Bridging the Gap: Managing Safety Management System People and Processes

Sheryl Barden
Aviation Personnel International

Lucille Fisher
Quality Resources

Just less than a decade ago, aviation safety programs were about accident and incident investigations and bore little resemblance to what we see in 2012. Nowadays, a Safety Management System (SMS) is viewed as a customized program, designed to work within the confines of a flight operation. Irrespective of the size or complexity of your flight operations, your team will benefit from the development and implementation of an effective SMS.

But how do you bridge the gap between your people and processes?

Unfortunately, there's no such thing as an integrated "off the shelf" SMS that works for everyone. This means that your individual team members — from the flight deck, leadership and maintenance to scheduling, dispatch and cabin safety — have the opportunity to align your very own unique standards, policies and processes. Carefully designing the right plan will ensure your team is more aligned and inclined to make the SMS an everyday part of life.

While it takes work and commitment, all facets of a safety program must be addressed to fill the gaps between people and processes — from partnering and education to communications and employee onboarding. This paper will address the importance of an SMS as well as how to:

- Identify and personalize the right SMS plan for your operation;
- Implement change management techniques to gain buy-in;
- Create and deploy SMS education for the generations;
- Integrate HR stakeholders into the SMS process;
- Execute an effective onboarding program; and
- Address safety in everyday life (not at annual reviews).

The Importance of an SMS

First things first: An SMS can be described in terms of integrated networks of people and other resources performing activities that accomplish some mission or goal in a prescribed environment. Management of the system's activities involves planning, organizing, directing and controlling these assets toward the organization's goals.[1]

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[1] 120-92A - Safety Management Systems for Aviation Service Providers - http://www.faa.gov/regulations_policies/advisory_circulars/index.cfm/go/document.information/documentID/319228

The four pillars of an effective SMS include:

1. **Policy.** All management systems must define policies, procedures and organizational structures to accomplish their goals.

2. **Safety Risk Management (SRM).** A formal system of hazard identification and SRM is essential in controlling risk to acceptable levels.

3. **Safety Assurance (SA).** Once SRM controls are identified and operational, the operator must ensure the controls continue to be effective in a changing environment.

4. **Safety Promotion.** The operator must promote safety as a core value with practices that support a sound safety culture.

While an SMS helps your flight department identify current safety gaps, it doesn't necessarily mean that your operations are unsafe. An SMS will help you identify opportunities for improvement — and address gaps in current policies, processes and procedures. This is where it's important to course correct what you're already doing. In fact, it should be a professional development requirement that your team is always looking to improve safety.

How to Identify and Personalize the Right SMS Plan for Your Operation

When SMSs were first implemented, it was easy to choose between the X or Y plan, and get started. Now there are countless consultants and systems — but there's no apples-to-apples comparison. When evaluating apples and oranges, you may want to consider:

- **Identifying a core team to make the decision,** including engaged users such as your designated safety officer, chief pilot, scheduler, dispatcher, maintenance technician, and cabin safety attendant. An SMS can be very successful when the "doers" are actively involved and presenting their recommendation to top management for final approval.

  - Engaging your internal IT department and asking them:

  - What type of SMS database is needed for your operation?

  - Who owns the material that is reported?

  - How will you transfer ownership of the data should you chose to discontinue working with your SMS solutions provider?

  - What you will do with the material (e.g., keep it in-house or share it with members of your safety roundtable)?

  - How will you train your team and implement change management techniques to gain buy-in?

- Identifying reputable SMS consultants and asking them:

  - How many clients do you serve that meet the same customer requirements and mission profile as our organization?

  - How many SMS plans have you implemented for Part 91, 121, 135 operators?

- How have you created total customer satisfaction, and may I speak with a few of those customers?
- How have you handled a dissatisfied client, and may I speak with him or her?
- How do you demonstrate commitment to your client's success?
- Can you share examples of how you've used diplomacy in the face of a challenge?
- Where do you find best-practice information, how do often do you circulate it and in what format is it presented?
- What are ways you add value and go the extra mile for your clients?
- How do you propose we create procedures around onboard WiFi and iPads?
- Is your SMS more electronic and hands-off? Semi-manual and hands-on? Or a combination?
- Will you share reports and explain how you've assisted other operators with turning the reports into useful information?
- How do you retain data?
- Can you show documentation for your disaster recovery plan?
- Which quality management system do you use?
- How are you internally and externally audited?
- How do you propose to work with our internal and external auditors?

- **Determining how to audit your SMS.** Your internal and external audits can be as complex and robust as you want them to be. The key is to document all processes, create training programs around those processes and start practicing them daily. If you already use an IS-BAO[2] auditing system, your SMS will need to meet the IS-BAO standard. But, culturally, your team may choose to write up everything safety-related. For example, if a toaster keeps catching fire in the hangar break room, is it your culture to write a "hit" form?
- **Asking for referrals.** When requesting referrals from industry colleagues, ensure that the SMS users share your same mission profile, customer base and regulatory compliance. Really try to match up mission profiles. For example, if you're flying executives and your hangar neighbor runs an employee shuttle, keep looking. Likewise, if you're Part 135, look for "like" 135 operators. When you pay a visit to their hangar, ask to see their SMS in action. Ask them how they retain their data and if they *like* their vendor. Additionally, try to assess whether the team is just checking a box to complete a requirement.
- **Using the Kepner-Tregoe decision-making matrix** to select the "best possible" choice, not the perfect choice.
  - Situation appraisal. Clarify the situation, outline concerns and choose a direction

[2] The International Standard for Business Aircraft Operations (IS-BAO), developed by the International Business Aviation Council and its member associations, is a code of best practices designed to help flight departments worldwide achieve high levels of safety and professionalism.

- *Problem analysis*. Define the problem and determine the root cause.
- *Decision analysis*. Identify alternatives and analyze risks for each.
- *Potential problem analysis.* Minimize risk by weighing alternatives against potential problems and negative consequences and actions.

How to Implement Change Management Techniques To Gain Buy-in

Change management is well documented in business and requires a systematic approach for any change that your flight organization is facing. However, adjusting to change is not something that humans are particularly fond of — or are particularly "good" at. In fact, many aviation professionals go to great measures to avoid change or limit their exposure to it. That's why it is interesting that a component of an effective SMS includes a change management process.

While many change management tools and methodologies used in business can be customized for your flight operation, below are some important concepts to consider:

- **Designate a safety leader.** Your SMS should be scalable so that it can easily integrate into your existing organization without drastic personnel changes. However, larger flight departments typically tap someone to oversee the safety policies or head up a safety department.
- **Get in the know.** Your management team and safety lead will want to consider any recent or pending changes in leadership, aircraft or maintenance equipment, and/or hangar location (just to name a few). All of these elements will likely warrant a change management process.
- **Integrate safety and quality systems.** An SMS is focused on identifying and mitigating risk, while a quality system is focused on process improvement. And, while they may use the same or similar tools, the objective is very different. Ideally, safety and quality systems will work together to produce the safest organization possible.
- **Walk the talk.** Management's lack of interest in following unpopular safety rules allows aviation professionals to ignore them as well. Is your organization ready to walk the talk at all levels — from management to the front line? If your overall mission is to run 100% safe missions, yet your flight crew or scheduling team is expected to schedule flights or fly in unacceptable weather due to the last-minute whims of the principal or management, then there's likely a need to change mindsets and gain buy-in around safety. A key to successful SMS plans is having leadership buy-in throughout the entire process, which then enables team to apply the right principles based on safety — not convenience.

How to Create and Deploy SMS Education for the Generations

Any new SMS plan (or changes to an existing plan) requires proper communications to your target audience. The challenge is accounting for the differing styles among the four generations in the workplace. While all groups may be committed to the same result, individuals may view things through a different value lens and have a different communication style. The key to gaining buy-in during the change management process is to customize SMS education based on these four unique employee groups:

- **Traditionalists** (Born prior to 1946)
- **Baby Boomers** (Born 1946–1964)
- **Generation Xers** (Born 1965–1981)
- **Millennials** (Born 1982–2000)

Traditionalists Value:

- Privacy: Share very little of their inner thoughts.
- Hard work: Believe in paying their dues and are irritated when others are wasting their time. They often feel that their career identifies who they are.
- Trust: Give you his or her bond.
- Formality: Value paper documentation, formal dress and organizational structures.
- Authority: Have a great deal of respect for authority.

Baby Boomers Value:

- Change: Thrive on possibilities and constant change.
- Hard work: View hard work as a way to get to the next level of success.
- Teamwork: Embrace a team-based approach to business.
- Anti-regulations: Challenge the system and do not conform to rules.
- Inclusion: Accept people who perform to their standards.

Generation Xers Value:

- Independence: Have clear goals and prefer managing their own time and solving their own problems rather being assisted by a supervisor.
- Information: Want access to information and love plenty of it.
- Feedback: Require a lot of feedback and will use it to adapt to new situations.
- Quality of work life: Work hard but prefer quicker, more efficient ways of working so that they have more free time.
- Communication: Like sound bites and prefer email to long meetings and letters.

Millennials Value:

- Positive reinforcement: Value real-time, systematic feedback.
- Autonomy: Want input into how they are doing and need to understand how they contribute.

- Technology: Value technology tools for multi-tasking.
- Action: Like action and accepts challenges.

Your senior staffers will likely appreciate hard copy handouts, books and manuals as well as “lessons learned” stories told in a team environment. Meanwhile, the Xers and Millennials will be more resistant to coming into a classroom, sitting at the desk and filling out a 5-page risk assessment. They will very much dislike returning from a trip only to write, proof, print and distribute a Hazard Identification Tracking Form. But, give them an iPad application and they will complete the assignment quickly.

The key is to develop a training system that each member can comfortably work within, and that will assist in integrating new hires.

How To Integrate HR Stakeholders Into the SMS Process

As mentioned, there are many key stakeholders involved in an aviation department’s success, including the CEO, Reporting Executive and Human Resources. Educating each group on the value of business aviation is essential. However, because HR is generally very removed from the inner workings of the flight department, it’s even more important to strategically engage your HR professional and make them a partner. The more the HR function understands what your team does, the more they can support the recruiting, performance reviews, promotion and work/life balance issues facing your team.

HR generalists are often mystified as to how to handle the “unique” group who works at the hangar. And, because it’s difficult to put aviation into the typical HR process, many aviation teams (or individuals) are often ignored or passed from person to person within HR. That’s why it’s important to explain the ways in which aviation professionals work outside of corporate norms, including their need to:

- Handle pressure and make complex decisions daily that affect the health and safety of the company’s top officials;
- Earn a salary without working in an office from 9 to 5;
- Maintain unique (and rather expensive) ongoing training requirements to remain current;
- Pass medical exams to keep their jobs;
- Spend “idle time” in nice hotels and exotic places; and
- Have a unique corporate performance appraisal process (not the standard form).

Below are a few ways to help expose your HR partner to aviation:

- **Educate them on minimums.** Help them put into perspective what it’s like to accumulate 4,000 flight hours. Explain the out of pocket expenses for education and ratings as well as the “cost” of building time at a regional carrier, freight carrier, etc.
- **Expose them to simulator training.** You can explain what recurrent pilot training is like, but a visit to FlightSafety International or CAE SimuFlite will really put things into perspective.
- **Invite them on a complex trip**. Give them a role as a member of the flight team for 2–3 days to help them experience how much work is required to keep the mission running smoothly — from maintenance, dispatch, handlers, and even the line service professionals who clean, cater and fuel the aircraft. Select a trip where you can count on changes. They will see that your aviation team is

required to assess risks and make critical decisions daily while protecting the corporation's most valuable assets — your leadership team.

How to Execute an Effective Onboarding Program

Onboarding a new employee into your aviation organization's systems, procedures and culture should take time and follow a well-orchestrated program. One of the best examples today is the integration of AirTran Airways' employees into the Southwest Airlines culture. Southwest is taking up to 18 months to integrate the *people* (not the *systems*) of AirTran into the Southwest culture.

Just because a pilot candidate flew for a "like" business aviation organization doesn't mean he or she will have the same techniques, processes, procedures and communications that your department requires. That's why your flight department should implement a defined and structured onboarding protocol to integrate new hires into your safety culture.

Formalized training is a big part of integration, but it is just the basics. By systematically integrating a new employee into the flow of a department — and your culture — you'll establish expectations around behaviors related to safety, security and a "just culture." Then, once the new hire has been exposed, be sure to test his or her knowledge of systems, procedures, values, etc. To do this, consider formalizing a program with cross-functional exposure, assigning a system owner and providing a mentor whose personal performance is measured through the effective onboarding of a new hire.

How To Address Safety in Everyday Life (Not Just Annually)

Is your organization "safe" just because you've never had an accident or incident? Hopefully you have the luxury of touting a zero-accident or -incident ratio to your leadership team. Although your team does not defy death every time they fly or maintain the aircraft, their work does require high attention to detail and countless hours of skills, formal training as well as on-the-job-training. And despite this precision, there is ample room for missteps, which is only precluded by a proactive culture of safety. As individual SMS plans are adopted at each hangar, the industry will become even more proactive at managing those missteps — and be even more transparent in the areas that need improvement.

As discussed, the HR, Reporting Executive and CEO must understand the value of this information and commit to living out the "just" culture. The "messenger" must be confident that he or she won't get shot if he or she exposes the department's vulnerabilities. Part of the SMS is to make life easier to document safety risks — not career limiting.

SMS is best integrated into everyday life when each professional's performance goals and reviews incorporate and define the safety culture. This way the team is expected to highlight vulnerabilities — and they're rewarded when doing so — in lieu of showing a perfect scorecard all of the time.

Summary

The easiest way to improve operational efficiencies and safety levels within your organization is to develop processes and procedures which best support the nature of your individual operations.

The key to bridging the gap between your people and processes is by addressing a variety of people-related factors — from partnering and education to communication and employee onboarding — so that your organization will be poised to systematically support (and course-correct) your operations in the safest way possible.

About the Authors

Sheryl Barden

President and CEO, Aviation Personnel International

Having been a lifelong voice of the people behind the planes, Sheryl has emerged as a leading authority on HR issues and is a frequent speaker at industry events.

She earned an MBA from the Masagung School of Business at the University of San Francisco and a B.S. in Management with an emphasis in Personnel Management from Pennsylvania State University. She is the President for the International Women's Forum of Northern California and on the Board of Nominations for the National Aviation Hall of Fame. She is also a Flight Safety Foundation Business Aviation Meritorious Service Award Nominations Committee Member, and serves as an Associate Member Advisory Council Member and Corporate Aviation Management Committee Member for the National Business Aviation Association. She's an active member of Society for Human Resources Management and Women in Corporate Aviation.

Lucille Fisher

President, Quality Resources, LLC

With extensive knowledge and understanding of regulatory matters, Lucille Fisher has created compliance documentation, working with 14 CFR Part 91, 135, 125, and 121 operations, and has written programs and presented to the Federal Aviation Administration.

Lucille has developed and implemented effective information flow by writing manuals and documenting the processes necessary to achieve business objectives with a strong focus on the customer. She was the scheduler of a Part 91 flight department for 7 years and also worked for a large fractional provider as Director, Operations Control Center and Director, Standards and Training.

She participated on the Aviation Rulemaking Committee rewriting the Part 135/125 regulations as well as authored a paper for the 2003 Flight Safety Foundation Corporate Aviation Safety Seminar titled "Regulations that Affect Part 91 Passenger Operations."

Lucille earned her MBA from John Carroll University in Cleveland, OH, and Bachelor of Science degree in Management from Gannon University in Erie, PA. She currently serves as the chair of NBAA's Domestic Operations Committee and a member of the NBAA Schedulers and Dispatchers committee, of which she is a former committee chair.