

DO YOU TRUST YOUR SAFETY MANAGER?

How is your relationship with your safety manager? The interface between operational and safety staff can sometimes involve friction, as the goal of the safety department reflects only one of the goals of the operational staff. In this article **Maria Kovacova** reflects on her experience as a former safety manager, and invites safety managers and operational staff to better understand one another's worlds.

KEY POINTS

1. **Safety managers and departments and ATCOs should build trust by spending time together in each other's environments, and in workshops.**
2. **Concerns about safety processes and operational safety issues should be discussed regularly and informally.**
3. **Safety departments should provide relevant, timely feedback to ATCOs who report occurrences.**

Imagine a survey focused on the trust of operational employees in their safety managers. I think the results would surprise many safety managers. We safety managers believe that we run safety management systems within our companies with the best intention – to help operational people and management continuously improve safety. But is the view of operational people the same? Do they feel that the safety manager is there to support their work and system safety as a whole?

I was safety manager for several years and every day was a small battle to gain the trust of operational people. I learnt that many aspects contributed to the whole picture. One of the main contributors is the culture that you live in, not just the organisational culture but also national culture. It makes a big difference whether you are coming from post-communist times or you are a safety manager in a western European country. It also makes a difference if you have operational experience or not, if you are young or older, even male or female. None of these contributors is necessarily good or bad. They just mean that a safety manager might have

to take different approaches to the establishment of a safety management system. You have to communicate safety topics in a different way to different interested groups and parties.

Often, the safety manager is invisible to air traffic controllers and his or her activities and viewpoint may not be recognised properly. In my experience, it is very important to talk with operational people. Regular visits to all operational rooms and units and regular informal discussions are the basis for trust – on both sides. Operational staff will know that it is easy for rumours to spread around the Ops room. Line managers sometimes modify the position of the safety manager and present it in a way that "safety didn't approve it" or "safety found that it was in breach of the rules and now we have to take this action". It is true that the 'safety argument' can be abused by everyone. But the safety manager has the power to change this attitude and put information into the right context. The only way to do it is to go to wherever the work is done, and talk to ATCOs, supervisors, flow managers, technicians, etc.

I have had the opportunity to discuss this topic with safety managers from different ANSPs, airlines, airports, and military. What I have discovered is that communication and regular discussions with operational people are rare. Safety topics are often not communicated properly and can be misinterpreted.

In this area I was lucky for two main reasons. First, I studied at the same university as some of my ATCO colleagues, so I was not afraid to go to Ops room, grab a coffee and talk with them. I spent hours with ATCOs and supervisors, who explained what they were doing, why they have to work in certain specific ways, why the system is designed in the way it is and where is the potential for improvement. Second, I had the full support of the CEO and we started to use different ways of communication with operational employees so we could explain different safety topics properly.

Reporting and investigation is a critical issue. What do controllers imagine when they think of this? From my experience it was often the following: after a separation minimum infringement or runway incursion, I have to issue a safety occurrence report. My actions and potential mistakes will be the subject of an investigation and after a long time I will receive the report, which will not be in line with how I experienced the occurrence.

For this reason, I decided to talk to ATCOs about how investigations are managed – about why analysis, findings

and recommendations are formulated in the way that they are, and when they can expect feedback. After this experience and discussion with my team we decided to introduce an electronic reporting system. This was not just to help the process of reporting, but to give the opportunity to see what is going on with the report. We also introduced a mandatory procedure for investigators to let ATCOs read the final report and discuss it if necessary before the investigation report is officially issued. This procedure is highly appreciated and welcomed among controllers.

So do you trust your safety manager? Perhaps it depends also on their style. Tyler Britton (2017) described five types of safety managers. There is no 'good' or 'bad' type; each type is appropriate for different types of cultures, depending on the maturity of safety management and just culture within the organisation, as well as within the State. Here are the five types, according to Britton:

1 The Expert Safety Manager

Expert safety managers gain authority and respect via their expertise, including their understanding of requirements, best practices, and safety philosophy. This may be the easiest and most natural way to gain respect and support for the SMS program. However, it requires very strong knowledge of all aspects of safety, and ongoing learning.

2

The Amiable Manager

Amiable safety managers gain respect, trust, and support for the SMS program by having positive personal qualities. This type of safety manager is probably the best type of manager to help build a positive safety culture and sustainable risk management program. Such a manager can be highly influential, with strong following for a safety program. However, not everyone has these personal qualities.

3

The Top Down Manager

The top down safety manager relies heavily on his or her formal position and authority in the company. This can be very powerful to help keep the safety program in line. This kind of safety manager can use incentives and sanctions from outside of the safety realm to promote the safety program. This manager has a lot of authority and resources to be well organised and efficient. However, the safety program may feel like a 'management thing'.

4

The Disciplinary Manager

This type of management style relies on disciplinary action to control safety behaviour and has very clear rules regarding non-conformance. This is not sustainable for long-term management. However, in the short term, it may occasionally be necessary. This style can help in situations of open rebellion or resistance against change management. However, it can backfire, be very unpopular and hurt safety culture.

5

The Connected Safety Manager

The connected safety manager gains vital support for safety programs and camaraderie among upper management, which provides more resources for safety management and greater responsibility and status for the safety manager. However, the safety manager may not have the support of staff, and this style can have a tendency towards corporate cronyism.

Every organisation may need a different type of safety manager, also different styles at different times. The safety manager has an interesting, but difficult and sensitive role, including:

1. ensuring efficient SMS implementation
2. supporting operational employees in safety matters, concerns and safety improvement changes
3. acting as an advisor to line and top management to help in decision making and strategy
4. acting as a focal point to third parties, especially objecting to proposed solutions that adversely affect safety. (This is not an easy job, especially when you have to face different political interests.)

This has to be done amidst increasing 'faster, better, cheaper' pressure, and of course a tenfold improvement in safety...

So, next time you meet your safety manager, please have a coffee together and try to understand one another's worlds, so that you can support each other in the achievement of the common goal of all of us: safe aviation transport. 

Maria Kovacova is an aviation safety enthusiast actively contributing to safety areas such as just culture, safety management gap analysis and proposals for safety improvements, introducing practical and efficient safety methods and tools to air traffic control. After her graduation in aviation engineering, she continued her mission to improve safety processes in air navigation services, supporting just culture within the Slovak Republic and providing training for different aviation stakeholders.