Concept paper

Inspiring aviation

The power of engagement and positive leadership in driving resilience

Positive Organizational Culture in Aviation

ECA Piloting Safety
European Cockpit Association

Introduction

The post-pandemic recovery has shown that the aviation industry has underestimated both the speed and scope of traffic recovery as well as the willingness of furloughed and retrenched staff to return to the industry.

However, to point at the pandemic as the sole factor for the lack of staff and the ensuing chaos at airports and in airline operations during the summer of 2022 would be too easy. It merely provided a catalyst to expose some long-hidden issues in the aviation industry.

The glamour of aviation has been replaced by an environment of constant stress and commercial pressure, long, irregular hours and precarious, atypical forms of employment and working conditions that can border on the exploitive.

Furthermore, the pandemic gave many people the opportunity to rethink their life priorities and a number have chosen to manage their work-life balance more actively. This has led to what is referred to as "The Great Resignation", an exodus of people leaving their employment, wage stagnation amidst rising costs of living and long-term job dissatisfaction.

This phenomenon has had a disproportionate effect on professions exposed to high stressors, such as those in the healthcare industry. During the pandemic these professions suffered abnormally high voluntary resignation rates in addition to forced layoffs. Aviation staff seem to have suffered similar tolls.

Without a comprehensive, structured effort to counter this 'exodus and start to attract and retain the right talent, aviation is at risk of being unable to be sufficiently resilient to face future challenges and maintain the high levels of safety required to function successfully. This resilience has to rest on 3 pillars: human capital sustainability (wellbeing and social), economic sustainability and environmental sustainability.

Corporate/Organisational Culture in Aviation

While we focus a lot on safety culture in our industry, we tend to forget about the importance of corporate / organisational culture in general.

ECA believes that many of the challenges that the aviation industry faces today stem from this lack of attention. Often it translates into a lack, or even unwillingness, to understand and acknowledge drivers of human performance and – crucially – motivation for all employees and not just the front-end operators.

It is therefore necessary to address the subject of organisational culture, and to do so by going beyond the solely safety culture.

A narrow application of Just Culture

Aviation is well acquainted with the concept of "Just Culture". But there is reason to believe that mere reference to 'Just Culture principles' is a long way from solving what may be seen as an underlying structural and cultural deficiency within our industry.

The introduction of a definition of Just Culture in Regulation EU376/2014 has been a milestone in aviation safety. However, many stakeholders see this Just Culture exclusively tied to occurrence reporting, as this is the prime focus of said Regulation. As a result, Just Culture principles, more often than not, are simply not applied beyond either reporting or safety issues and remain limited to the front-end operators, such as aircrew or Air traffic Controllers.

Often, that Just Culture is seen as a mere sub-culture of the operational culture, and this does not help to make Just Culture credible within the wider organisation. Furthermore, such a narrow approach to Just Culture creates an inconsistent and siloed environment where its underlying principles are often misunderstood by the very people who are tasked to apply them.

Just Culture is frequently reduced to an 'Accountability Matrix' that is procedural in its application and, in fact, far removed from any true notion of 'Culture'.

One of the reasons for this is the very definition of "Just Culture" in EU 376/2014. It omits a crucial point that James Reason made in his definition, i.e. that Just Culture actually requires an "atmosphere of trust".

This "atmosphere of trust" is what differentiates Just Culture as an administrative process within an organization from a corporate / organisational culture that is 'just' and 'safety-conscious'.

In aviation, we often fall short of exploring the full potential of Organisational Culture in its impact on safety, productivity and creativity.

The case for Positive Organisational Culture: Resilience

Beyond the airline industry, many organisations have understood that nurturing an adequate culture within the organisation is a tool to gain competitive advantages. A wealth of data exists to prove what makes organisations and teams effective and successful. In fact, scientific research shows that organisations that have a culture adapted to their environment and their needs perform better economically and are more resilient in times of crisis.

By actively and positively shaping their internal culture, organisations can reap safety benefits and also gain a commercial and economical edge. In other words, an organisational resilience that will help them not only to survive, but as well to thrive in a difficult context, now and beyond the current crisis.

ECA believes that part of the issues that organisations face today need to be addressed by focussing beyond Just Culture for the pilots (and other front end operators), and by embedding this concept into a wider organisational context.

To capture and help operationalising this ***positive active shaping of an internal organisational culture***, ECA proposes the following definition of a 'Positive Organisational Culture in Aviation':

> *A Culture where an organisation actively creates an environment where motivation and safety-conscious behaviour occur as a natural consequence of a psychologically safe work environment, where staff feel included, trusted, are empowered to, and willingly show, discretionary effort in order to lead the organization to success.*

Attributes of Positive Organisational Culture in Aviation

ECA proposes the following as essential attributes and cornerstones of this Positive Performance Culture that balances an organisation's economic realities, staff motivation and well-being, as well as high safety standards:

- *a psychologically safe environment*
- *integration of Just Culture attributes*
- *credible values*
- *leadership*
- *a transparent and balanced employment relationship.*

Effective and successful implementation of a Positive Organisational Culture in Aviation in an organisation should also incorporate many of the attributes found in High Reliability organisations, Learning organisations and similar concepts, in addition to the basic attributes mentioned above.

The need for a 'psychologically safe' environment

'**P**sychological safety' can be defined as "*being able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status or career*."

It is a "*shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking. In psychologically safe teams, team members feel accepted and respected*."

In such a psychologically safe environment, team members are encouraged to speak up, share concerns, questions or ideas – and this without fear for negative consequences.

In such an environment, organisations are able to innovate and thrive, become and stay both efficient and resilient.

Hence, any organisation that relies on safety conscious employees, needs to foster innovation, or relies heavily on the motivation of their employees, needs to create a psychologically safe environment at its core.

Integration of Just Culture attributes throughout the organization

As shown above, while many organisations are convinced that they have a Just Culture, many of them have merely a regulatory process in place which is far removed from 'Culture'.

Just Culture – which generally is also referred to as « **Positive Safety Culture** » at ICAO level, must be embraced by all levels of management within organisations. It is therefore a function of the organisational culture at large.

Every employee, not just those identified as having a safety critical role, can influence the establishment of the desired culture and should be engaged in this process.

In a safety critical, high reliability organisation, every employee has a role in maintaining and enhancing safety, whether a front-end operator or working in the office. Therefore the principles of Just Culture should apply to all staff and not just a sub-set of employees.

Credible Values

To build, maintain and enhance a **Positive Performance Culture**, organisations should define clear values that reflect the ethics and principles that underlie the organisation's culture.

These values need to be credible to both internal and external stakeholders and adapted to the context of the operations.

These values need to be articulated in a way as to make sense to staff and customers alike and need to be visibly lived throughout the organisation through daily operations.

Finally, these values need to be lived and felt throughout the organisation from the top down and need to be recognisable as the cornerstones of an organisation's culture.

Leadership

For an organisation's culture and values to be credible and consistent over time, it is imperative that the right leadership qualities are demonstrated from the top down throughout the organization.

Obviously, there are many different styles and theories of leadership. However, given that airline operations are both safety-critical and human-centered, the leadership style promoted by senior management needs to be based on 'Ethical Leadership' principles, in order to foster a Positive Performance Culture.

One way to describe Ethical Leadership would be:

> *Ethical leadership is also about **understanding the truth about humans and our need for meaning**. It is about **building workplaces where standards are high and fear is low**. Those are the kind of cultures where **people will feel comfortable speaking the truth** to others as they seek excellence in themselves and the people around them.*

Leadership should be seen as dissociated from hierarchical position. The organisation should encourage leadership at all levels of the organisation and empower people to be flexible and adaptable to disruptive events, *(i.e. "Move the decision to where the information is")* according to the principles of a High Reliability Organisation.

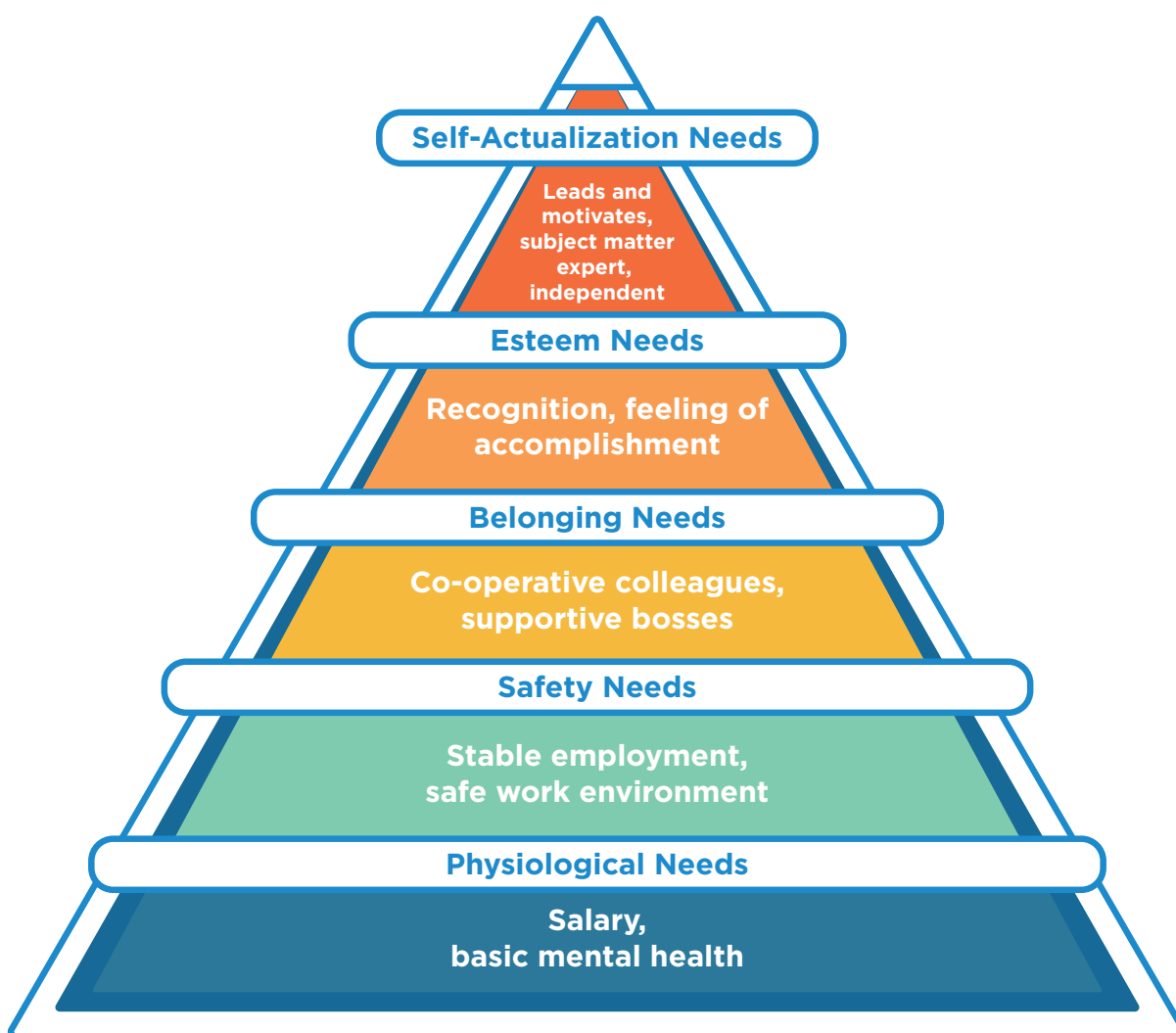## A Transparent & Balanced Basic Employment Relationship

In times where 'self-employment', 'pay to fly', zero-hour broker agency contracts, and other creative employment solutions abound, it is worth noting that if you want to create trust with your staff, you need to provide a balance of rights, duties and commitments for both employers and employees.

Research strongly suggests that precarious, untransparent employment forms tend to influence safety reporting as well as aircrew's operational decisions negatively, by creating incentives to balance decisions towards commercial considerations instead of safety.

The employment contract is the first and most basic foundation of the relationship between the staff/employee and the organization he/she works for.

If this relationship results in a one-sided approach – where most or all the burdens are on the employee's side while the organisation elegantly rids itself of even the most basic social commitments – then the organisation will hardly be able to generate either motivation (except through fear) or psychological safety.

One can argue therefore that, to create an environment where all staff will feel confident to balance their decisions and actions according to safety priorities, transparent and well-adjusted employment conditions – as related to the basic contract form – are an absolute requirement. Direct, open-ended employment contracts therefore form the very basis for developing and strengthening a **Positive Organisational Culture** as well as organizational resilience.

Self-Actualization Needs

Leads and motivates, subject matter expert, independent

Esteem Needs

Recognition, feeling of accomplishment

Belonging Needs

Co-operative colleagues, supportive bosses

Safety Needs

Stable employment, safe work environment

Physiological Needs

Salary, basic mental health

Conclusion

The industry has emerged from the Covid pandemic weakened and many problems and challenges that were underlying have become visible, as demonstrated by the inability to retain staff and (re)hire a wealth of diverse talent to guarantee the industry's survival and resilience. The economic and environmental challenges that our industry will face over the coming years will only exacerbate this situation.

From a safety point of view, ECA believes that the aviation industry needs to build on and evolve from the current 'Just Culture' concept and move towards seeing safety culture and corporate organisational culture as strongly interdependent. You cannot have one without the other.

ECA is convinced that Positive Organisational Culture in Aviation will enable organisations to become not only resilient in a safety context but also in a wider economic context, as well as improving their financial, social and environmental sustainability in the long term.

As a way forward, industry stakeholders, including regulators, are invited to collaborate on the concept of organisational 'Positive Organisational Culture in Aviation' to define, foster and implement best practices for all stakeholders in the aviation value chain.

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