

Safety is an outcome of good leadership

THE HEARTS & MINDS OF SAFETY LEADERSHIP



BRIEFING

Effective leadership is the cornerstone of a strong safety culture, and this is especially true in aviation.

Notably, leaders at every level include those who may not have leadership or management in their job title. Because airports are such fascinating places to work, we have a lot of people who have high tenure and use their experience to lead through influence. The 'village elders' should be considered part of the leadership cohort in the airport community. Their wisdom should be embraced, and their influence should not be ignored.

And this is because collectively, all leaders have a pivotal role in shaping a strong and proactive safety culture. They need to remember that they are being observed by others for their behaviours, their decision-making, their prioritisation, their insights into managing risks and genuine care if there are unsafe outcomes.

It is vital that all leaders are passionate and proactive about ensuring safe outcomes. They should demonstrate courage in dealing with difficult issues, refrain from reacting to single data points, and invest in measures that make it easy for people to do the right thing. It also means leaders should check in with people, be highly sensitive to psychosocial safety, and actively ensure mentally safe workplaces.

It is also imperative when things go wrong that leaders demonstrate Just Culture, are steadfast and calm and always retain a genuine care for people. When stress is at its highest, leadership behaviours are on display.

Good safety leadership extends beyond simply enforcing SOPs from the top down. It involves creating a culture where everyone is aligned and engaged, regardless of their role or job title.

CALL TO ACTION

How to Lead with Safety in Mind:

1 Be fair dinkum

All leaders must consistently demonstrate safe behaviours and prioritise safety in all decisions. Aussies have incredible sensitivity to sense for detecting insincerity or hypocrisy. Make sure you know and comply with policies and procedures, actively managing risks, and setting a positive example for others to follow. Be visible and connected at every level so you can be observed by teammates, employees and other airport stakeholders.

2 Empower influential employees

Recognise that long-tenured employees or "village elders" often hold informal leadership roles through their experience and influence. These people are right across the airport community and work in every role. Be aware of the individuals and seek them out in order to engage, mentor and ensure they are champions. Use their standing to reinforce the importance of a proactive safety culture.

3 Foster open communication and a “Just Culture”

It is so easy to blame the individual, but it is imperative to cultivate an environment where everyone feels safe reporting events, near-misses, and safety concerns without fear of retribution. A Just Culture encourages open dialogue, using incidents as learning opportunities to improve safety rather than looking to assign blame. It also underpins a psychosocially safe environment for people to do their best work.

4 Demonstrate calm and genuine care

Remember anxiety and panic is contagious, and when safety incidents occur, leaders must respond with calm and clear thinking. Avoid overreacting to isolated incidents and focus on sustainable improvements that benefit the overall safety culture.

5 Be courageous in addressing safety issues

Leaders must have the courage to address difficult safety challenges head-on and potentially invest in solutions that make it easy for everyone to do the right thing. Avoid overreacting to isolated incidents and focus on sustainable improvements that benefit the overall safety culture.

STORYTELLING GLOBAL EXAMPLES OF LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

Alcoa’s safety transformation

The role of leadership in creating and sustaining a safety culture cannot be overstated. A compelling case is Alcoa, the multinational aluminium organisation, which made safety the foundation for operational success.

When Paul O’Neill took over as CEO in 1987, his primary focus became transforming Alcoa’s safety performance, as he knew this was the root cause much of the organisation’s dysfunction. In other words, he believed that if you can get safety culture right, then a lot of other business improvements would also line up.

In his first address to investors, O’Neill didn’t speak about profits or operations—he spoke about people safety. He made it clear that Alcoa would prioritise safety above all else – it was a message that was not common in the 80’s.

Notably, O’Neill took personal responsibility for embedding safety as a core value and required the same from his leadership team. He was a safety evangelist, and amongst other behaviours, he began every meeting, regardless of agenda, with a discussion on safety metrics and incident reports. His deeply impassioned and authentic leadership style was contagious and empowered employees and contractors at every level to take responsibility for safety, knowing they were working towards a common goal.

The results were transformative: Alcoa’s injury rates rate decreased to one-twentieth of the U.S. average for industrial companies. Moreover, this focus on safety also improved overall operational efficiency and engagement, demonstrating O’Neil’s belief that leadership in safety also directly contributes to business success.

You can read more about Alcoa’s safety approach here:

<https://strategicdiscipline.positioningsystems.com/bid/104994/Alcoa-s-Key-to-Safety-Success-Communication-Keystone-Habit>



AUSTRALIAN AIRPORTS ASSOCIATION

Questions for Team Discussion

1. How do you, as a leader, demonstrate your commitment to safety in daily operations?
2. How can we improve communication in our teams to ensure both operational and psychosocial risks are addressed?
3. How can we empower contractors to be part of the airport’s safety culture, ensuring they feel supported and included?