

How to build a good safety culture (short version)

By Stefanie Becker

In a recent interview (Skysailor Autumn 2026), Carol Liang asked me: “How do you build a good safety culture?” – Immediately, a myriad of ideas shot into my mind – a wild mix of contents from my dual roles as a Senior Safety Officer Paragliding, and a researcher in attention, perception and decision-making. So I was quickly buried under an avalanche of ideas that all seemed very important but could not be easily distilled into a simple answer (at least not by me). 😊

In a first step, I produced a fairly long, 19-page document that draws on research on human factors, aviation and other disciplines to describe the evidence behind each recommendation and explain the rationale. This document is available at <https://sibecker.com/Aviation.htm>

This article presents the short version, focusing on the following key principles:

- (1) Better communication instead of penalties;**
- (2) Ensure the legitimacy of rules and consequences;**
- (3) Encourage individual, conservative decision-making;**
- (4) Create psychologically safe environments;**
- (5) Ensure high-quality supervision;**
- (6) Model expected behaviour;**
- (7) How club management can support a good safety culture;**
- (8) Identify and resolve threats to a good safety culture.**

1.) Better communication instead of penalties

A good safety culture proactively prevents breaches of rules, avoiding the need to punish pilots. A good system for doing that is to provide important information about site access and club rules to new pilots and visiting pilots, for example via the group chat. In providing information about club rules, site rules and in site briefings, clubs should respect that memory is limited, leaky and strongly context-dependent.

A possible roadmap to foster a good safety culture that prevents breaches is thus to:

- (1) regularly provide important information instead of relying on pilots to get it themselves;
- (2) try to provide information that is easily digestible, by
 - (a) limiting information,
 - (b) providing it at the right time and
 - (c) in the relevant context; and
- (3) regularly check with pilots that they understand the information.

2.) Ensure the legitimacy of rules and consequences.

Research has revealed that rule-following increases:

- when people perceive rules and authority figures as legitimate,
- authority figures are visibly present and engaged on-site, and
- when people strongly identify with that group.

The main purpose of a flying club is to encourage and facilitate flying. Hence, rules that restrict flying need to be clearly linked to risks, such as safety risks, risks of losing access to a site, or other risks that would impair flying. Clubs should be able to justify their rules and decision-making processes and share them with their members.

Moreover, application of rules should always be solution-oriented and focused on managing the underlying risk in a way that still allows pilots to fly safely.

Rules need to be enforced by the clubs, and to build a good safety culture, this enforcement must be timely, consistent and fair. Clubs should post consequences for breaching rules on their website and point pilots to these regulations when they join or renew their memberships. Moreover, clubs should always consider the individual circumstances prior to applying a penalty, bearing in mind that most rule breaches are not deliberate acts of misconduct but the result of forgetfulness, inexperience, misunderstanding, poor judgement, or a failure to appreciate the consequences of an action.

A good approach for many rule breaches is restoration instead of punishment.

Restoration provides pilots with an opportunity to understand the impact of their actions, take responsibility, and repair any damage caused. For example, if a pilot has upset a landowner, the pilot could be asked to apologise personally to the landowner and make amends (such as bringing gifts or offering other forms of restoration). This will usually lead to better relations between the pilot, club officials and landowners, and teach pilots to take (more) responsibility for their actions.

In a good safety culture, the safety of all pilots must have priority: If, for example, the safest landing option for a pilot in a given situation is a No Landing zone, pilots should be encouraged to land there, and make amends to affected landowners afterwards. A culture in which pilots are asked to adhere to landowner rules at all times, at the danger of their own health, is not a good safety culture.

3. Encourage individual, conservative decision-making

The SAFA syllabus for PG progression is currently entirely skill-based. However, many accidents are not caused by a lack of skills, but by poor decision-making, often rooted in misjudging the conditions, overestimating one's abilities, or motivational pressures such as peer pressure or the perceived need to fly.

A strong safety culture therefore promotes individual, conservative decision-making and actively counters group bravado, record-chasing, and the pressure to fly. It teaches pilots how to make good assessments about their fitness to fly on a given day, including their physical, emotional and mental fitness (see Ready to Fly Checklist, <https://sibecker.com/Aviation.htm>). Moreover, in a good safety culture, pilots routinely hone their ability to assess weather conditions and check their ability to detect weather changes by openly exchanging their thoughts about the weather, impending conditions and other potential external risks, over the radio and whenever they are chatting on the ground.

In reviewing flights, launches and landings, the focus is also on the decision-making process rather than the outcome: In our sport, poor decisions are not always punished and may occasionally even be rewarded, simply because we get lucky. Conversely, conservative decision-making can occasionally lead to poor outcomes. In a good safety culture, conservative decision-making should always result in positive feedback, and risky decisions should be reviewed and discussed with regard to what better decision could have been made, even when nothing untoward happened.

4. Create psychologically safe environments

Creating a psychologically safe environment is vital for a good safety culture. The hallmarks of a psychologically safe environment are a shared responsibility and a culture of care and learning. Pilots should be able to focus their full attention on flying rather than worrying about being ridiculed, harshly criticised, unfairly penalised, or publicly embarrassed. Reducing these unnecessary concerns improves situational awareness, supports good decision-making, and ultimately enhances safety.

A psychologically safe environment also encourages pilots to admit mistakes, raise concerns, ask for help, and discuss incidents openly. Mistakes and rule breaches should therefore be addressed respectfully and confidentially, with the aim of understanding what happened, identifying contributing factors, and preventing similar incidents in the future—not assigning blame.

Club officials and Safety Officers play a key role in creating and maintaining this culture by modelling respectful behaviour, addressing disrespectful conduct promptly, and ensuring that all pilots feel safe to speak up.

5. Ensure High-Quality Supervision

According to SAFA guidelines, a duty pilot only needs to be a PG4 with appropriate experience with a flying site. Similarly, a PG4 with the required experience can easily become an SO for a club, by attending an SO workshop. Realistically, however, effective supervision requires skills that extend beyond flying competence, including sound judgement, effective communication, the ability to provide constructive feedback, and

the confidence to intervene when necessary. Clubs, SSOs and SOs should recognise that performing well as a duty pilot may require training and regular, high-quality feedback.

For this reason, clubs should be very selective in who they appoint as SOs. Prospective SOs should ideally be observed while acting as duty pilots and provided with mentoring and feedback. The decision to endorse a pilot as an SO should be made jointly by the club management, the existing SOs, and the Senior Safety Officers, taking into account the pilot's demonstrated ability to supervise safely and effectively.

Moreover, SSOs and club officials should invest in better education for SOs and duty pilots. A good Safety Officer understands that learning to fly places a significant cognitive burden on novice pilots and should be aware that novices can easily make serious mistakes when rushed, distracted during critical tasks, or overloaded with information at inappropriate times.

In a good safety culture, members trust the learning process, allow pilots to grow and engage in proper reporting. To reflect on past actions, identify potential mistakes, learn from them and share the lesson with other pilots is a non-negotiable part of good safety culture, and SOs must take the lead in consistently modelling this behaviour.

6. Model expected behaviour and curb risk-taking behaviour

A well-known saying is that *Actions speak louder than words*. I have found this saying to be very true. We all have a natural tendency to mimic behaviours we see and especially novice pilots often spend a significant amount of time observing others. The behaviour they see provides the most important clues to understanding how the rules should be interpreted, and what behaviours are encouraged, tolerated, or discouraged within a flying community. Hence, in a good safety culture, ideally everyone should consistently display the behaviour we want to see from others.

Naturally, pilots are all at different stages and what is risky for a novice pilot may be safe for more experienced pilots. However, novice pilots may not be aware of this and need to be reminded regularly of this. When pilots engage in risky flying, it is important to put it into context for newbies; reminding people that this is an example of high-risk flying that may require certain skills, types of wings and conditions to be executed safely.

If a pilot engages in truly risky behaviour (at any skill level), club officials, instructors, Safety Officers, and senior pilots must be willing to address this behaviours to maintain a good safety culture. Failing to address unsafe flying or other breaches of the rules sends a powerful signal that such behaviour is acceptable, regardless of what the written rules may say.

Modelling the desired behaviour is especially important for authority figures within the club – also to establish and reinforce the legitimacy of their authority. For building a perfect safety culture, it is important that all pilots consistently embody its values.

7. How club management can support a good safety culture

As outlined in the previous sections, club officials play many important roles in establishing and maintaining a strong safety culture (summarised below). In addition to these responsibilities, club management should take an active role in ensuring the ongoing safety of their flying sites. This includes fostering a strong reporting culture, identifying and mitigating safety-critical hazards, investing time and resources in site maintenance and safety improvements, and ensuring that sites are managed in a way that supports safe flying operations.

Organising working bees to complete these tasks is a good start. However, very frequent working bees that are attended by a few pilots can create tensions, as this can lead to volunteer burnout and resentment towards other club members who do not volunteer regularly, creation of an in-group that expects special treatment, or too much pressure to volunteer. To resolve or avoid these problems, club management should consider investing some money in the maintenance of safety-critical infrastructure.

Apart from that, club management should also make efforts to create an environment in which members feel empowered to contribute ideas, identify problems, and take initiative. When pilots are encouraged to take ownership of projects, they often bring valuable expertise, energy, and perspectives that would otherwise remain untapped.

8. Identifying and resolving threats to a good safety culture.

A strong safety culture requires ongoing attention and protection. Club management should actively identify and address behaviours, practices, or organisational issues that undermine safety, trust, or learning.

One source of risk arises from individual behaviour. While mistakes are an inevitable part of learning and should generally be viewed as opportunities for improvement, reckless behaviour, deliberate or repeated breaches of safety rules, or a persistent unwillingness to learn from mistakes, accept feedback, or take responsibility can pose a serious threat to a club's safety culture. Where education, mentoring, and restorative approaches have failed, club management should consider removing such pilots from the club in order to protect other members, preserve access to flying sites, and maintain a strong safety culture.

Threats to safety culture can also arise from within the organisation itself. Club committees should regularly review whether their rules, procedures, and practices continue to achieve their intended purpose and whether they inadvertently discourage participation, open communication, or good judgement. This process should actively involve club members and encourage honest feedback. In some cases, anonymous reporting mechanisms may be valuable for identifying issues such as excessive control, unhealthy politics, peer pressure, or other social dynamics that can erode trust and undermine a positive safety culture.

Maintaining a strong safety culture therefore requires not only responding to safety issues when they arise, but also continuously reflecting on and improving the way the club operates.

Summary

Ultimately, a good safety culture is a caring culture. It is characterised by respect rather than intimidation, learning rather than punishment, and shared responsibility rather than blaming and shaming. Every decision made by club officials helps shape this culture. The greatest contribution a committee can make to the safety of its pilots is therefore not simply to manage risk, but to create an environment in which everyone takes responsibility for helping each other fly safely. A practical roadmap that can help to establish or maintain a good safety culture for clubs includes the following items:

1. Establish sensible and proportionate rules;
2. Communicate rules and consequences transparently;
3. Enforce rules consistently and fairly, using restorative over punitive approaches;
4. Select Safety Officers with due care and diligence;
5. Model the behaviour the club expects of others;
6. Invest in initiatives that improve safety;
7. Encourage and support member-led initiatives; and
8. Act decisively when confronted with threats.

Club officials, Safety Officers, instructors and other senior members can help shape a good safety culture but ultimately, it is the people who make the culture. Let's work together to ensure that all pilots get home safely after every flight.

[Disclaimer: The views in this article reflect the author's own views and do not reflect the views or opinions of any of the organisations that the author is a member of.]