CHANGING THE LANGUAGE OF SAFETY

Might the language of safety be holding us back? **Tom Lintner** explains why we need to shift from 'Safety is our Number 1 Priority', and instead talk more about risk.

Several years ago, at a major aviation safety conference in Europe, I made the statement, "Aviation is the safest way to travel". A hand from the audience immediately shot into the air. I was intrigued, especially since the hand belonged to a senior safety official from a European air navigation service provider. I asked if he had a comment. His answer was at first puzzling, but also insightful.

Paraphrasing his comments, he said, *"I disagree that air travel is safe. Just look at what we're doing. We take an aluminum tube, 5mm thick, stuff people inside, fill it with fuel, pressurise the contents, then light fires on the wings and take it five miles into the air where you need life support to live. And we call that safe? I think the only reason we're able to do this is we do a great job managing the risk of something that is dangerous."*

My initial reaction – fortunately left unspoken – was this was the nuttiest thing I ever heard, until I actually thought about it. While aviation is statistically the safest mode of travel for passengers, it is not risk-free, nor without costs when we lose control of risk. If you look at employee injuries, aviation ranks somewhere near mining as an industry. If you look at ground damage to aircraft (not associated with flight operations), there's reportedly something in the area of USD $6B in yearly costs industry wide.

And hyperbole aside, there may be something more to this, especially

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when we explore the human reaction to the word "safe" and how that might have limited how well we manage a risky operation.

If we examine the word, we see "safe" and "safety" is used in a way that limits discussion about an issue. "Safety is our Number 1 Priority!" "Safety was never jeopardized." Such declarations make it difficult to talk about safety in a sensible way, and perhaps make it difficult for people to say, "I think we're doing something unsafe here", without fear of how their feedback will be accepted.

So maybe we need to be honest among ourselves about our priorities and how we talk about safety. Perhaps we need to modify our language to better support our safety efforts by changing emphasis to something we can all see and understand better – hazards and risk.

I will occasionally ask an audience, "Is safety the most important thing within your organisation?" Nowadays, I can expect only about 50% of the group to say yes, while 10-years ago the percentage was much higher. I then ask, "If your organisation is not efficient and does not survive, do you think anyone will care how safe you used to be?" This is generally met with uncomfortable silence as we ponder a different perspective. That view

may be one whereby an organisation needs to be as efficient (profitable) as possible while controlling risks and maintaining the highest level of safety to support the operation. Reaching and maintaining that level of safety is achieved by the proactive identification and management of hazards and threats before they become incidents and accidents.

There needs to be an acceptance that things can go wrong, and denial of that can be the greatest risk of all. But to reduce the likelihood of causing harm, an organisation must be able to identify, analyse, and discuss risks, and manage those risks so that they are as low as reasonably practicable. To do that, an organisation must first accept that:

1. What they are doing is, by its very nature, fraught with some risk of harm. Nothing we do is totally without risk and therefore nothing is totally safe.
2. Past success is no guarantee of future success. The statement, "It never happened here" may in fact mean you have just been incredibly lucky.
3. Humans represent both positive and negative contributions to the risk equation. We contribute to ensuring that things usually go well, and intervene when we detect that things may go wrong. But by our very nature, we make mistakes and we contribute to things occasionally going wrong. But very few people come to work planning on causing harm.
4. Identifying a 'single point of failure', whether it is human, mechanical, or procedural, may be a noble goal, but in today's world of complex systems, it's rarely a comprehensive or realistic solution to mitigating risk.
5. To manage risk, an organisation must know what the hazards are and accept that hazards, and the associated risks, can change on a short- and long-term basis. To identify and understand those changes requires open information exchange and reporting within the organisation.

A change in language may make us more open and less defensive when discussing conditions and events, and how to manage them openly and proactively.

A related challenge is how to get a clearer idea about the overall level of risk. I recall a meeting with an airline CEO who said, with some humour, "My Chief Financial Officer shows me one PowerPoint slide and I know exactly how we're performing. My Head of Safety gives me 80 slides and I'm still not sure what it means." ⑤

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