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You Can't Have an SMS Without SRM!

Many organizations that are trying to implement a Safety Management System (SMS) have been utilizing a shotgun approach, in order to satisfy regulatory requirements (aka “checking the boxes”). While the shotgun approach may allow you to form the foundation for your SMS, it by no means will give you a robust Safety Risk Management (SRM) structure, which is a key element of your SMS (along with Safety Policy, Safety Assurance, and Safety Promotion). In fact, of the aforementioned, SRM will most likely take the longest period of time to achieve full, effective functionality (referring to ICAO Phase 4).

But what is SRM and why does it take so long to implement? Well, first of all, SRM is a formal, continuous, circular safety process. This process involves 1) Identifying hazards and their associated risks, 2) Mitigating or, if possible, eliminating those risks, 3) Monitoring those risks, and 4) looking for new hazards and risks that will inevitably emerge in your operational environment.

SRM requires formal documentation. This documentation ranges from a Preliminary Hazard Analysis (PHA) to the status of risk mitigation (i.e., what, where, who), to the ongoing monitoring of known risks. As a formal process, SRM is not something that you just “do.” Rather, think of SRM as the heart of your SMS, which requires your attention on a day-to-day basis. SRM is not complex, but at the highest levels it does require a knowledgeable, enthusiastic

Safety Manager (the quarterback) and active participation by the Department Heads (the receivers and running backs) in order to achieve success. I use the Football analogy because you can think of the Safety Manager as the quarterback (the one who passes or hands off the ball), and the Department Heads as the receivers and running backs (the ones who will actually be catching and/or running with the ball) in order to address the corrective/preventive actions that will be required for any particular logged risk. Depending on your type of operation, Department Heads may include people from Maintenance, Flight Operations, Cabin Services, Training, etc.

Why does SRM take so long to implement? Generally speaking, it is because there are a lot of subcomponents that need to be put in place. Anyone can claim they have an effective SRM, but in reality all they really have is a casual, verbal “system” where there is no structure, tracking, monitoring, follow-up, etc. Most employees in this type of “system” don’t even know what, if any, roles and responsibilities they have in their SRM!

So, it’s the “formality” and structure that takes some time. I’ve seen it take a year or more to implement a fully functional Phase 4 SRM program. The bottom line is that you need to 1) Formally document all SRM processes, 2) Have a safety culture that supports a non-punitive hazard/error reporting system (this in itself can take over a year), and, 3) Ensure that all employees understand their roles and responsibilities in the SRM process (i.e., Safety Manager, Department Heads, Accountable Executive, Line Personnel, etc.). While these three items can be considered germane to your SRM, they are also highly applicable to your overall SMS.

In summary, if you claim to have an SRM, but haven’t yet conducted a preliminary or recurring Hazard Identification and Risk Analysis (HIRA), or don’t have a non-punitive reporting policy, or your corrective/preventive items are going months beyond their targeted due dates—well—you definitely have a way to go. It takes time.