

Understanding the Relationship Between Safety Culture & SMS Maturity

Reference: FAA Order 8900.1 Volume 17








Safety Culture

Safety Culture is the shared values, actions, and behaviors that demonstrate a commitment to safety over competing goals and demands.

- Strong safety culture fosters trust, open communication, and proactive identification of risk.
- These cultural traits help an organization develop a more mature SMS.
- As safety culture strengthens, the organization becomes better able to systematically identify hazards and manage risk.



Cultural Traits That May Be Observed

Trait	Description	Observable Behaviors
	Personnel understand safety risks and system operations through training and open communication.	Regular and transparent sharing of safety data.
	The organization adapts quickly to operational changes or unexpected conditions.	Cross functional coordination, timely procedural adjustments.
	Balances accountability and learning.	Reports of errors or hazards without fear of reprisal.
	Encourages employees to share concerns and safety data.	Accessible, non punitive reporting systems
	Uses lessons learned to prevent recurrence.	Trend analysis, corrective action tracking, continuous improvement initiatives.

A Key Point: A positive safety culture supports a mature and effective SMS. It is reflected in leadership commitment, workforce engagement, and how openly safety information flows throughout the organization.

Observation Tip: How is safety practiced in daily operations? Look beyond the manuals and company policies.

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How SMS Maturity Can Be Identified

Observations of safety culture, organizational processes, and operational decision making provide indicators of how mature an aviation organization's SMS is.

These observations help determine where the organization falls within the SMS Maturity Level Model.

Observer Role:

- Observe leadership engagement, communication, and employee participation.
- Evaluate how cultural indicators align with process performance and decision making.
- Use critical thinking to integrate observations of culture, processes, and decision making when assessing SMS maturity.

SMS Maturity Model Overview

(Adapted from FAA Order 8900.1 Vol. 17 Figure 17 5 1A)

Level	Descriptor	Cultural Indicators	Organizational Indicators
M1 – Present	Safety Management System (SMS) exists but is policy heavy and reactive.	Communication limited; employees resist (SMS).	No meaningful evaluation; issues are typically identified externally.
M2 – Suitable	Early SMS development and process formation.	Reporting emerging; questioning attitudes forming.	Basic use of Safety Assurance (SA) data; partial system analysis.
M3 – Operating	Integrated and functioning SMS.	Open reporting; safety prioritized over production.	Safety Risk Management (SRM) applied when triggered; management engaged.
M4 – Effective	Proactive and continuously improving SMS.	Just culture established; employees drive improvement.	Full system analysis; dynamic safety objectives; proactive risk management.

Cultural observations are often leading indicators of SMS maturity.

