

# SMS for the MIDDLE Manager

The engine that drives SMS is line management.

BY MICHAEL BARR

A safety management system (SMS) is becoming the standard safety program throughout the world. It has become mandatory for International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) air carrier operations and is voluntarily being implemented by corporate and government aviation departments.

Its potential value to the success of an organization's mission has been proven.

Accountable executives have shown their support by verbal and visible measures. They produce strong safety policies and are instrumental in the development of a proactive and predictive program. Safety personnel are

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receiving formal safety training and education in the mechanics and implementation of SMS. The benefits of SMS are shown by increased productivity with less risk to the organization. Unit personnel are educated on how they can support the SMS program.

With all these people working so hard to implement a vibrant SMS, why hasn't it matured into a strong working program with positive benefits throughout the aviation industry? In many cases, organizations say they have an SMS program, but in reality they only change the cover page on their safety program document and call it SMS. The previous safety program management system contained many elements of an SMS, but it failed to hold all levels of management accountable for a safety system.

The safety department is responsible for establishing an SMS, but the success of such a program rests on the shoulders of management personnel. A personal review with more than 400 safety professionals reveals that one of the major stumbling blocks to the implementation of an effective and dynamic SMS program is middle management. The reasons are many, but two of the most important are a lack of

understanding of their role and the belief that safety programs are solely the responsibility of the safety department.

I believe we need to stress the importance and methods of involvement of middle management in programs such as goals and objectives; education and training; just culture; risk management programs; change management process; operational safety reviews; audits; safety action group (SAG); and accountabilities.

Remember that Safety is a corporate staff function that advises but has little if any authority to direct actions. The engine that drives SMS is line management; they are accountable for implementing SMS. Plus, they ensure that company personnel comply with SMS policies and procedures. Without the active support of middle management, SMS is doomed to fail.

Safety advisers' constant theme is that their biggest hurdle is mid-level management. They wish that middle managers would receive the SMS training, even if the education covers only the basics of the program. Since this is not always possible or probable, line management must be educated about the benefits of SMS by safety personnel.

Given the importance of middle management support and involvement in a successful SMS program, suggestions to safety advisers on how to educate middle managers are needed. Middle management cannot be expected to support such a radical new concept if they do not know its principles and potential benefits to the organization's mission.

A quick review shows us that safety is defined as "acceptable risks that enable an organization to succeed in its mission." It used to be said that safety always came first, but this idea has been modified to recognize that a company's mission, its ultimate business goal, must be the primary focus. The company would not exist if it failed in that mission.

Where does that leave safety? Safety is, or should be, inherent in every aspect of the operation. Without it, the mission surely would fail to reach the performance level needed for success. A good statement concerning safety is, "Safety is critical for ...," to be completed in any way that meets your needs.

Prior to SMS, the safety manager or Safety function was totally responsible for safety programs. They were trained in all aspects of the safety program. When an organization had a safety problem, the expectation was that Safety would correct the situation, but Safety had little authority to direct change or implement corrective actions. This was the situation until SMS became the required methodology of safety management.

An organization's safety culture is an integral part of an SMS. Although SMS is triggered from the top of an organization, it is measured at the bottom, where the productivity is measured, as well. For that cultural concept to reach the employees, it must first travel through middle management. The success or failure of a culture depends on the support from middle management.

A strong SMS will establish goals and objectives. These goals and objectives set a course that an organization wants to follow to achieve mission success. These goals usually are established by top management and implemented by middle managers. If middle management does not actively support and is not continually aware

of the status of these goals and objectives, the chance of success is reduced.

Middle managers need to be trained and educated the same as all other employees. They need to know exactly what SMS is and how they individually interface with the program. They must be aware that the success or failure of SMS rides largely on how they understand and support SMS concepts.

Middle managers are responsible for the job safety training of their personnel as well as a workplace hazard analysis. The first line manager is the most important influence on individual safety behavior. Middle managers have to understand the basis for a just culture. The implementation of a just culture may not be the same in all parts of the world, but its concept should

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be universal. Personnel should be able to report hazards and events without fear of punishment. Of course, there are some defined exceptions, such as purposely committing illegal activities or violating company regulations. A blame culture and open reporting culture cannot coexist. It is up to middle management to openly support a strong reporting system and ensure that supervisors follow the just policy of reporting.

A cornerstone of an SMS is an active hazard identification program. Three important programs that support the hazard identification program are change process management (CPM), operational safety reviews (OSR) and a program that allows personnel to report hazards.

A CPM review should be activated when there is a new system design, a change to existing systems, a new operation procedure and/or a modified operation or procedure. The implementation of this process has to start with the middle manager in charge of the department where the change will occur. If that person does not inform Safety of this change, then the change management process cannot be implemented.

An OSR in an organization is the difference between believing that you are safe and knowing that you are safe. The review allows you to look at all of your operations to determine if latent risk conditions have become part of your operations. While this is done at the middle management level, it should be a formal risk assessment that blankets the whole operation. It is only through these reviews that middle managers can have an educated knowledge of the risk potential of their operation.

Middle management should be highly supportive of these operational reviews and welcome the findings as a way to improve their operations and not consider it to be a process that will negatively reflect on their leadership skills and management capabilities.

Finally, employees should have a method to report hazards that they observe in the operation. They should be free to report without fear of reprisal. The safety office should take all reports very seriously and evaluate cited hazards in a timely manner. Middle managers

often discourage these reports. Then, after an incident, investigators find that the organization was aware of a hazard that led to the mishap but that institutional mechanisms failed to correct it or at least report it so that it could be fixed. These reports allow employees to participate directly in the SMS and be part of the prevention process. It is a positive motivator.

The SAG plays a vital role in an SMS. The group is made up of managers who will review the data that has been provided by the safety office. They will look at audits, mishap investigations, hazard reports, goals and objectives, future activities and other areas of concern. It is their duty to review the data and make recommendations to senior management. Another reason for the importance of the SAG is the possible reduction of direct communication between the safety manager and the accountable executive. Paragraph 8.6.5 of the ICAO *Safety Management Manual (SMM)*, Document 9859, second edition, says the following concerning those communications:

“Normal: Safety communicates through the [SAG] and/or the Safety Review Board (SRB).

“Exceptional/special circumstance: Safety must have direct emergency access to the accountable executive. This ‘backdoor’ communication should rarely be used and properly justified and documented.

*“The safety manager will likely be more often than not the bearer of bad news, safety wise.”*

This new organizational concept about safety makes middle managers all the more important in the success of an SMS. Without middle management’s active and genuine support, SMS will be unable to exist as a proactive and pre-emptive risk management program. More important, the overall process will become ineffective, since the role of safety has been reduced to a data collection agency with little or no direct access to the accountable executive, thereby eliminating an objective source of information to the accountable executive. The essential education of the role of middle management must rest with the safety managers. 🗣️

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