

ANALYSIS OF THE ROMANIAN AIR FORCE SQUADRON ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

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***Abstract:** The current article aims at analyzing some of the methods by which the organizational culture of the aviation squadron manages to focus mainly on people and relationships they establish, which builds a particular universe, surrounded by magnetism and sustained by the feeling of belonging to a special group, of collaboration and open communication. The main features of the squadron culture constitute the foundation of this universe, whereas the standard specifications, rules, beliefs and strategies utilized for achieving goals are followed willingly, with responsibility, and not imposed compulsorily.*

***Keywords:** squadron, symbol, patch, behavior*

1. KNOW-HOW. ACQUISITION. CONFIDENCE

Know-how represents the whole body of information and skills that a person uses in solving problems. It is based on facts and data, but, unlike such issues, know-how involves people and it has two dimensions: individual and collective.

The individual dimension consists of the personal memory, experience, talent and abilities that each of the pilots of the squadron acquires during his instruction, training and progress.

This dimension materializes by professional meetings, mandatory controls in flight and annual exams (for maintaining/obtaining the flight license, physical).

The collective dimension is related to the integration of individual knowledge and the creation of relationship networks between members; the rules, standards and values shared by these members are more important in terms of organizational culture.

The squadron facilitates a knowledge-based environment, in which the item of information needed for the on-going activity can be accessed by every member without restriction.

Pilots share their every day work experience during the debrief meetings as well as throughout the spare time they spend together.

The modern techniques of spreading information (computer, storage and recording media, internet) constitute the foundation for the personnel's training; nevertheless, stories, informal gatherings, or even the visual observation of others' work (ground observation of the aircraft evolution until it gets on final) have a considerable share for the progress in flight technique.

The human factor cannot be excluded either, since it holds great importance; the more experienced pilots have the moral obligation to assist the less experienced ones with using the modern technology.

The squadron's youngest members, despite their detaining fresh theoretical knowledge upon graduation, are helped with the aircraft operation by the ones with experience and so, they can easily overcome possible troublesome situations.

Informing and direct communication are important and the most important parts of the entire activity within the squadron. Throughout debriefing, following the flight mission, malfunctions are identified, both success and failures are being shared among the members of the squadron, and optimal solutions for the accomplishment of future missions are being looked for. Any emergency situation that occurs in flight is immediately communicated, even if it didn't affect the mission to a great extent.

Further checks will attempt to identify the insecurity-generating factors that might impact upon the flight performance.

Accordingly, most of the flight shortcomings have turned into lessons learned for every pilot and such events have been analyzed and debated on, in order to avoid air catastrophes:

- during a flight aboard an *IAK-52*, the pilot experienced the obstruction of an one-way clack valve, malfunction which did not appear in the exploitation standards, therefore the squadron personnel identified, evaluated and solved the problem, which afterwards became specific situation mentioned in the Flight Manual;

- during a certain flight period aboard an *IAR-99 Hawk*, there were recordings related to certain “GPS blanks” and to a lack of signal on the board avionics. While executing the missions, the pilots paid attention to the variation of signals, observed them and reported them, so that further flight activity was planned in such a way that it did not overlap with the mentioned “blanks”.

The squadron commander manifests his faith in the other pilots by planning their solo flights or double-command flights against complex scenarios.

At the same time, his delegation of authority and responsibilities is a proof of trust offered to the followers: the drawing of the flight plan is the job of the second in command, the flight instructors are responsible with the theoretical learning of new flight exercises, the flight leaders check the training of the pilots etc.

By the fact that no one questions the commander’s decisions, but obey them, because “he knows what he is doing”, and by everyone’s inquiries related to the correctness of the accomplished work, one can notice the faith shown by pilots in their squadron leader.

2. COMPONENTS SPECIFIC TO THE SQUADRON ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

My personal experience gained throughout the activities performed within a squadron and my collaboration with members of other similar organizations helped me to identify the essential elements of the organizational culture, which can be divided into intrinsic components, psychological (virtues, beliefs, assumptions – “who and what we are”; “what we consider to be important”) and extrinsic components, attitudes (standards, rituals, symbols “how we interact with the things around us”).

Myths and symbols are “the facts” which help the newly employed pilots to get an idea about the values, standards and behavior of the other members of the organization, in order for them to adjust to this organization’s demands. “Stories” tell about facts which led to certain behaviors, they tell about important people or visionary who offered a new perspective to the organization, or past achievements.

People’s desire to fly, to conquer the unknown, has existed since immemorial times, and it made room for myths and legends: Pegasus, the feathered horse, Daedalus and Icarus, the first human beings who built wing of wax to evade from King Minos’ maze, and even Alexander the Great, who tied four mythical birds to a basket so he could fly around his kingdom, all these attempts revealed the human being’s call of the boundless and eternal sky.

Leonardo da Vinci, forefather of aviation, acknowledged: “Once one has attempted to fly, one will always walk on earth keeping one’s eyes towards the sky, the place one has conquered and where one desires to return”.

Living in the spirit of this profound feeling, pilots experience the witness status in front of a miracle; they could reach the space where, long ago, Romanian aviation pioneers, such as Aurel Vlaicu, Traian Vuia, Henri Coanda dared to get, through a lot of sacrifices.

Within every squadron, there are names that sound clearly in the mind of its members and which the newly come respect even if they did not meet any of them: Victor Huci, Mircea Toader, Doru Davidovici, Dorel Luca, Valer Muresan being but a few examples out of many other possibilities.

The squadron language has become its own professional jargon, characterized by slogans and mottos which hold a stimulating role in the minds of its members and which are meant to transmit the organization's philosophy, while having a deep emotional impact rather a rational one. Some sayings are generally known by all members of the Romanian air force:

- "Every pilot shows up for his first flight carrying two bags: a full one, on which LUCK is imprinted, and an empty one, named EXPERIENCE. The challenge consists of filling out the EXPERIENCE bag, as much as possible, right before the LUCK bag dries out".

- "The plane doesn't care about the chain of command/ military ranks"

Other sayings display a coded language, more laconically formulated and synthesized, which bear meaning only for the members of a certain squadron.

- "I'd rather fly one solo than ten doubles" – the solo flight being much more important than the one with double command.

- "Aviation is like loving a lion" - it is hard work and involves training with short but intense satisfaction.

- "If your flight resulted in a good debrief, you'd better stop flying or you'll spoil the briefing".

Nicknames, representative for every pilot, are part of the informal register used in direct communication. They are known and used by the squadron members, thus contributing to building a stronger bound among them: Soacra, Neica, Chioru (QXU), Ciff, Tatoo, Talpa, Kapra, Papadie, Cap Mare, etc.

Traditions, rites and customs highlight the important ideas and events of the squadron life.

The events carrying a deep emotional load are celebrated through air shows, each year: The Aviation Day (20th of July), the Romanian aviation pioneer, Aurel Vlaicu's day (13th of September), "n" years since the first jet flight in Romania etc.

The most wanted moment, charged with strong positive emotion, in the evolution of a young pilot is his or her first solo flight, when he or she has the chance to prove that he/she can and is worthy joining the cast.

Connected to this moment is the "baptism" ritual where the pilot is downed and covered with thorns, symbol of the work and sacrifice the aviation asks for.

A special ritual, specific to a certain air combat squadron, occurs every full moon night, when the pilots meet at the Roman Castrum, Potaissa.

One long tolling officially opens the meeting and from that moment all the members obey the rules of the Chronicle, in whose pages a sort of minute of the meeting is recorded, together with lessons learned, personal experiences and sayings.

During this ritual the "Numbskull of the month" is distinguished (the one who had made the most flight mistakes throughout that month), there are stories told, experience shared, so that any barriers between members are destroyed within this informal gathering which comes to strengthen the relationships among crew members. The Chronicle reminded earlier creates a bound between the squadron pilots, it being the fundamental element of an initiation ritual.

Each new member is granted a page in the Chronicle, which he will later on personalize with his own thoughts, verses, sketches, the only condition being that the page should not be removed from the Chronicle.

With the passage of time, other events became traditions, among which we could remind of the annual reunion of the members who left the organization, the instructors' celebration of their first student-pilot who executed a solo flight, or the parties at the end of the flight period where new connections are being established, memories are shared and everyone "talks aviation".

The favorable atmosphere for flight and work is influenced by the architecture of the surroundings, the comfort of the rooms where the pilots are trained, the places where they recover or rest.

The rooms' decoration offers the sentiment of affiliation with all the diplomas, plates, scenes and patches displayed on walls, which brings back memories of the important moments that happened, of the people who are no longer members of the squadron.

All these elements confer a psychological comfort, the sentiment of security and brotherhood.

The social-moral climate is built on collaboration, direct communication, trust and friendship. Personal development is metaphorically compared with an "acorn" which grows due to the fluids extracted from the "soil" of the structure: "be there and do not deny what the structure teaches you", because "even if we are distinct individuals, a great part of our experience is molded by the others" (a reflection written in the pages of the Chronicle).

The logo, the flag, the patch and different emblems epitomize for the squadron, enrich its cultural heritage, render the symbols which need to be respected and transmit in a secret way, the essence of the organization's existence, synthesized in distinctive logos.

The emblem of the IAK-52 Training School Squadron symbolizes the hard work involved in the instruction of the student pilots. The foundation of the emblem is the phrase "Pull-Push" because every student, in his initiation phase, is working against the instructor with abrupt and bullied movements.

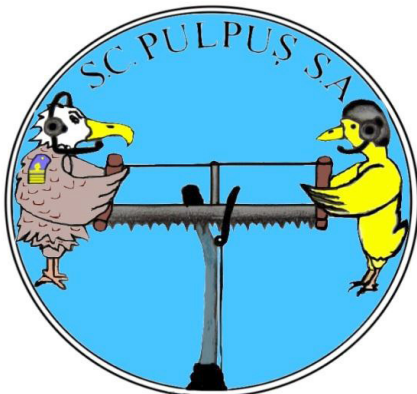


Fig. 1 IAK-52 Training School Squadron's emblem

The 71st Air Base's logo, represented by seven towers on blue background – Transylvania stronghold, suggests the protection of the air space which the flotilla provides for the entire region, their activity being carried under the protection of God Himself - "Nothing without God".



Fig. 2 The 71st Air Base's logo

A patch, suggestive for the idea of membership and for what the group with its own values and beliefs means, is illustrated in picture 3, emblem of the 712th Air Fighter Squadron.

Inspired by the Dacian wolf, symbol of power, strength, confidence, vigilance and affection, the logo stands for the bridge between work and collaboration.

The idea of success obtained as a result of teamwork is found in the motto "Vis Lupi Est Grex"- "The strength of the wolf lies with the pack".



Fig. 3 712th Air Fighter Squadron's emblem

The system of values and code of conduct are reflected by the organization structure, the strategies need to be followed, the rules and the procedures showing what is allowed and what is forbidden must be obeyed.

Many of these rules are known by the squadron members as unwritten laws: in case of the students performing their practical training, it is expected that they stay at the airfield until the end of the flight, even if their activity is over for that day, because an accurate landing should be learned and observed next to others; in a squadron, its representative patch can be worn with “full rights”, only after a first solo flight in the current squadron is achieved etc.

Knowledge of the organizational culture is imperative and useful because, on the long term, it is the most effective anticipatory element of an organization and, at the same time, the understanding of collective behavior is essential under the permanent adjustment to changes, given the aspirations of the organization members.

The knowledge of the organizational culture can be difficult for a person due to the concept that the organizational culture stands for an universe of convictions, virtues and beliefs which are offered once and for good, and which are hardly declared or questioned.

3. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we can highlight some defining features of the organizational culture of the squadron:

- philosophy, ideology, virtues, beliefs, responsibilities, hopes, feelings and the mainstems shared by the members of the organization, amplify their initiative, motivation, competitive behavior and idea of team-work, things necessary for achieving success;

- the squadron sustains communication, information, and trust so that any shared error becomes a learned lesson for all the members of the squadron and they may realize that even the most experienced pilots or technicians can make mistakes;

- the conditions of the workplace are way above the comfort condition imputed in the past and ensure the physical and psychic well being of the personnel;

- the informal connection between the members is strengthening the collaboration and team-work, which leads to better results of accomplished missions.

The organizational culture leads to work performance and optimal achievement of tasks by strengthening the relation between members of the squadron, sharing the knowledge and experience of the individual and the crew, direct information and communication, obeying written and unwritten specifications, and the values and beliefs which nurture the inner motivation for work in every pilot.

The organizational culture needs to be known both at the mythical level, through stories, slogans, heroes and ceremonies, and as reality, conditioned by strategies, structures, systems, leading rules, standards and activities.

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