

Building Risk Capability a case study involving the RAAF and the PNG DF

Ian

Hello and welcome to covers micro bite on building risk capability within an organization. My name is Ian, and I'll be joined in a moment by Squadron Leader Kostya Jensen, who was part of the Defence Cooperation Program team (DCP), currently working with the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNG DF). Today we will discuss the real life example of how the Royal Australian Air Force(RAAF) worked with the PNG DF to improve its risk capability and culture in order to ensure the safe operation of its aircraft fleet. In early 2020, the RAAF established a task force to work with the PNG DF to remediate sovereign PNG DF air capability through the establishment of a new bespoke Defence Aviation Safety Framework.

The implementation of the framework enhanced support for aircrew and maintenance personnel and allowed the PNG DF to operate its reestablished air element in accordance with contemporary aviation standards. One of the key challenges to the success of this program was not only having to build the right capability, but doing this within a culture that considered and accepted risks within acceptable limits.

As the RAAF senior engineering adviser to PNG DF Squadron Leader Jensen had a key role in the project. Kostya, thanks for joining us and agreeing to tell us more about your experiences with this project.

Kostya

G'day Ian, thank you very much for this opportunity to share our experiences and explain this project to those that are listening and watching us online.

Ian

Can I start by asking what approach you used to identify the risks associated with the program?

Kostya

Once on the ground the team began to review the existing PNG DF systems and establish what was needed for the PNG DF to effectively and safely operate their aircraft within a contemporary aviation rules based environment.

One of the key challenges of this project was to build a common understanding of the risks and issues faced to ensure the success of the project. Then once this was agreed by both ourselves and the PNG DF our next challenge was to commence an organisational cultural change process that recognized the need to develop a greater level of risk management capability.

Ian

And how did you do that?

Kostya

So to do it successfully it was very important for us to understand the PNG DF organisational structure and the PNG working environment within which we have to embed ourselves in. Close engagement with our PNG DF element partners, as well as with the PNG Civil Aviation Safety Authority was critical in ensuring that we adequately understood the risks and challenges we were dealing with.

Ian

And what kind of risk based training programs were undertaken? Was there a stark contrast in behaviors, norms and risk related values that needed to be reevaluated?

Kostya

Some members of the PNG team were used to doing things in a certain way that was acceptable as normal back 20-30 years ago, and their procedures to deal with risk and uncertainty had not changed. As such, well, there's a bit of work to do to change the organisational risk values and build the capability. We are now seeing a gradual change in behavior and capability itself. This has been achieved by us offering numerous training opportunities to educate the PNG DF air element team on the new Defence aviation sector framework. These included human factors training, aviation safety rules training, flight line activities training and various other lectures. However, the most important aspect was and still is the daily interaction with our PNG DF counterparts to explain and reinforce some of the key concepts of risk and then guide the PNG DF team through the framework, and as we put it into practice.

Ian

How are the new processes accepted?

Kostya

So we saw willingness to engage by the PNG DF at all levels but this was especially evident in the behavior of many junior PNG DF members. Well, they're starting to ask more questions and become more interested in this new approach. The way they handle themselves around aircraft and their approach to aviation safety for example, is one of the noticeable differences since the commencement of the program.

Ian

So can you tell us what some of the key challenges were as part of the flights of excellence program?

Kostya

Yes, there definitely were a few challenges that we had to deal with and overcome to ensure the success of the program. The first challenge for the RAAF team was to understand the situation and determine a solution that will work for a PNG DF within the existing environment. It was important that we simply didn't copy and paste a pure Australian approach to the management on risk that works for us but might not have been suitable for the PNG DF.

Ian

And what came next?

Kostya

The next key challenge was for us to communicate this approach and the aim of the program to the PNG DF air element leaders and personnel. We have to ensure that the approach and the process was simple and clear to everyone, and that everyone understood why it was important to write new procedures and adopt new practices to manage the safety of flight, which included dealing with risks and hazards. This approach was very well received by leadership and we were able to commence and undertake the required tasks.

Ian

Sounds like clear, concise communication was the key. Tell us more about the DCP.

Kostya

So the DCP team provides advice, assistance and training to our PNG DF partners. In practice this involves working with them to solve the venue challenges associated with operating and maintaining an aircraft using the newly developed safety framework and associated procedures.

Understanding the culture of the PNG DF and recognizing the importance of learning on the job was critical. One can only learn so much from reading the procedures and listening to lectures.

Ian

And have you noticed any changes?

Kostya

Yes, definitely. The first sign of this change was the wearing of the personal protective equipment on maintenance personnel working on and around the aircraft. We began to observe a more attentive attitude of the personnel on the flight line and in general with the interaction with the aircraft. This is now manifesting in the way PNG DF aircrew are assessing their own abilities and skills, before committing time to taking a particular task or a flying activity.

Ian

And Kostya before we let you go, what are the key lessons that you can take away from this project in respect to bolstering risk culture and transferring risk capability?

Kostya

Like any country PNG have their own culture and this was influenced by their environment and the people. First of all, it was important to understand these aspects. Then it is just as important to understand the organisational culture and how things are done, including their organisational structure. From there, it was critical to form a good interpersonal relationship with our counterparts and establish a common understanding of the issues and challenges as well as the ways to solve them.

Ian

So a solution that is unique to PNG was key.

Kostya

Yes, definitely Ian. It was important to remember that simply implementing an Australian methodology in PNG without any change is not the solution. While it's great to harness on our processes and systems, there is a need to adapt them to the organisational context. Where possible, a local approach should be harnessed and used as was the case for us adopting the PNG civil aviation rules for some parts of the PNG DF, Defence aviation safety framework.

Ian

And what final piece of advice would you give to the audience on a project like this?

Kostya

So, I would say knowing the capacity, knowledge and skill sets of the organisation and people you work with is critical to ensure that their approach is both effective and enduring.

A method of routinely reviewing and adjusting the adopted methodology must also be established, and it's important to understand that there will be some changes along the way. For us, this was definitely not a fire and forget type of task.

Ian

Thank you, Squadron Leader Jensen, for your comments and insights. What your team has managed to achieve on this project is impressive. As we've seen, achieving a culture that understands risk and is willing to take risks to inform decision making and build capability will support the successful achievement of outcomes. But to achieve this, it is important that all employees at every level understand and appropriately manage risk as an integral part of their day-to-day work.

I hope you found today's discussion informative and useful. Comcover can provide advice and support if you need assistance in measuring or enhancing your entity's risk capability or culture. If you include a request for support in the survey below one of Comcover's staff will be in touch.

Thank you for watching.