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The Safety Squeeze

The AMT Perspective

A group of aviation maintenance technicians (AMTs) have been complaining about old and inadequate workstands. These complaints have been submitted for a long period of time; in fact, for a few years. These complaints have been submitted both verbally to supervisors and in writing (via the maintenance facility's SMS hazard reporting system). They are valid complaints. In fact, all one needs to do is go into the maintenance hangar and look at the workstands and how they are being used. For instance, six of the 15 stands are visibly starting to fall part. A few other stands are not of sufficient height. AMTs are standing on the handrails in order to get to the required height to perform their tasks.

The Management Perspective

Management has known about these workstand issues for almost as long as the complaints have been submitted. Yet, no action has been taken. You see, according to management, the workstands seem to be "good enough to get the job done" and an investment in new workstands will cost a substantial amount of money. Management's rationale is that, although the company has the financial resources to purchase the new workstands, there are other, more important areas to allocate company money, such as the acquisition of a new corporate office building.

Welcome to the Safety Squeeze

This dichotomy creates what I call “the safety squeeze.” I am sure many of you can relate to a situation similar to this one; an obvious and valid need for some type of new or replacement safety equipment, but at the same time there is much pushback from management. One of the reasons for this dichotomy is that line personnel and management have different objectives. Line personnel are the “do-ers,” the people that get the job done. They are on the frontline and are intimately familiar with the tools and equipment they need and use. They are the best judges of safety.

On the other hand, you have management. Unlike line personnel, management objectives are more aligned with profitability and shareholder interests. Managers are decision makers who, among other things, enable line personnel to get the job done, through the allocation (or not) of human and financial resources. Management, however, are not on the frontline and may not be familiar with the tools, equipment, and procedures required to get the job done. In fact, management may be so distal from line operations that it would be nearly impossible for them to determine whether or not something is safe. Because of this, it can become very difficult to explain to management why an investment in safety needs to be made. Management’s role, among others, is to save money and/or increase revenues. Why would management buy new workstands if the ones that have been used for years are still getting the job done?

Epilogue

A few months ago, an AMT fell off one of those workstands while working outside on a windy day. He was standing on the handrails because he needed to attain more height in order to access the upper part of the fuselage. He suffered a broken neck and will be out of work

indefinitely.

The next day, management ordered new workstands for the entire maintenance facility.