



Poisonous

Communication is key to developing a positive safety culture. This is clearly stated in every story, every column printed in this journal on the subject. You've read it before and you'll continue to read it, because without effective communication, there cannot be a productive safety culture within any organization.

This is why it is alarming to watch what is going on in the United States, where, it must be said, labor-management relations and communications are poor within the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) Air Traffic Organization (ATO) (see story, p. 12).

Once upon a time it was much worse. That was 26 years ago, when the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO), seemingly convinced that the FAA administrator at the time was the devil incarnate, walked off the job in the face of a threat that they'd be fired, which they were. My description of PATCO's attitude might seem harsh unless you have seen some of the literature that organization was sending its membership.

Today the situation is not that bad, but the paucity of communications on safety mirrors what is happening on the labor relations front, where the FAA plays defense against a nearly daily

barrage of press releases from the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) alleging one safety problem after another. Some of NATCA's charges are sufficiently grounded to have attracted the attention of the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). Not eager to jump into a labor dispute, NTSB nonetheless produced a recommendation that the FAA look into controller fatigue issues.

There is a good news aspect to this situation: The U.S. air traffic control system remains, for now, the best in the world for its size, and probably any size, at safely handling in real time such a huge number of airplanes in any kind of weather.

How this FAA vs. NATCA situation developed is a story for another sort of publication. We are concerned about fixing it. Sadly, the alignment of the stars is not favorable for a speedy cure.

FAA Administrator Marion Blakey is poorly positioned to lead reconciliation after last year's failed NATCA contract talks, and her five-year term at the agency expires in mid-September. And while transportation issues in general, and aviation more specifically, have largely been spared the past six years' partisan mud wrestling in Washington, D.C., it is

unclear that the Republican administration of President George W. Bush and a Congress controlled by Democrats will confirm a new administrator before Bush's term ends in January 2009.

The prospect of a temporary caretaker administrator compounds a leadership vacuum that got serious several months ago, when the previous head of the ATO, the highly regarded Russ Chew, left to become JetBlue Airways' chief operating officer. He has not been replaced.

Both sides are largely talking past each other, trying to make their case and garner support; the situation has the potential to become downright poisonous. With minimal safety communication now going on as traffic builds and a new air traffic control system is in development, a way must be found for leadership to take extraordinary steps to establish communication channels that work, and to keep them open.

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

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 AeroSafety World