

## ***Compared to What?*** ***The Potential and Pitfalls of Performance Measurement***

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Nearly every established jazz professional has at some point played a cover version of Eugene McDaniels' 1960s classic *Compared to What?* - a driving, funky piece that mocks our attempt to define ourselves relative to some arbitrary benchmarks. In fact, it was in this song that McDaniels may have been the first to coin the uber-hip phrase "keeping it real." It begs two important questions of us in the aviation world. *Are we keeping it real* with our safety and training programs? Are the steps we are taking and resources we are expending relevant to our needs? How would we know – and perhaps most importantly, *compared to what?*

In today's financially strapped, high risk, error intolerant world of aviation, regardless of the methods you employ to manage your safety, you should be able to answer these questions:

- **Are hazardous trends developing?** Most safety programs claim to keep a close eye on identifying and mitigating hazards, but few recognize slowly developing trends.
- **Are there better ways of doing business?** One emerging concept in business assessment is capturing lessons of *positive deviance* - the ability of a few inside your organization to do more with higher quality while operating within the same resource constraints as others. Perhaps someone has discovered a new inspection technique, or a means to reduce the time it takes to complete reporting requirements. There are tools specifically designed to locate and share these performance improvement "secrets."
- **What is the return on investment (ROI) of our safety and training dollar?** Safety programs are a cornerstone of fiscal sustainability. Can your organization survive an "at fault" fatal accident? Does a poor safety program that leaks resources into "minor incidents" threaten your bottom line?
- **Are we getting better or getting worse?** One of the keys to safety excellence is forward looking continuous improvement; yet, most safety and quality measures are trapped in the rearview mirror of past events and outcome statistics.

### **Common Pitfalls**

**"I know it when I see it."** One reason formalized assessment is critical is that *self assessment* is notoriously unreliable. Far too often, we psychologically ignore or underestimate hazards in our own programs.

**The "great organization" logic trap.** Self assessment is also faulty because we have a hard time recognizing trouble, and an even harder time believing what we see. One typical thought loop goes something like this:

1. We have a great organization without any serious problems but...
2. We have recently discovered evidence to the contrary.
3. But since we have a great organization without serious problems . . .
4. This new evidence must be a minor, "one off" anomaly or flawed in some other manner.

Does this sound familiar? In two decades of working with organizations, this is a typical response to evidence of a problem. We are so wedded to the notion of our goodness, we refuse to accept that past safe performance does not automatically represent our future. This is very dangerous ground.

**Obstructive legal opinions.** Lawyers spend their lives building castle walls that will, hopefully, defend your organization in the event of a lawsuit. It's their job, and it is easier for them if there is no evidence of known problems in your organization's records. Ironically, this "see no evil" mindset not only makes your assessment program impotent, it backfires in court when it becomes clear you weren't following industry best practices (IBP) for hazard control. Legal opinions about assessment may make executives nervous, but remember legal opinions are just that – opinions, and must be balanced with the organization's needs to improve.

**Once and done.** Assessment must be continuous in any mature safety program. While outside perspectives are good, they should only supplement your internal measurement and auditing program. An outside assessment should never *surprise* you – but validate what you already know.

**Confusing a "program" with "progress."** Most organizations have some type of suggestion box or hazard identification form, and regardless of its utility, this is often enough to check the box when the auditor calls. Don't make this common mistake. Fight for participation in these critical processes. I realize this is easier said than done, and in a future article we will address how to get more participation into your reporting systems.

## Best Practices

Let's review a few things you can do now to get the ball rolling in the right direction.

**Think big, start small.** Committing to serious assessment can be intimidating, but just as every good flight depends on an accurate flight plan, the same holds true for measuring organizational performance. An assessment plan should be the starting point and should contain: (1) what you plan to measure and why; (2) how - and how often - you plan to measure it, and finally, (3) how you will use and communicate the information to improve.

**Start with slow moving targets.** Begin with easy and important targets to get an early win. Review and refine policies, forms, internal checklists and other written guidance. Identify gaps in coverage and ways to clarify and protect the decision space of your personnel. This gives everyone a chance to participate and see the benefits that come from a transparent and logical process. Document the process.

**Fight for objectivity.** Fight the first temptation to rationalize or refute what your system is telling you. Unlike wine, bad news doesn't improve with age, and your program is only as reliable as your ability to process the bad news along with the good.

**The Janus perspective.** According to legend, Janus, the mythical two headed god of gateways possessed the gift to see both future and past. The idea of looking at past performance to develop leading indicators of future performance is an essential prerequisite for good organizational measurement.

## One absolute

Whether news is good or bad, knowing what is going on in your organization is far better than not knowing if you are going to "keep it real."