



## **“Best Practices – A Misunderstood Standard”**

Your Standards and Practices May Not Be As High As You Think!

*By Peter v. Agur, Jr., MBA, ATP, President  
The VanAllen Group, Inc.*

More than 98% of the hundreds of executives we have interviewed have indicated they expect their aviation services to perform Safety & Security, Service and Efficiency at “Best Practices” levels, or higher. These interviews were conducted over the past eleven years in conjunction with flight department start-ups and operational reviews our firm, The VanAllen Group, has supported.

Meanwhile, the majority of business aviation service providers (private and commercial) indicate they strive to perform to at Best Practice’s levels. But in our observations, most do not.

There are three arenas of performance of “Standards and Practices” within aviation

1. Safety and Security,
2. Service and
3. Efficiency.

The hierarchy of these three arenas should be inviolate. In other words, in order to achieve Best Practices levels of Service a delivery team should never subjugate the performance of Safety and Security.

Our observations are that most business aviation professionals and their organizations work hard to “do things right.” And they succeed most of the time. However, they are often not doing enough of the “right things” that create “Best Practices” results, or better. Part of their challenge is that there is no coherent and widely accepted delineation of what it takes to achieve “Best Practices.” This paper initiates the dialogue that can create clarity and the establishment of practical definitions of “Best Practices,” especially as they apply to Safety.

During eleven years of conducting Performance Reviews (an expanded form of an “operational audit”) we have developed a set of practical definitions for the different levels of performance. For the purposes of this presentation we focus on those definitions as they apply to the arenas of Safety and Security.



## **Definition of “Standards and Practices” as they Apply to Safety and Security**

### World Class

To be ahead of the challenges, threats and risks. In other words, performance is *anticipatory or leading edge* in nature and results.

### Best Practices

To effectively manage recognized challenges, threats and risks. In other words, performance is *proactive* in nature and results.

### Standard Practices

To adhere to prescribed minimum level processes and results as they are most often required by Regulatory Agencies (FAA, OSHA, etc.) or Original Equipment Manufacturers. In other words, performance is *failure prevention* in nature and results.

### Substandard Practices

To deliberately or coincidentally ignore minimum accepted standards or practices. In other words, performance is adjusted to accommodate for the absence of adequate resources (people, time, knowledge/information, process, or money) and leads to *marginal, or calculated, risk taking*.

### Unacceptable Practices

To deliberately go against Standard Practices. In other words, performance incorporates *intentional risk taking*.

Let me cite some examples of Sub-Standard and Unacceptable Practices of which we are aware.

### **Case 1 – Failed Fatigue Management**

A recent FAR Part 91 trip carried a top executive from Anchorage to Tokyo. Immediately upon landing at Narita, Japan, it was determined that the passenger was not able to accomplish his objectives. He asked, but did not demand, to promptly return home. The trip captain, in an effort to deliver high service, chose to accept a quick turn around and return to Anchorage without rest or an augmented crew. The two man crew's resulting duty day exceeded 20 hours without rest. In the aftermath of the trip, during discussions with his manager, the trip captain did not believe that he had done anything that reduced safety margins. In fact, when it was pointed out that his choices conflicted with departmental fatigue management policies and procedures, as delineated in the company's Flight Operations Manual, he refused to acknowledge that he would not do the same thing again under similar circumstances. To most of us, this was clearly a Sub-Standard or even an Unacceptable Practice.

The apparent confusion in this case comes from a situational assessment by the crew of the importance of Service over Safety (or risk management). The first step to preventing future confusion is to reinforce the hierarchy of deliverables: *First* we assure Safe and Secure operations, *second* we conduct the trip in a manner of service that best meets the needs and expectations of the client (the company and its passengers), and *third and last* we strive to minimize the costs in time and money it takes to achieve those results.

### **Case 2 – Cost Management over Safety and Service**

The second case also occurred on an FAR Part 91 trip. The department's chief pilot and lead technician had both perceived a significant amount of pressure to manage costs aggressively. This included an established goal to get at least 200 landings before changing nose wheel tires. The current set of tires was approaching its limits of wear when a trip to Europe hit the schedule. As a preventative measure, the technician changed out the nose tires twenty landings early. When the aircraft returned from its European trip the old tires were put back on the aircraft, despite their having less than 10% of their normal treads remaining. A week later the aircraft was dispatched halfway across the country to bring a government VIP back to a function the Chairman was hosting. A ramp check by the FAA and the Secret Service grounded the aircraft for having a nose tire that had excessive wear. The trip was covered by a hastily arranged charter trip, to the embarrassment of the owner, the chief pilot, his co-pilot and the lead technician.

Even though the executives' downtown may have set the stage for this event, the chief pilot and lead technician chose to implement practices that raised risks in an effort to lower or control costs. When we asked the executives about their pressure on costs they indicated that they had always expected their aviation professionals to always maintain assurance of Safety as an inviolate standard. Management expected their aviation professionals to tell them when costs could not be cut without reducing safety. Unfortunately, many flight department managers, both flight and floor, have a hard time confronting downtown. Many corporate cultures thrive on pushing the limits



until they are told “no” because there is an assumption of leaving money on the table. When the flight department’s leaders and members don’t share the corporate culture and business experience there is a high risk of misunderstandings and bad outcomes. Only if there is a clear hierarchy of flight services deliverables; Safety and Security, Service and then Efficiency, can the aviation professionals be expected to consistently deliver to the standards that are expected. Otherwise, you are relying on each individual’s interpretations of the rules and their performance.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to see that both of these examples led to Substandard Safety performance, or worse. Yet both of these organizations, like most business aviation service teams, believed they were routinely performing to Best Practices levels, or higher. However, when those organizations, and their customers, were presented with tangible definitions of what it takes to achieve Best Practices performance levels, they privately acknowledged the need to make changes.

Most aviation professionals are eager to adopt and achieve newly understood higher goals and objectives. And their customers are willing, for the most part, to endorse and pay for the achievement of those goals with their money and cooperation as demonstrated through proper policies and practices.

#### A Practical Test of Your Standards

You can use the following examples to gauge to what standards your organization performs. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus solely on the ultimate performance arena, Safety and Security. Then VanAllen Group has created similar criteria to grade the performance within the arenas of Service and Efficiency. Grade yourself on the results. If you meet Standard Practices count it as a “1”, Best Practices as a “2”, etc. If you don’t comply with Standard practices count that as a “0”. If the question does not apply, eliminate the question from your calculations. Your average score will give you an indication of what standards your flight department is performing for Safety and Security.

### **20 Safety and Security Check Points, A Sampling**

1. FOM/MOM
  - j. Standard Practice – A comprehensive FOM and MOM are in place
  - k. Best Practice – The FOM/MOM documents are updated regularly and initial and recurrent training is conducted each year
  - l. World Class – “b” plus staff is periodically observed and graded on adherence to FOM/MOM practices and procedures
2. Emergency Response Plan
  - j. Standard Practice – Comprehensive emergency response plan
  - k. Best Practice – “a” plus training for emergency response team followed by a tabletop exercise
  - l. World Class – “b” plus bi-annual simulations
3. Flight Crew Medical Condition Assurance
  - j. Standard Practice – Maintain a 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Physical



- k. Best Practice – Maintain a 1<sup>st</sup> Class Physical
- l. World Class – Obtain a 1<sup>st</sup> Class Physical once each year and have Executive Physical at the mid-year point
- 4. Aircraft equipment and in-flight technical information services
  - j. Standard Practice – TCAS and GPWS
  - k. Best Practice – TCAS II, EGPWS and/or TAWS, Lightning Detection, Automatic External Defibrillator (AED), high end First Aid kit, in-flight medical services subscription
  - l. World Class – “b” plus enhanced or synthetic vision system and weather uplink
- 5. Simulator training frequency, content and oversight
  - j. Standard Practice – Each crewmember receives simulator training once per each twelve months
  - k. Best Practice – Each crewmember receives simulator training twice per year (in one or two aircraft types)
  - l. World Class – Simulator training is conducted twice per year as a crew in no more than two types to your own syllabus and is observed by a supervisory pilot at least annually
- 6. Cabin Safety training for crews and passengers
  - j. Standard Practice – Thorough in-cabin demonstration of safety features, procedures and equipment
  - k. Best Practice – Classroom and in-cabin or mock-up-based crew and key passenger training that includes simulations
  - l. World Class – “b” plus training is mandatory and repeated on a periodic basis (i.e., every two years)
- 7. Maintenance Technician training
  - j. Standard Practice – The lead technician has aircraft type-specific initial training plus bi-annual recurrent training and supervises all work by those who have not
  - k. Best Practice – All technicians that work in an aircraft have type-specific initial training plus bi-annual recurrent training
  - l. World Class – “b” plus all technicians receive annual ancillary training (engine, avionics, electrical, or trouble shooting, etc.)
- 8. Maintenance specifications and oversight
  - j. Standard Practice – There is the routine use of trained in-house staff and of a single certified service center for selected inspections and actions
  - k. Best Practice – There is the routine use of trained in-house staff and a periodic rotation of certified service centers for selected inspections and actions
  - l. World Class – “b” plus all external maintenance is closely supervised by an in-house senior technician or inspector
- 9. Flight Attendant use on cabin aircraft on all FAR Part 91 passenger flights
  - j. Standard Practice – Use of flight attendant is optional
  - k. Best Practice – Use flight attendants on all multiple passenger trips and any trip with unfamiliar passengers
  - l. World Class – Use flight attendants for all legs with passengers aboard



10. The use and management of day crews and technicians
  - j. Standard Practice – Use only type-rated and simulator-current day crewmembers (as SIC-only) and fully licensed technicians
  - k. Best Practice – “a” plus conduct a thorough crewmember orientation prior to each trip and directly supervise all day technician work
  - l. World Class – “b” plus each day crewmember is captain qualified and all day technicians have type-specific initial and bi-annual recurrent training
11. Fatigue and Rest Management – Adhere to NBAA/Flight Safety Foundation guidelines on all flights (i.e., 14 hour maximum continuous duty day, etcetera, with at least 11.5 hours between the last landing and the next takeoff and no more than 6 consecutive flight days without at least one day off)
  - j. Standard Practice – Scheduling adheres to established guidelines and varies (within approved limits) only with complicity of flight management, crews exceed those limits within reason considering the conditions – without outside approval
  - k. Best Practice – Any variances are approved only with unanimous consent of both the crew and management
  - l. World Class – Scheduling and flight crews never exceed FSF/NBAA guidelines
12. Trip team briefing and debriefing
  - j. Standard Practice – Crewmember conducts asynchronous briefing (via media or in person) with Scheduling and Maintenance prior to trip departure and debriefs asynchronously (via media or in person) with Scheduling and Maintenance
  - k. Best Practice – Crew conducts in person briefing with Scheduling and Maintenance prior to trip departure and debriefs (via media or in person) with Scheduling and Maintenance
  - l. World Class – Crew conducts in person briefing with Scheduling and Maintenance prior to trip departure and debriefs in person with Scheduling and Maintenance upon return
13. Pre-departure briefings for passengers
  - j. Standard Practice – Conduct a complete briefing (electronic or in person) prior to the first departure of the day and again for each new passenger added during the day
  - k. Best Practice – “a” plus an abbreviated briefing for all other departures.
  - l. World Class – Conduct a complete personalized briefing prior to all departures
14. Pre-takeoff crew briefing
  - j. Standard Practice – Rigorously train as a crew for departure anomalies
  - k. Best Practice – Conduct a complete crew briefing prior to the first departure of the day and an abbreviated briefing prior to all other departures
  - l. World Class – Conduct a complete briefing prior to all departures
15. Ground handling, at home and away
  - j. Standard Practice – The crew stays with the aircraft until servicing (fuel, lavatory, de-icing, etc.) is complete



- k. Best Practice – “a” plus a flight department member oversees all aircraft ground movements and assures that two wing walkers are used at all times
  - l. World Class – “b” plus crewmember assures that cones and parked aircraft separation standards are adhered to (no overlap of wing or tail, 3 feet or more horizontal separation, etc.)
16. Facility safety and security
- j. Standard Practice – Your facility and procedures are OSHA and TSA/NBAA security guidelines compliant
  - k. Best Practice – “a” plus fall protection is rigorously used for all off-floor work that exceeds 3 feet in elevation and you conduct security training for all hands once per year
  - l. World Class – “B” plus you conduct external safety and security audits in alternating years
17. Aircraft security, at home and away
- j. Standard Practice – When at home the aircraft doors are closed and locked when no one is in the hangar (not including the office) and when away the aircraft doors are closed and locked whenever no crewmember is present
  - k. Best Practice – “b” plus the aircraft is disabled and intrusion detection systems (passive or active) are in place when the aircraft is unattended away from home
  - l. World Class – “c” plus the aircraft is actively monitored by security personnel whenever it is parked
18. Facility security
- j. Standard Practice – Facility and practices meet TSA/NBAA security guidelines
  - k. Best Practice – “a” plus parking lot and facility perimeter are secure at all times (hangar doors are never left open without active monitoring by personnel)
  - l. World Class – “b” plus corporate security actively monitors facility and perimeter security 24/7
19. Security information and liaison
- j. Standard Practice – Acquire general security information about unusual destinations and maintain a casual relationship with corporate security
  - k. Best Practice – Get specific security briefings and updates and maintain a proactive relationship with corporate security
  - l. World Class – Develop and maintain a partnership relationship with corporate security
20. Security training and practices
- j. Standard Practice – All airport staff are trained to TSA/NBAA security standards
  - k. Best Practice – “a” plus all visitors are identified, signed in and given visitor badges and staff recurrent training is conducted annually
  - l. World Class – “b” plus all visitors are approved for either accompanied or unaccompanied facility access plus security audits are conducted annually



Total your score and calculate your average. Don't be surprised if your score is lower than you expected. Fewer than 10% of the dozens of flight departments we have reviewed have achieved a 2.0 or higher. And they are among the best and brightest.

Use this paper as a starting point for establishing open and constructive debate within your department. Create your own set of criteria for performance and their measurable definitions. As you proceed, discipline and rigor are the difference between checking the boxes and doing the deed.

Our intent in this presentation is to stimulate dialogue that can lead to a growing acceptance of specific definitions of standards and the practices that bring them to fruition. In the end, we hope to help you close the gap between what your clients expect from you and what you may be actually delivering.

### **The Beginning**

Pete Agur is the founder of *The VanAllen Group*, a management consulting firm for Business Aviation. His work has been cited in numerous national and industry periodicals, including *The Wall Street Journal*, *FORTUNE*, *Business and Commercial Aviation*, *Aviation International News*, *Professional Pilot*, and the *Business Aviation Management Journal*.

Pete holds a Master of Business Administration (MBA) from Georgia State University and a Bachelor of Science (summa cum laude) in Aeronautical Sciences from Denver's Metropolitan State College. He is an active member of the Flight Safety Foundation's *Corporate Advisory Committee* (formerly the Vice-Chairman) and is on the National Business Aviation Association *Corporate Aviation Management Committee*. He is also a member of the Society of Aerospace Communicators and the Aviation Speakers Bureau. He is frequently a guest lecturer and keynote speaker at universities, colleges, and industry programs. He is a frequent contributor to *Business Aviation Management Journal*, *Business Aviation Safety Journal*, and *Business Jet Traveler* magazines.