WELLBEING, CULTURE AND THE NEED FOR A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENT

Organisations will need to develop cultures where people feel psychologically safe to speak up about matters relating to wellbeing, says **Captain Paul Reuter**.

'Wellbeing' is one of these buzzwords that regularly pops up, and sneaks into every other presentation or lecture. For me, as a non-native English speaker, 'wellbeing' evokes saunas and yoga retreats, probably because I equate it with 'wellness'. And I have the suspicion that this is true for a number of high-level aviation executives when they are confronted with 'wellbeing'.

This is a pity because in our dynamic, complex, and hazard-prone aviation environment, the wellbeing of our front-line staff needs to be one of our prime concerns. For all our technological advancement, the human element is still the most resourceful, resilient and surprisingly effective safety 'tool' at our disposal.

The new regulation (EU) 2018/1042 relating to pilot and peer support programmes is the latest acknowledgement that we need to find ways to deal with staff wellbeing (or lack of wellbeing) and allow people to be properly cared for and reintegrated safely into their workplace. The effectiveness of these support programmes hinges on the willingness of the organisations that need to implement them to go beyond simple regulatory compliance, and create an environment where these programmes will be seen as being credible and will work.

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The best definition of such an environment that I have found is by James Comey, former head of the FBI:

"(…) is about understanding the truth about humans and our need for meaning. It is about building workplaces where standards are high and fear is low. Those are the kind of cultures where people will feel comfortable speaking the truth to others as they seek excellence in themselves and the people around them."

If we want to take wellbeing for front-line staff seriously, we will need to look beyond the odd presentation, nutritional programme, or well-meant motivational slogan. Organisations will need to develop cultures where people feel psychologically safe to speak up about matters relating to wellbeing, while embracing and understanding their responsibilities. Organisations will need to foster a climate where staff *"feel safe enough to take interpersonal risk by speaking up and sharing concerns, questions or ideas"*, according to Amy Edmondson (2018), leading to opportunities for both for the organisation and individuals.

This sort of environment is likely to foster safety-conscious behaviour, motivation and a sense of purpose, benefiting safety and other goals. Indeed, Kotter and Heskett (2008) provide data to show that organisations that have a culture adapted to their context and needs tend to perform much better than organisations that don't. Outside of aviation, many organisations have benefited from creating environments that foster staff engagement and wellbeing.

In aviation, we have had for a number of years many of the building blocks to create such a culture and environment, including crew resource management, just culture, human factors research and now peer support, just to name a few.

Unfortunately, organisations have rarely seen beyond these 'silos of knowledge' and have often failed to use the tools at their disposal to build a culture that merges all of these elements so that 'being well' and 'performing well' are two sides of the same coin. Additionally, there can be ambiguity between an organisation's professed values and culture and the underlying business practices that the organisation encourages.

In such cultures, it is difficult for both line managers and front-line staff to understand clearly what is really expected of them. This can lead to

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impairment not only of the quality of performance but also to wellbeing issues, including stress and mental health problems.

For safety-critical staff, such as pilots or controllers, the only fallback may be a set of core professional values, which help to navigate a sea of ambiguous or contradictory expectations at an organisational level. It might also fall to professional associations to reinforce a credible professional ethos and create more psychological safety within a group of professionals.

By encouraging candid questions and sharing doubts and concerns within a team or a crew, individuals and groups may create an atmosphere of trust and respect that will help a team function effectively, even in a disruptive or divisive environment.

Ultimately however, it should fall to organisations to define clear and credible values and to communicate them both internally and externally. Commitment to these values needs to be visible, coherent and felt in all aspects of the organisation, whether operations, training, communications or hiring practices. Both executive management and line managers need to understand the importance of 'talking the talk and walking the walk' every day, especially so on the 'bad days'.

In an environment where the economic, environmental and safety challenges will grow, we as an industry will be challenged to foster such a culture with wellbeing being woven into everything that we do, not a regulatory add-on. This is our duty of care, not only to our front-line staff but also to the travelling public.

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