

# CAN YOUR ORGANIZATION'S CULTURE INFLUENCE YOUR DECISION-MAKING?

By Chris Young

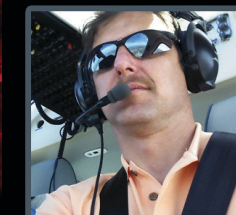
Decision-making is a frequent occurrence in our daily lives. As aviation professionals, the choices that we make can certainly have critical implications on the outcome of a flight or maintenance activity. When selecting between several options or different courses of actions, we often do so unconsciously without reference to the influences that might drive our decision. We often do not realize that there are underlying stimuli that can motivate our choices. Studies have shown that there is a definitive relationship between culture and decision-making strategies. We belong to what Allan Stewart describes as "high-reliability organizations." Due to the catastrophic potential of our work, it is critical that safety culture and decision-making align to enable the best choices.

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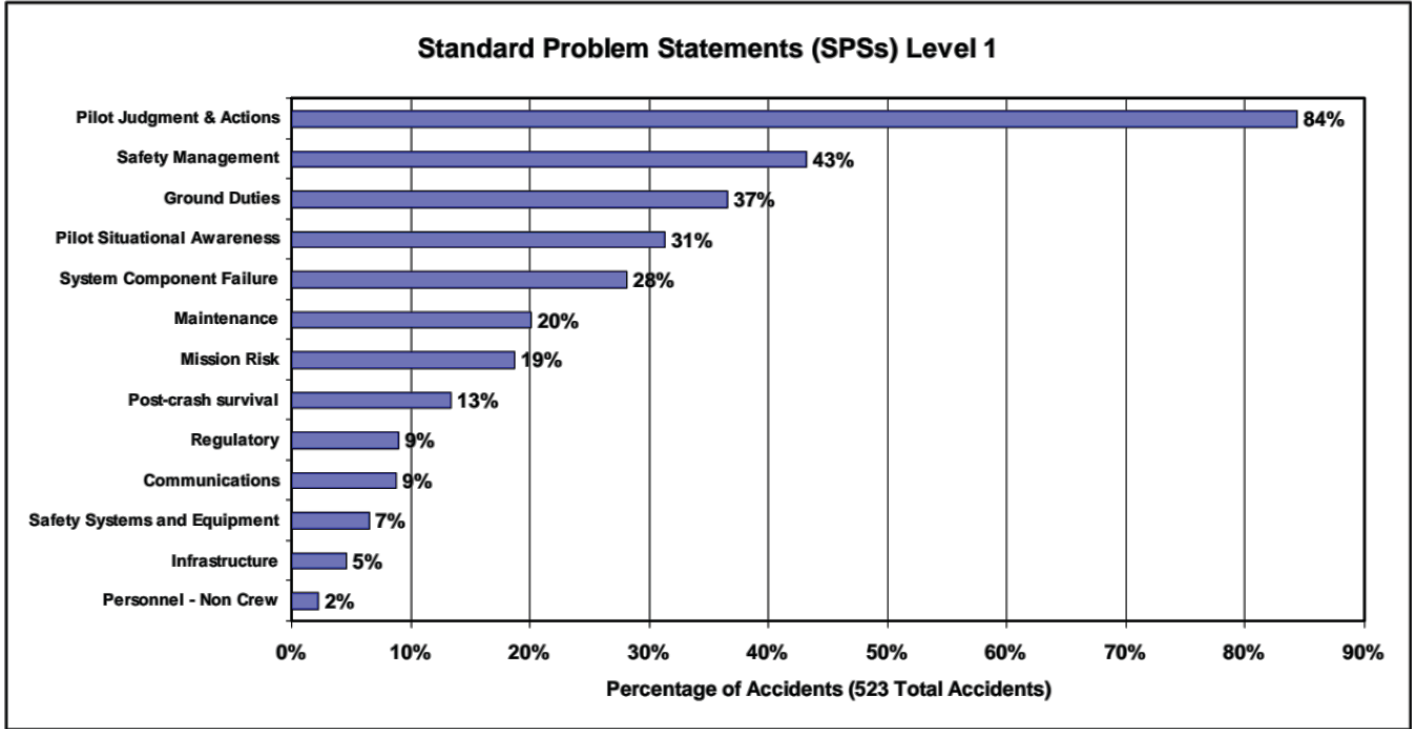


# CULTURE VS. EMPLOYEE DECISION-MAKING

As part of this discussion, it's important to look at how we use judgement. The reality is that pilots and mechanics have differing levels of judgement. Our personalities and attitudes toward risk, combined with pressures from others, may cause us as pilots or mechanics to make decisions that would be considered imprudent by others [Source: Stanley Trollip, Ph.D. & Richard Jensen Ph.D., 1991]. How many times have we read a post-accident report and boasted we would never do that or wondered what the participants were thinking? In the U.S. Joint Helicopter Safety Analysis Team's 2011 Compendium Report, their baseline analysis of 523 U.S. registered helicopter accidents in 2000, 2001, and 2006 identified several standard problem statements (SPS) that were associated with the accidents' causes. The findings for the three years of combined data, reflects that the vast majority of accidents (84 percent) had an SPS of "Pilot Judgment and Actions" with "Safety Management" second at 43 percent. In their report, the team stated: "The conclusions of this report indicate

there was a greater need for aeronautical decision-making (ADM) training and use of risk analysis tools by pilots." Pilot or maintenance judgement is truly a process or series of steps that we must use to help make a decision. In their two-part judgment model, Trollip and Jensen relate the ability to having good judgment with headwork (intellectual activities – rational process) and attitude (motivation – less rational). Each are equally important with performance, but we see that attitude tends to be more easily affected through outside sources. Attitudes towards risk taking by pilots or mechanics are typically the result of personal background, training, and experience. They can evolve over time and can be easily influenced to become either positive (more cautious) or negative (more vulnerable). Some examples of negative influences referenced by Trollip and Jensen are "non-safety factors such as job demands, convenience, monetary gain, self-esteem, and commitment." When an organization's culture has a profound influence over an employee, you

can see how easily a decision could be biased and pilot or mechanic perspectives skewed. As you might imagine, these hazardous attitudes can have a major impact on decision outcomes and require significant self-control to avoid these pressures. If we allow ourselves and others to cultivate this irrational conduct—and for it to become accepted through repetition—it might develop into an organization's standard accepted behavior and have a lasting harmful effect. This type of effect is known as "normalization of deviance" and often results in what Sidney Dekker refers to as drift into failure, defined as "a slow, incremental decline into bad judgment by organizations that take past results as a guarantee for continued success." To guard against these drift-inducing impulses, theorists of high-reliability organizations suggest we stay curious, open-minded, complexly sensitized, inviting of doubt, and ambivalent toward the past [Weick, 1993]. Always being mindful of what could be done better and resisting the temptation to give into outside influences will ultimately result in using better judgement while helping to prevent quality and safety deficiencies.



# ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

Organizational culture refers to "the values, norms, beliefs, and practices that govern how an institution functions. At the most basic level, organizational culture defines the assumptions that employees make as they carry out their work" [CAIB, 2003]. It is these assumptions that often influence the decisions made by employees. Why do organizations put their employees in awkward or difficult situations that can yield negative results? In many cases it relates to the diversity of the organization's goals and how they create incompatibilities in what employees need to be accomplishing.

Some organizations pass goal conflicts on to individual practitioners quite openly, but many are never made explicit [Dekker, 2005]. Rather, these conflicts are left to emerge from multiple irreconcilable expectations from different levels and sources or from both subtle and tacit pressures. Another factor is management or customer reactions to past trade-offs [Woods et al., 2010].

Stewart wrote that there are four categories of causal factors that can affect the culture of an organization:

- 1. **Philosophy and Values** – Organizational mission, employee involvement, and customer service orientation.
- 2. **Supervisory / Leadership Skills** – Quality of communications, distribution of influence, sources of power, goal setting, and facilitation.
- 3. **Human Resources Management**– Selection & placement, training & development, respect, empowerment, and appraisals & reinforcement.
- 4. **Job Design** – Autonomy, variety, feedback, task identity, significance, and interdependence.

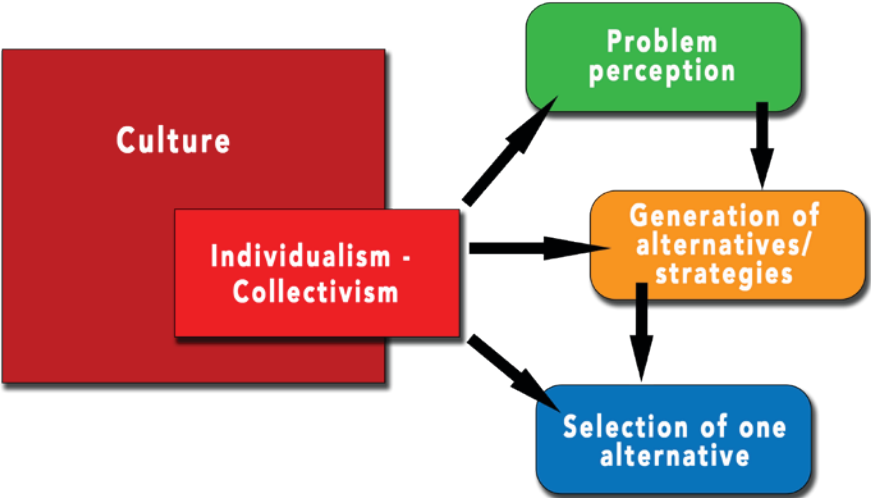
There are several overlaps in the provided set of causal factors, but one common thread of them all is the skills of the supervisory/ leadership team. It is important that employees see management actions reinforcing the value system, not contradicting it [CNSC, 2002]. A key focus of training should be to develop proper attitudes, values, and beliefs in leaders and others. Values can either be terminal: saying *what* we have to do, or a value can be instrumental: telling us *how* we should do something [Rokeach, 1973].

A common viewpoint of cultural values as described by C. Dominick Guess considers the difference of individualism and collectivism. Individualistic cultures are defined by detachment from relationships and community. The individual views himself or

herself as relatively independent from others. In contrast, collectivist cultures stress the importance of relationships, roles, and status within the social system. Individualistic values and collectivist values influence individuals' decision-making in three ways:

- 1. **The perception of the problem.**
- 2. **The generation of strategies and alternatives.**
- 3. **The selection of one alternative.**

Cultural expectations and values are represented in the individual's mind and may act as guiding principles for the selection of specific dynamic decision-making strategies. Values tell us what broad decision-making strategy we should follow, and why we should follow it [Guess, 2004].





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# WHAT DO I DO NOW?

Here are several items that you and your organization can pursue to improve your culture and decision-making effectiveness [adopted from R. Sumwalt, 2012]:

- Get commitment from top-level management.
- Create personal accountability.
- Empower personnel.
- Identify problems and resolve them.
- Raise risk awareness in your work plan.
- Promote open reporting.
- Create a culture of continuous learning.
- Use proper metrics.
- Create a just culture.
- Encourage a questioning attitude.

When implementing these ideas, keep in mind that safety culture is not something an organization either has or doesn't. The safety culture pathway is a journey, not a destination, and it is "a product of continual striving" [James Reason, 2000].



# CULTURE INFLUENCES SAFETY AND QUALITY

In organizations that have a healthy respect for safety and quality, employees will be encouraged to teach each other, encourage quality over quantity, and thus emphasize safety over productivity. In this environment, when newer members join the team they not only know what the safety rules and procedures are, but also why they are important. This develops a genuine respect for the need to follow rules and procedures, as opposed to just following them out of fear of punishment. Decision-making is not a static one-time activity, rather it is a process with numerous factors involved.

The success of an individual's decision-making depends on what is appropriate and expected in their cultural environment. If your organization takes a constructive approach and focuses on achievements, it will help reduce the possibility for negative influences in the workplace or cockpit and help improve decision-making, judgement, and attitude.



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