

# Are You Drifting Toward Failure?

By Russ Lawton

**A**m I drifting toward failure? Wow, there's a thought-provoking question. None of us wants to answer affirmatively to that one. Or is it really that far-fetched to think that an accident could lie just beneath the surface, waiting for the right opportunity to occur? "No, that's not possible. We're safe. We've never had an accident," you might be thinking.

Regardless of whether you operate, service, or maintain aircraft, there are risks that must be managed. There is constant tension in the struggle

challenge is how to remain within the safety space and avoid catastrophe.

Even safe systems can drift into failure. How does this happen? 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." When this type of thinking develops, two things can happen: Complacency sets in or, even worse, we decide to narrow the safety margins because we've gotten away with it before.

When people get complacent, those carefully

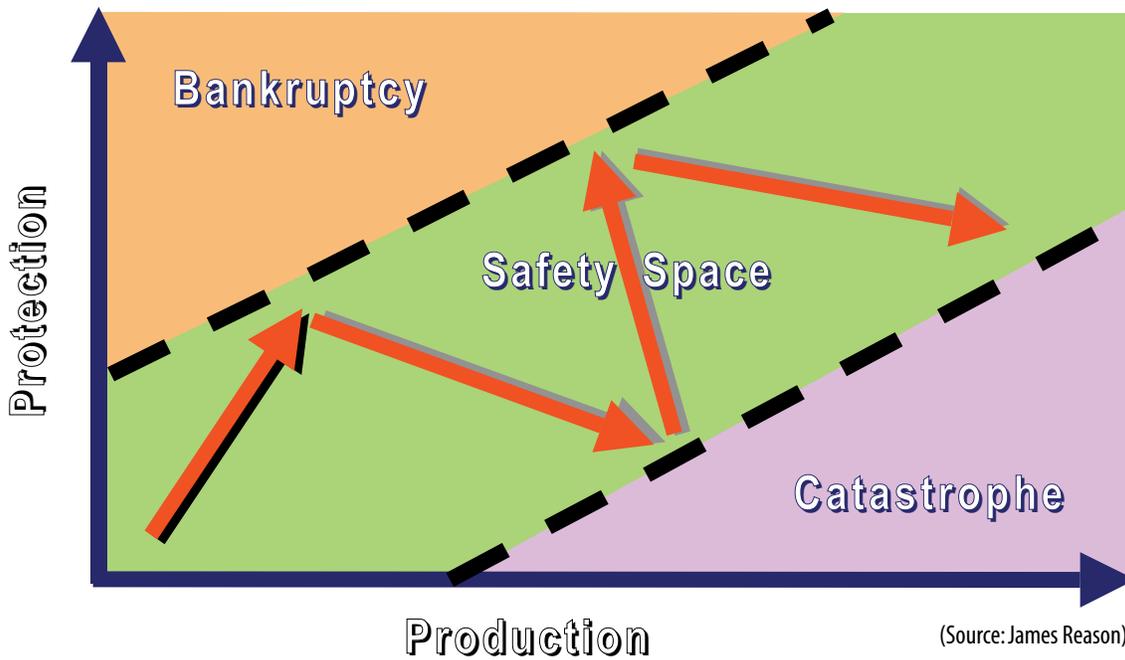
thought-out procedures you worked so hard to develop usually go out the window. "I don't need to confirm that fuel order; I got it the first time" or "I don't need to consult the checklist; I've got it memorized."

The pressure of finite resources and competition can also fuel the drift away from the safety margins (e.g., the need for faster turn-around times, better efficiency, etc.) In this situation, some companies

do not view rule breaking as a shortcoming, but rather an indication that people are motivated to get the job done.

What are some things you can do that will help you stay inside the safety space? The following can certainly help:

- **Discourage cutting corners.** If the procedures you developed were intended to be followed at all times (not selectively), it's important to emphasize and reinforce their importance, especially when under pressure.



between staying in business and staying in business safely. You can be so focused on making the bottom line look good that safety suffers. On the other hand, you can be so safe that business never gets done. (If you want to be risk-free, operate in a "1 G, zero airspeed" environment.)

Somewhere between bankruptcy and catastrophe lies the safety space, that balance you must constantly manage. Successful companies know how to navigate the "drift" between the two extremes: staying in business (production) and staying in business safely (protection). (See illustration above.) The

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## Safety Watch

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- **Don't give mixed messages.** The last thing you want is to come across with, "I don't care, just get it done...but remember safety first." Instead, the question should be, "Can we conduct this operation and maintain our high level of safety?"
- **Empower employees.** Don't just say, "Everyone in this company is accountable for safety." Provide employees with the authority to stop an operation at any point, they believe safety is compromised or against established company rules/procedures
- **Ask questions.** Find out what the people who know the job best think. "Are these procedures workable or are we pushing the envelope?"
- **Listen to everyone.** A good safety program encourages the uninhibited reporting of hazards and/or near misses that could have resulted in damage, injury or loss of business. People will report when they know the information will be seriously reviewed and followed up.

- **Develop a systematic approach to managing risk.** A good safety management system should require the routine, periodic review all risk control measures to ensure their effectiveness and look for any new or emerging hazards.

## Give Safety an Active Voice

Safety should never be compartmentalized within an organization. It must have an active voice and be a dynamic part of the business plan. Otherwise, you run the risk of drifting toward failure, and you'll never even know until it's too late.

Navigating the safety space can be tricky. Total protection to guarantee safety can result in bankruptcy; whereas, focusing on sales production only can lead to disaster. A systematic approach to managing risk helps ensure that you operate with an adequate margin of safety.

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