What is Missing in Your SMS?

Contact: Chris Young
*Phone: 203.767.8584*
Email: cbyoung.email@gmail.com

Many proactive aviation companies and agencies have voluntarily begun their own Safety Management System (SMS) implementation with varied results. As you might imagine, the safety needs of aviation programs can vary widely depending on the size and scope of the operation which can hinder the effective application.

When working with or talking to operators, the members of the USHST SMS Working Group have observed different levels of SMS implementation as well as employee perceptions of how well they are performing. In many cases, the company personnel believe that they are further along in their implementation than they actually are. This is not necessarily a negative point (hats off to them for actually embracing SMS), but it highlights a trend among aviation professionals that they do not fully comprehend the extent to which the SMS pillars/components (and their sub-elements) must be applied within their organizations. This realization can really only occur when you have an "outsider" review your SMS program. This is one of the methods in truly understanding what "stuff" is missing from your own system. Granted, as an SMS program evolves it should be looking inward through the use of its own internal evaluation program (IEP). However, the most helpful reviews usually come from an impartial entity that is not connected to the organization.

As an organization progresses through its SMS development, the desired goal is to be more predictive versus simply reactive. To truly achieve this, the established safety and quality processes need to help users become more aware of the gaps that might exist and how to fix them so that they can sustain long term results. In our experience we see gaps in several areas, most notably are:

1) **Management of Change or Change Management;**
2) **Continuous Improvement;**
3) **Safety Culture**

There are many elements that form your SMS, but these seem to be the "Right Stuff" that can truly transform your organization and get you to the future state of your program.
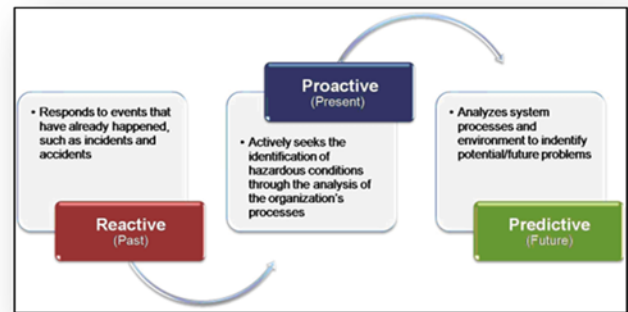
Management of Change

When we talk about of Management of Change or Change Management it often gets overlooked mainly because of the effort that is required to do it correctly. The author, John Kotter (2011), defines Change Management as "An approach to transitioning individuals, teams, and organizations to a desired future state." This is not an easy task, especially in large operations. However, it is critical if we want the outcome to be positive (i.e. safe) and lasting. Organizations commonly attempt to mirror an existing process at another location such as building a new maintenance base or expanding the route structure into an unfamiliar area. This is usually referred to as the "quick fix", but does not necessarily account for your organization's specific requirements. Just because it worked elsewhere or for another company is no guarantee that it will work for you. Another common practice is to overly depend upon a few

dedicated employees to spend the extra effort required to implement the change by "muscling" or "pushing" their way through the project to make up for the inadequate planning up front. This is the "square peg – round hole" phenomena that we all know is not efficient nor best at affecting positive change.

The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) states, "A formal management of change process should identify changes within the organization which may affect established processes, procedures, products and services. Prior to implementing changes, a formal management of change process should describe the arrangement to ensure safety performance." Senior leadership and the Accountable Executive must embrace what the author, Robert Quinn, calls "Deep Change". His approach looks at the transformational paradigm and attempts to change not only the practices, but the outcomes.

Continuous Improvement
Every commercial enterprise must embrace the concept of continual improvement in order to effectively compete in the market place and survive. By definition, it is an ongoing effort to improve products, services or processes. (As defined by the American Society for Quality). Continuous Improvement is a characteristic of a "learning culture" that enables proactive risk management through process assessment and improvement (from Implementing Safety Management Systems in Aviation; Stolzer, Halford and Goglia).

Organizations that always look at methods to make processes better will ultimately benefit from a safer, higher quality and more efficient system. Having everyone willing to participate in this concept helps the organization to truly understand what the root causes of identified issues are and also enables more transformational solutions. This will also help to minimize the tendency for organizations to do what Sidney Dekker describes as "drift into failure." It starts when we view our past successes as a guarantee of future safety, "We've always done it this way and have never had a problem." This mindset leads to complacency and the possibility of narrowing the

safety margins because we've gotten away with it before. Always being mindful of what could be done better will ultimately result in identifying potential problems and help to prevent quality and safety deficiencies.

Safety Culture
Peter Drucker once said that "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." This was stated in respect to business management, but culture will have a profound effect on the success or failure of an organization and its SMS. If the environment within your operation does not allow for your employees to freely express concerns or identify potential issues, the likelihood of safety and quality success is near zero. This culture must start at the highest level of leadership.

Accountable Executives and senior managers often think they know exactly what the problems are when in reality it is as if they are circling an iceberg with a host of issues lurking below the surface. By having a robust and positive safety culture, issues can rise to the surface more openly and be addressed before a negative consequence can occur. Ideally organizations want their employees to be as C.S. Lewis once stated "...doing the right thing even when no one is watching." By having this level of participation it will enable the Management of Change and Continuous Improvement processes to flourish and further enhance your safety and quality initiatives.

While the aggressive elimination of aircraft accidents and/or serious incidents remains the ultimate goal of our industry, it is recognized that the aviation system cannot completely avoid hazards and associated risks. However, as more and more aircraft operations continue to implement and sustain SMS, they will see huge benefits to their company, employees and customers – both from a safety and quality perspective. Also, by not overlooking the emphasis on the elements of Management of Change , Continuous Improvement and Safety Culture these safety professionals will have a more integrated and predictive system. This can work for large and small operations alike. The great thing about SMS is that it is scalable and can work based upon your operational needs. Our willingness to learn and change is crucial. Organizations should never stop asking if they have the "Right Stuff" to achieve SMS and quality success.