

Culture Shock

Step-by-Step Solutions Are Available to Improve Helicopter Safety Attitudes

By Gene Trainor (IHST team member)

Helicopter industry and government leaders knew something had to be done to reduce the alarming number of helicopter accidents worldwide.

So, those leading the charge to reduce accident rates called for a “culture of safety” that encouraged training, outreach, research, analysis, and an environment where people could report safety violations without fear of repercussions. There has been some success since 2005, when more than 250 people from 13 countries attended the first International Helicopter Safety Symposium in Montreal. There, they developed a plan to reduce helicopter accidents worldwide, and they created the International Helicopter Safety Team (www.IHST.org) to oversee this plan.

From 2001 through 2005, the worldwide accident rate was 9.4 accidents per 100,000 flight hours. The attendees’ goal for 2016 was 1.9 accidents worldwide per 100,000 flight hours. As of December 31, 2012, the rate was estimated to be 5.2 accidents worldwide per 100,000 flight hours. In the United States, the numbers looked particularly promising. Helicopter accidents had been gradually decreasing from a high of 222 crashes reported in 1990.

Sadly, that trend ended during the past fiscal year. Helicopter accidents were up 19 percent between 2011 and 2012 nationwide, increasing from 129 to 154. Of the 154 accidents, 23 involved fatal accidents, up from 18 in fiscal year 2011.

Most accidents - 87 percent - occur during the day. And most of the accidents - 84 percent - can be attributed to pilot judgment and actions, according to the IHST’s U.S. Joint Helicopter Safety Analysis Team, which studied 523 accidents in 2000, 2001, and 2006.

The major premise for the FAA and IHST is that pilots, companies, and organizations must create a culture of safety. This effort will not only save lives, but also save millions of dollars from destroyed or damaged helicopters and equipment.

But what do the U.S. FAA and the global IHST mean when they call for a culture of safety? Here are some recommendations that pilots and helicopter companies can follow to ensure safer skies:

1. Establish a system where anyone can report an unsafe condition without fear of reprisal. People should believe they will receive support, including feedback on how the problem has been addressed.
2. Make every employee a champion of safety, but designate someone in the company to be the principal safety representative - - an individual who serves as a catalyst for advancing the culture of safety. If a pilot works alone, he or she can take this role.

3. Seek out, establish, or provide training programs for employees and pilots that promote safety. Ensure that the employees and pilots understand what is being taught, perhaps through exams or through discussions.
4. Post lists of rules and potential hazards in public places. Let the public, employees, and managers know that there are serious consequences for flagrant violation of the rules - consequences that can include loss of job or more importantly, lives.
5. Establish a policy of risk analysis. Ask yourself: Does the task being proposed present safety risks? What is the probability for a mishap? Are the risks worth taking?
6. Review data. Is there a pattern of safety violations and risks? How can these violations and risks be reduced or eliminated? Accidents, near-accidents, and reports of safety risks should be collected and maintained in a secure location.
7. Create programs and checklists to ensure helicopters are properly maintained and flown.
8. Participate in ongoing monitoring programs and audits. How do you know if your safety program works unless you introduce some accountability?
9. Create an emergency response plan. Who does what and when, should an emergency arise? Duties might include who contacts medical emergency personnel, families, co-workers, the media, and administrators. What can be done immediately? Practice drills should be conducted.

Although the FAA and IHST remain committed to achieving the original goal of 1.9 accidents worldwide per 100,000 flight hours by 2016, the recently developed greater goals - - to reverse any negative trend and improve safety culture in the helicopter industry worldwide - - can lead to the ultimate goal of zero accidents.

The recommendations listed here are not limited to a large commercial operator. Any and every pilot can seek additional safety training, establish individual risk analysis, use checklists, and create a personal emergency response plan. Reducing the helicopter accident rate begins with promoting a culture of safety we can live with.

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