

CEOs on Safety Culture: Views from the Top

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1. Introduction

With several safety culture programmes in the domain of Air Traffic Management (ATM) now running for a decade or longer, and more than thirty countries in Europe and North America engaged in safety culture efforts, it is useful to step back and take stock of the overall performance and utility of safety culture. Since it has proven almost impossible to link safety culture efforts to safety outcomes in high reliability industries such as ATM (due to low accident and incident rates, and too many confounding factors), it was decided to ask those at the helm of a number of air traffic organisations whether they found safety culture useful, and whether they felt the ‘journey’ of starting and maintaining a safety culture initiative has paid off.

2. Method

In 2014 and 2015 eight air traffic service organisations (Austria, Canada, Hungary, Malta, Norway, Slovenia, Switzerland, and the UK) agreed to be interviewed at the highest level (typically Chief Executive Officer) on their perspectives on safety culture. In particular they were asked whether their investment in safety culture (all had run one or more surveys) had paid off. The results are a set of insights from different leaders running different sizes of organisations with different national cultures. Yet there is surprising agreement on the importance of safety culture, particularly when the industry is undergoing significant change and is coming under increasing cost pressures. The questions asked were as follows:

A: Safety Culture

1. What does safety culture mean to you?
2. How important is Just Culture to you?
3. What is the real value of a safety culture survey to you?
4. Why did you get into safety culture?
5. What were the main challenges in getting started?
6. What changes has it brought to the organisation?

B: Managing Safety at Board Level

7. What is your involvement, at Board level or otherwise, with your ANSP’s safety issues?
8. What are your personal goals for safety in your ANSP?
9. Is safety in a good place now?
10. Are any external factors and developments putting pressure on safety?
11. Is the regulator happy with your ANSP’s safety performance? Are you happy with the regulator?
12. How do you send clear safety messages to your direct reports on the Board? And the controllers and the rest of the organisation?

C: Safety Culture and the Future

13. Do you think integration into FABs might affect safety culture?
14. How do you see safety culture evolving in the future in your ANSP?
15. What are the key factors for a successful safety culture journey?

3. Results

This paper highlights the main arguments for safety culture that work at senior executive level, as well as insights into what they feel really matters in safety culture and Just Culture, and how both of these should be led from the top. It also documents all comments related to Human Factors as mentioned by several of the CEOs.

The conclusions of the survey are that Safety Culture is clearly seen as worthwhile by these eight ANSPs, all of whom are continuing their safety culture 'journey'. The major perceived benefits are a more comprehensive risk picture, important for those at the helm who are managing the risks in their organisations, and the knowledge that safety is 'alive' and keeping everyone safe. Just Culture, and more generally trust within the organisation, are both seen as critical ingredients for a solid safety culture.

One of the key success factors for safety culture is leadership from the top, with the CEO enlisting the help of his or her fellow Directors, but also engaging in periodic face-to-face dialogue with the workforce, which not only demonstrates a belief in safety, but also enhances trust, and enables those at the top to hear unmodified messages from those working at the sharp end.

Whilst new developments in air traffic such as Functional Airspace Blocks (FABs) are seen as an opportunity for safety, external cost pressure coming from the European Commission is seen as a challenge, though there is strong determination not to let such pressures erode safety.

Safety Culture is not seen by these leaders as a 'tick-in-the-box' exercise; it is a continuing conversation on safety within an organisation. As such, it can be particularly useful for CEOs trying to navigate their ANSPs successfully through a changing and increasingly pressured climate. As one CEO put it, safety culture is like a compass, helping you to see where you are, and how to reach your destination safely.