

# CHANGING THE Conversation

I have been in the news lately — at least in North America. I have had to make strong statements about the loss of voluntary reporting systems at a couple of the world's biggest airlines.

Flight Safety Foundation has made a major effort to protect these programs from the threat of criminalization. But this time, problems developed amid discussions among management, labor and the regulator. Disagreement developed around the extent of protection within the systems. In one case, the disagreement was triggered by a specific event, in another by the need to renew the program.

In my experience the people who participate in those discussions are real professionals. They work hard to keep industrial issues and safety issues apart. But, given the dynamics of the situation, sometimes they fail. Perhaps we are discussing these safety programs in an environment that is “spring-loaded to the screw-up position.”

In both cases, the loss of the reporting system was driven by issues besides safety. Let us be realistic about the dynamic that exists in those discussions and consider if this is really where we want the fate of these vital safety programs to be determined. You have somebody representing labor who can only sit at that table if the membership believes he or she is taking an appropriately hard line with management. On the other side is a manager who can't go back to his boss and say that he or she has given the other side everything it wanted. In the middle is a regulator who will be held accountable if the resulting deal makes things look too “cozy” between the regulator and industry.

A million things can create a dysfunctional discussion. Mergers and acquisitions can put management and labor at each other's throats. A regulator may have been battered by legislative inquiries, or a labor leader may be sweating a close election. Those all affect the day-to-day operation of many large airlines. They cannot be allowed to affect the future of safety systems.

So how do we change the conversation — and the result? Maybe in the U.S. it's time to make these vital voluntary reporting systems such as flight operational quality assurance (FOQA) and aviation safety action program (ASAP) mandatory through legislation, as they are in many parts of the world. Legislation could include protection so the use of the data doesn't have to be decided at every trial. There would still be difficult implementation issues, but no longer a question as to whether these programs will exist, or if their data will be protected.

To make this work, everybody would have to give up some power and flexibility. But for us it would not be the first time. Ever since I was 16 I have made choices about how I lived my life so that, some day, a parent would feel comfortable trusting the safety of their child to me in an airplane. This is just another of those choices. If we all take a second to remember why we got into this business, I think we can agree to live with it.



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