Safety First and the Wide Grey Line

As well as being known to many aviators for his role in organising the annual Healthy Bastards Bush Pilot Champs at Omaka, his bush flying instructing skills, and his employment with Sounds Air, Craig Anderson is passionate about managing safety in aviation in a simple and practical manner whereby employees are empowered to use common sense. He offers a worthy viewpoint in the following:

In our modern world, we are bombarded with safety slogans every day such as:
- SAFETY FIRST
- NO SUBSTITUTE FOR SAFETY
- NO SAFETY, KNOW PAIN, etc.

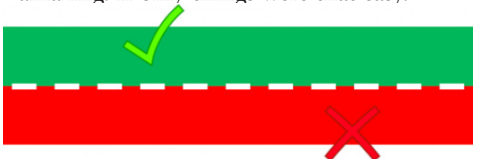
They are put in our faces by the 'Safety Industry' to keep us all in fear that if we don't comply with the myriad of rules and regulations we will instantly become 'unsafe', and bad things will happen.

Life isn't that Simple

To me it makes no sense to talk about 'Safety' like it is some magic wand that we can wave over our lives, or 'Do', and everything will be ok.

No Safety - Know Pain. Life just isn't that simple.

It's like putting a dotted white line through life and saying if you cross it you are 'unsafe' and in mortal danger, but if you obey the rules and don't cross it you are 'safe' and all will be fine. Sounds amazing! If only things were that easy.



There is no such thing as 'safe', or 'unsafe'. Safe to me, might be incredibly risky to you. And what you see as perfectly okay, I may well think is very dodgy.

The reality is that some things can be 'safer' than others, but nothing is perfectly 'safe' unless we don't get out of bed in the morning (and even then an earthquake might cause the roof to collapse).

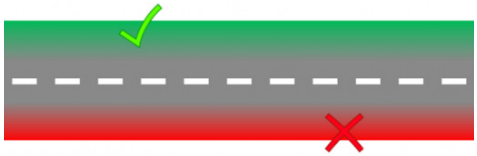
One road intersection may be safer than another, but there is still always the chance of a car crash.

One worksite might be safer than another due to management and staff diligence, but there is still the possibility of a worker falling off a ladder, or tripping over.

One school playground might be safer than another due to better design, but kids will always find ways to hurt themselves.

The Wide Grey Line

The dotted white line in reality is actually a wide grey line where there are decisions to be made by people involved in the everyday situation. And those decisions will determine how safe the



activity actually is.

This is where staff training, and good old fashioned common sense play their crucial roles. I have found staff respond really well when you train them in why we do things the way we do, and what the consequences can be if we get it wrong. Then let them (and back them to) make the day to day decisions to navigate the wide grey line.

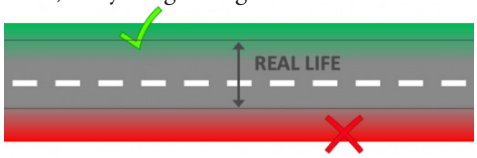
Is there a place for Rules and Procedures?

None of this is to say that there isn't a place for rules and procedures in our lives or in the workplace. That is the process of improvement. Mistakes are made, we learn better and safer ways to do something, and then pass it on to others by way of a new procedure.

But when we start putting so many rules in place to comply with that they begin to replace letting people make their own common sense decisions, that is when 'safety' is not about safety anymore, but more about an industry of compliance, non-compliance, and prosecution.

Real Life

For businesses that let their staff make their own decisions, and encourage healthy feedback and incident reporting, a good SMS or Safety Management System can allow you to navigate the wide grey line in a manner that is efficient, cost effective, and safe. I have found that most real life situations generally tend to sit between the black lines on the diagram below – from the green area (minimal risk) to the edge of the red area (moderate risk). Anything sitting well into the red



area should have some serious thought put into it to reduce the risk if at all possible.

Three Key Points to Conclude

1. Nothing is perfectly safe. There is always some risk, and that is represented by the wide grey line.
2. Rules, regulations and procedures alone do not determine safety. They can assist at times, but good training, common sense, and allowing people to make well informed decisions is actually the key to safety.
3. Along with the above, a good SMS system can assist to navigate the wide grey line, helping keep your business cost both effective and safe (within the boundaries you determine).

Craig Anderson

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