



TIME TO Reboot

The recent spate of accidents involving similar types of aircraft — jet freighters and emergency medical services helicopters — is an unwelcome return to the time when accidents seemed to come in clusters, making headlines and scaring customers and regulators with the appearance of an aviation safety meltdown.

It is far too early to say for certain if these accidents have any common threads, but it isn't too early to begin devising broad-based campaigns to elevate the status and effectiveness of safety programs in the impacted segments, and maybe beyond.

Such safety initiative enhancements must start with the specific companies that have suffered losses. They must deal with actual failures, not theories of increased risk based on statistical analyses, and herein lies a threat. It will be very tempting to turn post-accident efforts into a “hard target” operation and define success as making sure that the particular accident doesn't happen again. While this aspect certainly should be attended to, if the effort ends there with a declaration of victory, this would be a return to past practices that gave rise to the criticism that regulatory agencies were involved

in “tombstone” regulation, acting only after an accident, responding only to that accident.

Aviation safety professionals and most regular readers of this publication know I'm now going to say that the involved companies should move beyond the accident specifics and conduct a top-to-bottom assessment of their corporate culture and the place safety has in it. If there are questions about where to start, many find great benefit from an independent audit of their operation that stakes out in very clear terms both the starting point and a goal.

Next in line are the industry segment leaders who should guide a wider effort to realign safety initiatives to better address accidents and incidents that point to poor practices.

Other operators in those segments are cautioned to avoid the “it didn't happen to us” mindset that assumes that the absence of accidents is solid proof that you do not have a safety problem. Even if operations are safe, I believe a wise course of action is for operators to take the poor outcomes of others as a signal that it is time to rededicate and reinvigorate their own programs. And, importantly, this

periodic rededication should extend beyond the affected segments.

This is really the main point of this month's rant: Safety programs are not perpetual-motion machines. Eventually, they run down and lose the dynamism that made them so successful, the safety rhetoric becomes stale and overly familiar, and staff focus weakens. To borrow a metaphor from the computer world, every now and then any safety program must be rebooted, pulled down, taken apart, old files dumped and then reassembled to address today's threat environment and changes that are now on the horizon but were not apparent when the program was first envisioned.

Of course, this is not to say that a program with good continuous improvement dynamics will inevitably become fatally weakened. But even the best programs can benefit from an occasional overhaul, just to be on the safe side.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J.A. Donoghue".

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