

Part 5-The Narrow Margin: How Culture Shapes Decisions Under Pressure



The flight wasn't unsafe — at least, not on paper.

The weather was within limits. The aircraft was legal. The crew was qualified. The schedule was tight, but manageable. Nothing about the situation triggered an obvious “stop.”

Still, the crew hesitated.

A minor maintenance deferral had been accepted earlier in the day. Fatigue wasn't over limits, but it was creeping in. Weather was forecast to deteriorate later. No single factor felt decisive — yet together, they narrowed the safety margin.

The decision wasn't about whether the flight *could* go.

It was about whether it *should*.

Moments like this rarely come with alarms or warnings. They rely on judgment — and judgment, under pressure, is shaped by culture.

In Part 4, we explored how organizations learn from safety information; in Part 5, we examine how that learning—or lack of it—shows up in real-time decisions.

Risk-Informed Decisions Are Human Decisions

Risk-informed decision making is often described as a structured process: hazard identification, risk assessment, controls, and review.

But in practice, decisions are made by people — often in dynamic environments where time is limited, information is incomplete, and competing pressures are present.

Human factors such as fatigue, workload, normalization of deviance, authority gradients, and time pressure influence how risk is perceived, prioritized, and acted upon. A strong safety culture does not eliminate these influences; it acknowledges them and manages them intentionally.

The SMICG Safety Culture Evaluation Tool reinforces this reality by focusing not only on systems and procedures, but on behaviors, awareness, adaptability, and leadership commitment — all of which directly affect decision quality under pressure. (SMICG, 2019, pp. 6, 9–11, 17–18).

Where Culture Shows Up in Risk Decisions

Several safety culture characteristics identified by the SMICG play a decisive role in risk-informed decision making:

Awareness

Are leaders and employees genuinely aware of the risks created by their operational and business decisions — not just in hindsight, but in real time?

Organizations with mature safety cultures actively identify job-induced risks, question assumptions, and remain alert to emerging hazards, even when operations appear routine.

Justness

Do people feel safe raising concerns when something doesn't feel right?

A just culture ensures that questioning decisions, reporting concerns, or stopping a task due to risk is supported — not penalized or quietly discouraged. Without this trust, critical risk information often goes unspoken.

Adaptability

Does the organization learn and adjust as conditions change?

Risk-informed decision making depends on the ability to respond proactively, evaluate the effectiveness of risk controls, and adapt before small issues escalate into serious events.

Behavior

What actually happens in day-to-day operations?

Do leaders model conservative decision-making when pressure increases, or are shortcuts quietly tolerated as long as outcomes remain acceptable? Culture is revealed not in stated priorities, but in what behaviors are accepted, challenged, or rewarded.

From Compliance to Judgment

The SMICG framework highlights a critical distinction: having processes is not the same as using judgment.

Organizations with reactive or purely calculative cultures may rely on risk processes primarily to satisfy regulatory requirements or respond after an event. In contrast, proactive cultures integrate risk thinking into everyday decisions — from staffing and scheduling to maintenance planning and operational tempo.

In these organizations:

- **Safety is weighed alongside efficiency and cost — not after them**
- **Leaders routinely assess the safety implications of their decisions**
- **Employees are empowered to speak up and suggest improvements**
- **Risk controls are monitored for effectiveness, not just existence**

Here, risk-informed decision making becomes a living capability, not a checklist exercise.

Why This Matters

Accidents and incidents are rarely the result of a single poor decision. They emerge from a series of decisions made under pressure, shaped by cultural signals — explicit or implied — about what truly matters.

A strong safety culture does not guarantee perfect decisions. But it creates the conditions for better ones, especially when safety margins are thin and pressures are real.

Risk-informed decision making is not just an SMS function.

It is a cultural outcome.

Coming Up Next

In the final two installments of our Safety Culture series, we'll first explore how leaders build and sustain a strong safety culture over time — and then examine how organizations can meaningfully measure safety culture, turning values and behaviors into observable, actionable insight. Together, these perspectives show why continuous learning is essential to long-term safety performance.

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.

Reference

Safety Management International Collaboration Group (SMICG). (2019). [Industry Safety Culture Evaluation Tool and Guidance](#). April 2019.