

# The Senior Manager's Role in SAFETY MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS



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This paper was prepared by the Safety Management International Collaboration Group (SM ICG). The purpose of the SM ICG is to promote a common understanding of Safety Management System (SMS)/State Safety Program (SSP) principles and requirements, facilitating their application across the international aviation community. In this document, the term “organization” refers to a product or service provider, operator, business, and company, as well as aviation industry organizations; and the term “authority” refers to the regulator authority, Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), National Aviation Authority (NAA), and any other relevant government agency or entity with oversight responsibility.

The current core membership of the SM ICG includes the Aviation Safety and Security Agency (AESA) of Spain, the National Civil Aviation Agency (ANAC) of Brazil, the Civil Aviation Authority of the Netherlands (CAA NL), the Civil Aviation Authority of New Zealand, the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore (CAAS), the Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) of Australia, the Direction Générale de l'Aviation Civile (DGAC) in France, the Ente Nazionale per l'Aviazione Civile (ENAC) in Italy, the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA), the Federal Office of Civil Aviation (FOCA) of Switzerland, the Finnish Transport Safety Agency (Trafi), the Irish Aviation Authority (IAA), Japan Civil Aviation Bureau (JCAB), the United States Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Aviation Safety Organization, Transport Canada Civil Aviation (TCCA) and the Civil Aviation Authority of United Kingdom (UK CAA). Additionally, the Civil Aviation Department of Hong Kong (CAD HK), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), and the United Arab Emirates General Civil Aviation Authority (UAE GCAA) are observers to this group.

Members of the SM ICG:

- Collaborate on common SMS/SSP topics of interest
- Share lessons learned
- Encourage the progression of a harmonized SMS/SSP
- Share products with the aviation community
- Collaborate with international organizations such as ICAO and civil aviation authorities that have implemented or are implementing SMS and SSP

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# Introduction

Dear corporate executive,

I hope you take the time to read this document, because it is not just a set of clichés about process. It explains your role in a system approach to the management of safety risk that will make your company more competitive, more resilient and fundamentally change the relationship between your company and your regulator.

Every step your organization takes in this direction will make it safer and more competitive. Occasionally, a safety management system will identify a problem that, if left uncorrected, could have killed the company, but that is not the real pay-off. That same SMS will constantly identify the thousands of little problems that disrupt your operation, destroy efficiency and impact the bottom line.

But this is not the only reason why corporate executives need to fully support SMS in their organizations. They need to lead from the front on this initiative because that is the only way SMS can become embedded into the corporate culture and avoid becoming perceived as the management philosophy flavour of the month. The entire organization needs to believe deeply in the process and acknowledge that it is the only way to reliably drive down the risk of an accident.

Some shy away from initiating the SMS process because it is not a pre-determined package, a turn-key mechanism you import and adopt. To be truly effective, it must be an organic product of your company's culture that takes advantage of the positive elements of that culture already in place, but then goes beyond that point to push higher and deeper into the firm's operational psyche. This is how SMS becomes effective and long-lasting.

Moving towards safety management makes business sense, but it requires your leadership. Please take a minute to read more about it.



William R. Voss  
President and CEO  
Flight Safety Foundation

# What is a safety management system?

There is a common misperception in aviation about where safety sits in the organization. Many have traditionally believed that safety happens and belongs on the flightdeck, on the ramp or in the hangar. Few could argue that the implications of poor safety decisions or behaviors are evident in line operations and production and maintenance, but what of the safety ownership? Where should safety 'belong'?

An approach to aviation is emerging which puts safety ownership squarely in the realm of senior management. This is where the risks are weighed against financial viability, this is where priorities are set and resources allocated. And importantly management is where the safety culture of the organization is established.

Within the range of objectives that organizations pursue, regardless of the nature of the services they deliver, safety must be a priority. It makes sense from a practical perspective, is a must from a moral and legal perspective, and there's a vitally important role for senior managers in its management.

Managing safety makes good business sense and many of the good practices for safety are also good practices for effective operations and business risk management. Safety Management Systems (SMS) provide the manager and their staff with a vehicle for the management of safety. Specifically, SMS provides a set of beliefs, systematic practices and integrated procedures for mitigating and monitoring safety risk.

## **Safety management systems defined**

A safety management system is a businesslike approach to safety. It is a systematic and proactive process for managing safety risks. As with all management systems, a safety management system provides for goal setting, planning, and measuring performance. A safety management system is woven into the fabric of an organization. It becomes part of the culture; the way people do their jobs<sup>1</sup>.

## **Structure of a safety management system**

The universally accepted framework includes four main components and twelve elements, representing the minimum requirements for SMS. These ‘capabilities’ apply regardless of the aviation context. The four main components are:

### **Safety policy and objectives**

### **Safety risk management**

### **Safety assurance**

### **Safety promotion**

It is also important to recognise the impact of the organization’s safety culture on the effectiveness of the SMS.

## **What a safety management system is—practically**

Managing safety is really about managing safety risk, which means trying to prevent bad things from happening, or if something does go wrong, or slips through the cracks, trying to minimise the consequences of the event.

Safety management is about accepting that things will go wrong and about reactively, proactively and predictively controlling risks to a level that is acceptable.

It can help you predict potential risks, take appropriate action and measure how well risk controls are working. It can give you the business information

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<sup>1</sup> Transport Canada TP 13739 E (04/2001)

you would want to manage risks in other areas such as finance or productivity.

### **What a safety management system isn't—practically**

SMS implementation will change the way you operate your business. That is, your main game will still be operating the business; but SMS provides an underpinning structure which enables you to manage risks in your operation and, when implemented effectively, improve the effectiveness of your operation.

Safety management systems are not Quality Management Systems (QMS), although they do share many of the same features and capabilities such as performance targets, reporting, governance and performance monitoring. The objective of a QMS is the control of processes to achieve predictable and desirable results that meet with the customer's and organization's requirements. Whereas the objective of an SMS is to monitor and control operational risks to improve safety performance.

If you have a functioning QMS, then your staff will already be familiar with reporting and feedback and, most importantly, they'll already be on their way to an effective reporting and safety culture—which is vital to the implementation and sustainability of your SMS.

Finally, SMS is not a manual, a database, or a reporting process; these are all tools. It is how safety is managed day to day and becomes part of your organization's culture. It penetrates into the organization's processes and activities and it shapes critical management thinking. It is a vital management tool where the staff are the eyes and ears, the safety group is the heart and management is the decision-making 'brain' of the system.

# Why you should be involved: a practical perspective

Primarily, your SMS gives you control over the safety risks of your organization. In aviation, management of safety risk is a *core* activity. Like financial management, senior managers need to control how safety risks are managed. Many countries have regulations which put senior management in charge of the safety of their organization and hold them directly accountable for poor safety performance. The best organizations have SMS in place without any requirement from their authority—because it makes sense and it works.

Profits are made by taking risks. Senior managers are responsible to the shareholders and other stakeholders to ensure the business is profitable. Senior managers are always risk managers, but some managers don't realise that risk management is what they do. Risks should only be taken if the assessed level of the risk is acceptable and defensible. SMS provides a framework which supports you with your management of risk. Without a framework, how can you assure yourself, and your stakeholders, that the risks you take are acceptable? How do you know—objectively—when to 'go' or 'not go'? And how would you defend your operational risk decisions without such a framework?



An effective safety management system provides many other potential benefits, including:

- The ability to control the potential risky operations faced by the organization
- A clear and documented approach to achieving safe operations that can be explained to others
- Active involvement of staff in safety
- Demonstrable control for the authority, your customers and other stakeholders that your risks are under control
- Building a positive safety culture
- Reduction or removal of operational inefficiencies
- Decreased insurance costs and improved reputation
- A common language to establish safety objectives and targets and implement and monitor safety risk controls
- Potential defence from legal action

Effectively, SMS represents a continued evolution in safety. The first 50 years of aviation safety was based on individual risk assessment. The second 50 years was dominated by safety compliance. SMS leverages the first two and uses better information gathering and analysis tools to better inform managers and empower you to manage risk.

***No matter how interested individual employees might be, or what assistance a manufacturer offers, or how insistent a certifying authority might be— none of these factors will have a significant effect on safety without support from top management.***

John O'Brian

# Why you must be involved: a legal perspective

The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) has recommended that member states require SMS for some aviation sectors for many years. Regardless of which sector you operate in, ICAO—and most likely your authority—requires you, or will require you before long, to implement an SMS throughout your organization.

In most countries, senior management are being held accountable by authorities for safety, as well as financial outcomes. This requires senior managers to clearly identify what they are accountable for. The responsibility can be delegated but not the accountability.

Traditionally, authorities have held staff or line managers accountable for operational non-compliances. This was, in many cases, unfair and unproductive because the individual held to account did not have the funds and/or the delegated authority to implement or enforce the necessary actions for compliance. There is a growing appreciation that the senior manager—and in particular the Accountable Manager—is often the only person who can make the difference. The accountability for the safety of your operation rests squarely with you.

It is also important to keep in mind that you are accountable for every aspect of your operation, even the safety assurance of third-party goods and services. You must assure yourself of the safety of these provisions. SMS can help in this regard by requiring that safety is a consideration in all third-party contracts.

# How you get involved: a leadership perspective

## **Lead from the front**

The safety management system philosophy requires that responsibility and accountability for safety be retained within the management of the organization. Managers are ultimately responsible for safety, as they are for other aspects of the enterprise.

Regardless of the size, complexity or sector of your organization, you have a significant role in developing and sustaining your SMS, and, in concert with this, a positive safety culture. Without the unconditional and ongoing commitment of senior management, any attempt at an effective safety program will be unsuccessful. You must not only be committed to your SMS, you must be seen to be committed.

## **Walking and talking at the same time**

Whether you know it or not, whether you intend it or not, you are a leader. You are a role model for all the people in your organization. They watch what you do and imitate your words and your actions. From the top to the bottom, from the centre to the outposts of the organization, your traits, your attitudes and your actions will be copied. If you believe safety is important to the security and prosperity of your organization, and your actions reflect your beliefs, your staff will invest their own time and efforts and, given time, will make your beliefs and actions their own.

You can promote your beliefs by publicly announcing your views through staff newsletters, safety articles and safety bulletins. You can also declare your commitment to your SMS by publicly rewarding those managers and staff who demonstrate exemplary safety behavior and/or proactively identify hazards or suggest safety improvements.

## **Creating a positive safety culture**

Ultimately, the success of an SMS hinges on the development of a positive safety culture. This will encourage open safety reporting through non-punitive disciplinary policies and lead to continuous safety improvement. This will be achieved by establishing and promoting your safety policy supported by your SMS processes. Creating a positive safety culture will also help identify what is really going on in your organization and help you understand your risks.

A positive safety culture is the embodiment of effective programs, decision making and accountability at all levels. Safety culture, first and foremost, is about how managerial decisions are made, about the incentives and disincentives within an organization for promoting safety. There is often a great gap between what senior management believe to be the safety culture of an organization and what is actually going on.

## **Inspiring staff with a safety vision**

This is key to creating a positive safety culture. Establishing and promoting a safety vision which staff can aspire to is one of the most powerful actions senior managers can take. Seeking input from staff adds even more weight. A message from the top team that 'safety matters' affects decisions and morale of staff. Safety objectives and safety targets support the safety vision. Each of these endeavours sends a clear message to staff that we're on board with SMS and on the road to achieving our safety vision.

## Leading safety meetings

One of the best ways to be involved is by leading the highest level safety meetings. As an Accountable Manager, you are responsible for the safety of your organization, so it makes sense that you are front and center during regular executive safety meetings. By making yourself available for these meetings you can:

- Review your organization's safety objectives and monitor achievement of your safety targets
- Stay up to date on the safety health of your organization
- Make timely safety decisions
- Allocate the appropriate resources
- Hold managers accountable for safety responsibilities, performance and implementation timelines
- Be seen by managers and staff as a person who is interested in, and in charge of, safety.

## What you can delegate and what you can't

Although named as the Accountable Manager, senior managers often are not involved in, or have little knowledge of, the systems or the problems faced in the workplace. Senior managers often delegate the duties and responsibilities so as to maintain control of the competing 'top priorities'. Senior managers can delegate responsibility for day-to-day operation of the SMS—but—senior managers cannot delegate accountability for the system and important risk decisions.

You cannot delegate:

- Assuring safety policies are appropriate and communicated—by you
- Assuring necessary allocation of resources—financing, personnel, training, acquisition, etc.
- Setting of the risk limits and resourcing of necessary controls

## Providing the appropriate resources

SMS can, when mature, significantly improve the efficiency of your operation, potentially saving you time and money—although this is an indirect benefit rather than a stated aim. The safety management system does need resources to function effectively. You can be involved - and most effective—in your SMS by providing appropriate resources, such as: appropriate number of competent safety people, training, funding risk mitigations, facilities, communications and publicity.

***'... there is an awful sameness about these incidents ... they are nearly always characterised by lack of forethought and lack of analysis and nearly always the problem comes down to poor management ...'***

Dr Tony Barrell,  
former CEO of the UK Health and Safety Executive's Offshore Safety Division,  
(the offshore petroleum safety regulator), who led the development of the  
regulatory response to the 1988 Piper Alpha disaster, in which 167 men died

# Summary

A safety management system (SMS) is a businesslike approach to safety. It is a systematic and proactive process for managing safety risks. It needs to be woven into the fabric of your organisation. It becomes part of your organizational culture, the way people do their jobs.

You should get involved because it gives you control over the safety risks of business. In aviation, the management of safety risk is a core activity. Your SMS will provide you with a better picture of your safety risks and a framework for the management of those risks.

You must get involved because, regardless of the aviation sector(s) you are in, authorities require, or will require that you implement an effective SMS. Your staff and line managers are not always clear on what safety decisions they can or can't make. They are not in a position to make significant change happen but they can highlight issues to you. It is you, the senior manager, who can make those decisions and make a difference. The SMS will help you stay safe and provide a powerful vehicle for positive change.

You get involved by: leading from the front with your SMS implementation, talking positively about safety and ensuring your actions reflect your words, creating a positive safety culture, inspiring staff with a safety vision and providing the appropriate resources.

