow for flexibility within that standardization. CBTA and EBT offer promising pathways, especially when paired with robust instructor development and ongoing human factors research that respects cultural nuance.

Looking ahead, emerging technologies such as AI-driven decision aids, biometric monitoring, and intelligent automation will continue to reshape cockpit ergonomics and communication flows. Yet, these tools must be deployed with an understanding of how human culture mediates technological interaction. Ergonomics is not only about physical layout – it is about psychological accessibility, cognitive load, and interpersonal trust.

Ultimately, the safety and efficiency of multinational crews depend on a collective commitment to learning, adaptation, and empathy. *The flight deck must be recognized as a dynamic social space, not merely a technical one*. By embracing cultural intelligence as an integral part of operational competence, the aviation industry can transform diversity from a challenge into an enduring source of strength.

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