

[Dr. Robert Baron](#) is the President and Chief Consultant of [The Aviation Consulting Group](#). He performs extensive work in his core specializations of Human Factors (HF), Safety Management Systems (SMS), Crew Resource Management (CRM), and Line Operations Safety Audit (LOSA). He consults with, and provides training to, hundreds of aviation organizations on a worldwide basis.

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When National Culture Supersedes Safety Culture

As a global aviation safety consultant for a few decades now, it's fair to say that I have been exposed to many different cultures. When I speak of culture, I am focusing specifically on two types; the national culture and the organizational safety culture. Often there is a relationship between both— national culture has a direct effect on the organizational safety culture. As an example, a high Power Distance (PD) national culture (more accepting of an unequal power relationship) may see manifestations of excessive deference in everyday flight operations. Within the context of national culture, this is appropriate behavior; however, within flight operations, the inability or unwillingness to speak up, or voice a concern to a superordinate (i.e., Captain, Maintenance Crew Chief, etc.) can have (and has had) serious safety implications.

So how can an aviation organization separate its national culture from its organizational safety culture? Or can it? In some cultures (i.e., low PD cultures), where the disparity is minimal, it's easier to have a flatter hierarchy, more open and transparent communication, and a collaborative working environment. But what about high PD cultures? These cultures tend to have a more rigid hierarchy, are more suppressive with communication, and favor a more autonomous working environment.

The simple solution to negating the effect of national culture is to ask employees to “check their national culture at the door” and adapt to the organizational safety culture during

their shift. This might not be an easy task, however, in light of the fact that safety culture principles may be in sharp contrast to their national culture. As an example, a few years back, a Crew Resource Management (CRM) course was conducted at an airline located in Asia (high PD culture). In the class, all of the pilots learned about, and tested well, on CRM principles such as teamwork, delegation, assertiveness, speaking up, etc. Yet, once in the cockpit they defaulted to their instinctive, national cultural behavior patterns (particularly excessive deference and lack of assertiveness).

There are no simple solutions. However, the potential clash of national and organizational safety cultures is an issue that merits attention in all types of aviation organizations. As a pilot and an Industrial/Organizational psychologist, I find this to be an interesting area of research exploration.