WORKING PAPER

ASSEMBLY — 42ND SESSION

TECHNICAL COMMISSION

Agenda Item 24: Aviation Safety and Air Navigation Priority Initiatives

POSITIVE SAFETY CULTURE

(Presented by Oman, Singapore, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), the International Federation of Air Line Pilots' Associations (IFALPA), the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF), the Civil Air Navigation Services Organisation (CANSO), and co-sponsored by Dominican Republic and the International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers Associations (IFATCA))

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ICAO has recognized the importance of positive safety culture in Annex 19 — *Safety Management* and supporting guidance material. However, challenges remain that prevent effective implementation of positive safety culture principles that must be addressed to improve the level of safety in aviation. Positive safety culture is foundational to effective safety management. A culture must exist in which all employees feel responsible for safety, are encouraged and expected to report safety-related information and have sufficient trust in the system to be active participants in identifying hazards, including reporting their own errors. Contributors to these safety reporting systems must have confidence that they will be treated as valued partners in enhancing safety performance and not face retribution as the result of reporting. Leaders at all levels of service providers and regulators must demonstrate commitment to implementation of Positive Safety Culture through words and actions.

Action: The Assembly is invited to:

a) acknowledge positive safety culture as foundational to reducing the risk of accidents and serious incidents;

b) recognize that strong, sustained, and demonstrated commitment from senior leadership – including through driving the integration of safety into business strategies, processes, and performance measures – is critical for fostering a positive safety culture;

c) request ICAO to develop dedicated guidance material to harmonize the definition, understanding, implementation, and assessment of positive safety culture principles and concepts;

d) request ICAO to encourage practical application of positive safety culture principles and concepts within States and Industry through capacity-building activities, such as trainings, seminars, and sharing of best practices; and

e) encourage States to foster a regulatory and social environment that enables a positive safety culture.

Strategic Goals:	This working paper relates to Strategic Goals *Every Flight is Safe and Secure;* and *No Country Left Behind*.

Financial implications:	The ICAO activities referred to in this paper are expected to be undertaken within the resources available in the 2026-2028 Regular Programme Budget and/or from extra budgetary contributions as guided by the ICAO Business Plan 2026-2028.
References:	Annex 19 — *Safety Management* Doc 9859, *Safety Management Manual (SMM)* ICAO Safety Management Implementation (SMI) website.

1.   **INTRODUCTION**

1.1   Aviation is a complex socio-technical system in which risks must be managed to an acceptable level. When the safety system fails to manage risks, serious incidents or accidents can occur. By continuously and proactively identifying hazards and managing risk, current safety levels will continue to improve.

1.2   A positive safety culture is foundational to reducing the risk of accidents and serious incidents. International surveys and many expert academic papers have revealed that many incidents go unreported because those involved are fearful of management or regulatory authority disciplinary actions. Benefits of positive safety culture go beyond the identification and mitigation of hazards. positive safety culture acts as an essential enabler for a successful business. By embracing positive safety culture concepts such as learning culture, organizations improve performance and engagement across all functional areas.

2.   **DISCUSSION**

2.1   A positive safety culture promotes voluntary, non-punitive reporting of safety-related risks, which is essential for proactively identifying hazards and managing risks. An uninhibited flow and exchange of information is vital to improving safety. Criminalizing or punishing human error obstructs this flow.

2.2   A positive safety culture helps in identifying complex interrelated system vulnerabilities and prevents accidents by addressing latent risks within the system. It recognizes that errors are inherent in any system and that there is far more value in identifying and addressing hazards than in seeking punishment. The goal of a positive safety culture is not to seek immunity for misconduct. A positive safety culture finds its limits when deliberate misconduct, criminal activity, or intentional recklessness is clearly established.

2.3   Overall organizational culture sets an important context that helps shaping and enhancing the safety culture. Given that air operations are both safety-critical and human-centered, the organizational culture needs to be based on positive safety culture principles. This facilitates psychological safety in the organization, where people feel comfortable speaking openly about existing and potential risks that may affect the organization.

2.4   Senior leadership commitment is fundamental to fostering and sustaining a positive safety culture within an organization. To achieve this, all levels of leadership must not only communicate but also model and reinforce operational safety culture concepts, demonstrating an unwavering dedication to safety through both words and actions. Evolving safety culture is an organizational change that requires time, consistency, and continuous engagement from leadership at all levels to ensure that safety remains a core value embedded in daily operations and decision-making processes. Leadership should actively participate in safety initiatives, visibly champion safety efforts, and continuously seek ways to improve and reinforce

a proactive safety mindset among employees and leaders. The International Air Transport Association (IATA)'s safety leadership initiative advances this goal through its safety Leadership Charter. The Charter is geared toward strengthening organizational safety culture by emphasizing safety leadership as a core driver of continuous improvement in safety performance. The Charter promotes a clear commitment to key leadership principles and encourages practical, actionable steps to embed these principles throughout the organization.

2.5   One of the most critical components of a positive safety culture is the development of non-punitive safety reporting programs. Employees must feel confident that they can report safety concerns, incidents, or hazards without fear of punishment or retaliation, such as disciplinary, civil, administrative or criminal proceedings. By fostering an open and transparent reporting system, organizations can proactively identify and mitigate potential risks before they escalate. This approach not only enhances safety but also strengthens trust between employees and leadership, as well as service providers and regulators, reinforcing the idea that safety is a shared responsibility.

2.6   Empowering frontline workers and their representatives to embrace their role as safety advocates is equally essential in creating a workplace where everyone actively contributes to maintaining high safety standards. Leadership should encourage and support employees in voicing concerns, suggesting improvements, and taking ownership of safety initiatives. By cultivating an atmosphere of trust, organizations can promote open communication and ensure that safety concerns are addressed in a timely and effective manner. Employees should feel valued and confident that their input has a meaningful impact on the organization's safety performance.

2.7   Additionally, the organizational strategy, structure and processes should be intentionally designed to enable a positive safety culture environment and facilitate a free flow of safety-related information upward and downward. This means that all stakeholders, from frontline workers to senior leadership, should have timely access to safety-related information, to enable effective decision-making and continuous learning and improvement.

2.8   This two-way transparent and consistent communication builds trust and fosters an environment where safety becomes a core organizational value, fully integrated into daily operations, with empowered, engaged and informed employees at every level.

2.9   Ultimately, leadership commitment to safety must extend beyond rhetoric and be demonstrated through consistent actions. Prioritizing safety requires credibility, transparency, and a steadfast dedication to clear and open communication. Leaders must actively engage in safety discussions, allocate resources to support safety initiatives, and remain accountable for the organization's overall safety performance. By consistently reinforcing safety values, maintaining accountability, and leading by example, leadership can build a resilient, proactive safety culture that permeates every level of the organization. When safety becomes an integral part of an organization's identity, it fosters an environment where employees feel supported, valued, and motivated to uphold the highest safety standards in everything they do.

2.10   Currently, Annex 19 provides a framework for safety management systems (SMS) and State safety programmes (SSPs). Further guidance on implementing a positive safety culture would be of benefit. The development of a comprehensive (or "enhanced") ICAO guidance on safety culture will support a consistent definition, shared understanding, a harmonized approach to implementation, and the ongoing assessment of positive safety culture principles and practices. This harmonization will enhance safety outcomes and promote a unified approach to safety management, benefiting the entire aviation industry.

2.11   To assess implementation of positive safety culture at the service provider, States would benefit from guidance on the assessment of positive safety culture and measurement of implementation of positive safety culture.

3.   **CONCLUSION**

3.1   In conclusion, the management of safety within States and industry can be greatly enhanced through the implementation of policies and regulations to enable a harmonized understanding, and fair and consistent application of positive safety culture principles across organizational areas, hierarchies, and functions. The practical application of these principles can be developed though capacity-building initiatives and sharing of best practices. positive safety culture fosters trust within organizations which is essential for the continuous flow of open and proactive safety reporting. Actions for the Assembly are included in the executive summary.

— END —