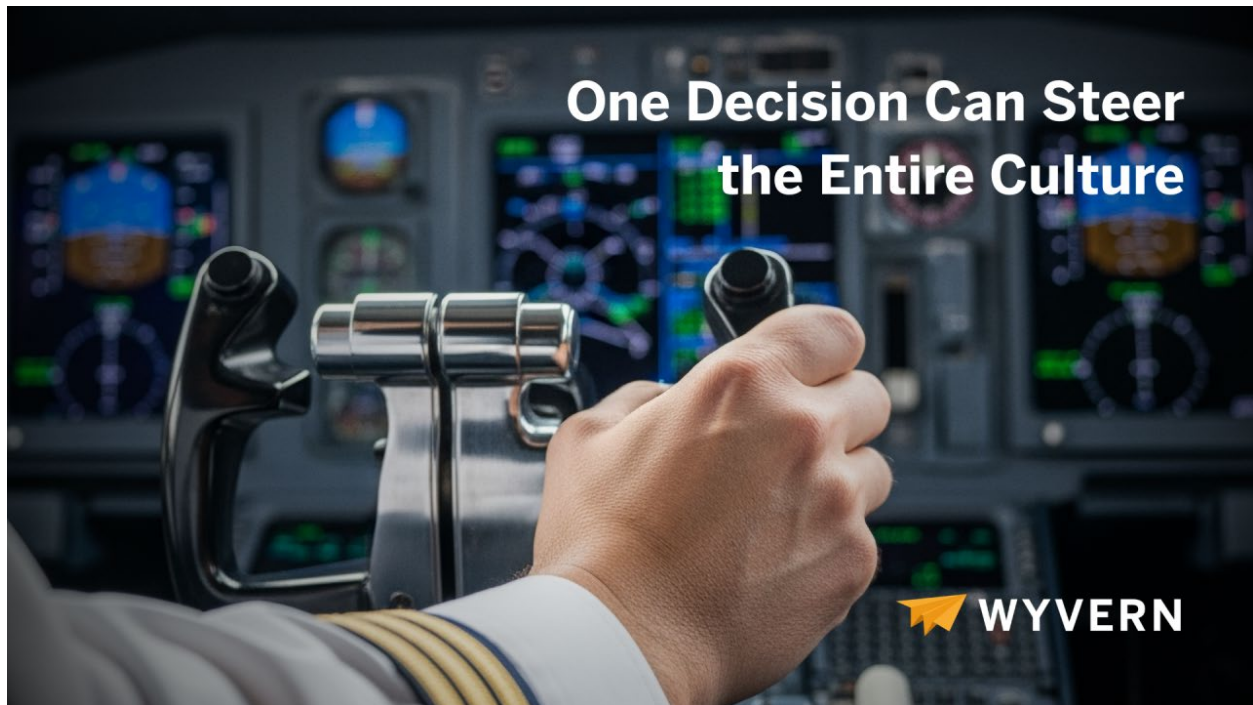


Part 2: Accountability at the Helm: How Leaders Build (or Break)

Safety Culture



The departure is delayed due to a technical anomaly with the aircraft. The passengers are waiting, and some of them are pressuring the dispatcher to “get the show on the road, because they have important business meetings in NYC.” The dispatcher feels pressure and anxiety because he doesn’t want to disappoint the executive staff. Then, the captain steps into the lobby and says to the passengers,

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we cannot depart until the aircraft avionics system anomaly is properly diagnosed and corrected. Our maintenance team is working on the issue and making good progress. We anticipate 30 minutes until completion. I will keep you advised. We realize your meetings are important, but your safety is our primary objective."

The tension shifts instantly. One calm and steady message resets the tone: **safety over schedule.**

This is what leadership commitment looks like in practice — not a memo or a slogan, but real-time behavior that tells the team what the organization truly values.

Safety Culture Starts at the Top — Not in a Binder

Every aerospace organization has written policies.

But people pay far more attention to **leadership behavior** than to any signature on a safety statement.

The **Safety Management International Collaboration Group (SMICG)**, a formal team of representatives from civil aviation authorities around the world (to include the FAA, Transport Canada, EASA, Australia, etc.) developed a tool to assess safety culture (SMICG, 2019). This method begins with analyzing *Safety Policy & Management Commitment*; Policies set expectations; Leaders make them believable.

Commitment is evident when leaders:

- **Demonstrate visible support** for the SMS;
- **Allocate time, tools, and resources** needed to enable safe behavior;
- **Model Just Culture principles** — distinguishing human error from unprofessional behavior;
- **Engage meaningfully** with all personnel to promote safe behavior;
- **Follow through** on the values embedded in the safety policy.

In other words:

Leaders don't shape safety culture by saying the right things; they do it by doing the right things.

FAA Guidance: Leadership Behaviors Are Culture Signals

The FAA's *Safety Culture: Guidance for Improving Safety Culture* reinforces a crucial truth: employees interpret safety not by what leaders *declare*, but by what leaders *demonstrate*.

The FAA highlights behaviors that consistently strengthen culture:

- **Consistency** between words and actions — especially under operational pressure;
- **Accessibility** — leaders who show up in the hangar, on the ramp, in the office;
- **Responsiveness** — acting on concerns quickly and transparently;
- **Humility** — modeling a willingness to learn, adapt, and admit mistakes.

These leadership behaviors reinforce psychological safety - where speaking up is valued.

When Leadership Doesn't Model Commitment, Culture Fills the Void

If managers do not send clear safety leadership signals, the organization will still form a culture — just not necessarily a healthy one.

Informal norms take over: shortcuts, silence, "this is how we really do it."

Inconsistent leadership behavior is one of the fastest ways to erode trust and weaken reporting, hazard identification, and learning.

Leadership Expectations

WYVERN's vision is "*Every aerospace organization has a healthy safety culture*", so we emphasize effective leadership behaviors in both the **Flight Leader Program** and **Safety Leader Training**. In these programs, leaders learn how:

- Their decisions influence the organization's risk tolerance;
- Their behavior affects psychological safety and reporting;
- Their responsiveness inspires excellence in risk management.
- Their application of Just Culture builds (or erodes) trust.

Strong leadership is not a "supporting element" of safety culture — **it is the foundation on which the entire system stands.**

Next Week: Part 3 — Just Culture, Psychological Safety, and Reporting

We'll look at how a strong reporting culture is one of the most visible markers of a healthy safety culture, and why management behavior (top, middle, and front-line managers) often determine whether reporting thrives or disappears.

Subscribe to our newsletters now at the bottom of this page. For further resources and guidance on implementing Safety Management Systems, contact WYVERN, THE industry expert. Attend our [SMS Training Workshops](#) or ask about our SMS software. [Contact us for a FREE SMS demo!](#) Together, we can elevate aerospace safety and create a safer future.

References

Federal Aviation Administration. (2023). *Safety culture assessment and continuous improvement in aviation*. FAA Human Factors Division.

International Civil Aviation Organization. (2018). *Safety management manual* (4th ed., Doc 9859).

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2024). *Emerging hazards in commercial aviation—Report 2: Ensuring safety during transformative changes*. The National Academies Press.

Safety Management International Collaboration Group (SMICG). (2019). *Industry Safety Culture Evaluation Tool and Guidance*. <https://www.wyvernlimited.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/SMICG-Safety-Culture-Evaluation-Tool-2019.pdf>

Safety Management International Collaboration Group. (2013). *Measuring safety performance: Guidelines for service providers*.

Safety Management International Collaboration Group. (2015). *SMS for small organizations*.