The Leader’s Role in Shaping a Safety Culture

United Airlines Leadership Safety Summit

Robert L. Sumwalt, III
Where you stand on an issue depends on where you sit.
USAir 1016
July 2, 1994
Charlotte, North Carolina
37 fatalities
Crash sharpens painful memories of 1994 tragedy

By NICOLE SWEENEY and JEFF STENSLAND
Staff Writers

It’s been nearly a decade since USAir Flight 1016 plummeted from stormy skies in Charlotte, but the pain is still fresh for Wayne Mattox of Winnsboro, whose brother was one of 37 to die in the crash.

Steve Mattox and his bride, Rita, vowed to spend the rest of their lives together that day, not knowing their lives would end just hours later.

News of Wednesday’s airplane crash in Charlotte brought back a torrent of memories for the Mattox family and others.
Safety Culture is: “Safety culture is the core values and behaviors resulting from a collective commitment by leaders and individuals to emphasize safety over competing goals to ensure protection of people and the environment.”

Source: U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission
Do you have a good safety culture?
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• “... it is worth pointing out that if you are convinced that your organization has a good safety culture, you are almost certainly mistaken.”

• “... a safety culture is something that is striven for but rarely attained...”

• “... the process is more important than the product.”

- James Reason, “Managing the Risks of Organizational Accidents.”
Safety Culture is:

- Triggered at the top
- Measured at the bottom

Safety culture starts at the top of the organization and permeates the entire organization.
align·ment  noun  \ə-ˈlin-mənt\  

Where the leaders and front line employees of United Airlines, and everyone in between, shares the same values toward safety.
LEADERS MUST WALK THE TALK - ALWAYS

Robert’s 1st Law of Safety Culture Promotion:
What is Leadership?

“Leadership is about influence. Nothing more. Nothing less.”

- John Maxwell
How leaders influence safety

“The safety behaviors and attitudes of individuals are influenced by their perceptions and expectations about safety in their work environment, and they pattern their safety behaviors to meet demonstrated priorities of organizational leaders, regardless of stated policies.”

- Dov Zohar, as cited in NTSB accident report
Metro North management is committed to workplace safety and participates regularly in safety events.

NTSB questionnaire
n = 156
Management 25
Labor 131
Management does not pressure staff to maintain service or operations, potentially at cost of safety.

- Management does not pressure staff to maintain service or operations, potentially at cost of safety.

- Fully Disagree: -3
- Mostly Disagree: -2
- Somewhat Disagree: -1
- No Opinion: 0
- Somewhat Agree: 1
- Mostly Agree: 2
- Fully Agree: 3

- Track Labor: -1.11
- Operations Labor: -1.00
- Division Management: 0.38
- Senior Management: 2.25
Employee Comments

- “Sometimes I feel safety is priority one as long as it's convenient.”
- “Metro-North pays lip service to safety. On time performance & budgets take precedence over safety.”
- “The railroad only cares about the on time performance.”
- “It’s all about on time performance and safety rules are thrown out the window to keep on time performance. Management has no clue.”
Robert’s 2\textsuperscript{nd} Law of Safety Culture Promotion:

NEVER BELIEVE GOOD NEWS - EVER
It appears you’re on the right track.

“Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there.”

- Will Rogers
“It’s been a year of challenges and success. We are doing great.”

- Aug. 8, 2014

- October 1, 2014
“Good can be Bad”

• With good safety performance, people/organizations can easily become complacent.

• Don’t ever believe that a lack of accidents means you are “safe.”

• To counter this complacency, there must be a leadership obsession with continuous improvement.

- Courtesy of Jim Schultz
Robert’s 3rd Law of Safety Culture Promotion:

PROMOTE OPEN COMMUNICATIONS AND REPORTING
Yesterday’s problems are in the past.

Tomorrow’s problems will kick you in the __ __ __.
Keeping Fingers on the Pulse

• How do you detect and correct performance deficiencies before an accident?
• How do you keep your finger on the pulse of your operations?
• Do you have multiple data sources?
Are employees comfortable reporting?

• They are open to report safety problems, if they receive assurances that:
  – The information will be acted upon
  – Data are kept confidential or de-identified
  – They will not be punished or ridiculed for reporting
Robert’s 4th Law of Safety Culture Promotion:

CULTIVATE JUST CULTURE AND TRUST
“Just” Culture

- Employees realize they will be treated fairly
  - Not all errors and unsafe acts will be punished (if the error was unintentional)
  - Those who act recklessly or take deliberate and unjustifiable risks will be punished
Robert’s 5th Law of Safety Culture Promotion:

MEASURE AND REWARD THE RIGHT THINGS
What do you measure and reward?

- Are you measuring the right things?
- Are they the most appropriate predictors of catastrophic events?