

The Biggest Myth in Aviation?

By Russell Lawton

“Safety is always top priority.” You often hear this slogan bandied about and see it on those slick workplace posters, but could this expression really be the biggest myth in aviation? Let’s think about it for a moment. The very definition of the word “priority” requires that we evaluate competing alternatives. So, calling safety a priority means it will change based on the needs or urgencies of the moment, such as trying to please a demanding customer or the boss to meet a schedule.

Admitting we might not always put safety first doesn’t mean we deliberately intend or want to be unsafe. But if we don’t have a logical, orderly process written down for everyone to follow, coupled with a firm management commitment, safety can easily take a backseat to the bottom-line or the latest crisis du jour.

“Of course safety is first in our company; we’ve never had an accident,” you might be thinking. This is the traditional response to the “Are we safe?” question. While it’s definitely a point of pride, the lack of accidents isn’t the only way to measure your company’s safety performance.

The aviation industry has learned through the years that it’s cold comfort to go about fixing problems after a tragedy has occurred. We have instead started to embrace a systematic approach to safety, or systems safety, as a result of lessons learned. The late Jerome F. Lederer (who championed system safety in aviation and space flight) described system safety as, “Organizing to put your hindsight where your foresight should be in the identification and management of risks.”

Risk identification and management are the core of the system safety process. For this process to succeed, the company must have a strategy, top management’s commitment to the process, and full company participation. Safety must be considered a value, not a priority, in the organization.

With Lederer’s sage words and a process in mind, here are ten points to evaluate whether your company truly puts safety first.

1. Our company has a documented, comprehensive, company-wide safety plan for identifying and managing risk that is distributed to all employees and is regularly updated.
2. Our CEO or other accountable executive takes responsibility for implementing the safety plan and ensuring its success.
3. Safety starts at the top in our company and is routinely emphasized as a core value.
4. Our company safety policy clearly states that any employee can report a safety issue without fear of retribution.
5. Our company safety policy is articulated in all company documents, such as operations and maintenance manuals, employee handbook, standard operating procedures, etc.
6. Our employees are rewarded for “doing the right thing” where safety is concerned.
7. Our company has a safety manager who reports directly to the CEO or accountable executive.
8. Our safety manager is considered a resource and facilitator, not someone to blame when things go wrong.
9. Our company has a safety committee, comprised of representatives from each department, that meets regularly to get ahead of safety issues and when special needs arise.
10. We routinely communicate safety issues and provide feedback on safety concerns to our employees.

So how did you fair? Were you able to confidently and positively confirm that all ten areas are completely covered and documented in your company? If not, conduct an honest assessment of your operation to determine where the gaps are. Develop an action plan and start the process to ensure you have a systematic approach to managing risk. It won’t happen overnight, but with company commitment, it will be an evolutionary process. At some point you’ll be able to truthfully say, “Safety is always first in our company.”