Safety Independence

BY MIKE AMBROSE

I f today's airlines lost aircraft at the same rate that their predecessors did in the mid-1960s, politicians would be calling for urgent and radical reform, safety regulators worldwide would be open to major public criticism and many of today's air travelers would migrate to other forms of transport perceived to be safer. Examining the accident statistics of those days shows that it was not uncommon for the world's largest airlines to each lose at least one airframe a year — a rate that would be totally unacceptable today.

The past half century has seen an evolution of progressively improving safety standards and achievements. Better design and testing; better training, simulation and procedures; improved maintenance and maintainability; improved instrumentation and more. The list of all factors that have contributed to today's safer system is long and includes the efforts of many dedicated individuals in very specific areas.

Yet, it is human beings who remain at the heart of the system — aircrew, engineers/maintenance workers, ground personnel, air traffic controllers. All too often seasoned air safety professionals faced with some new event bitterly observe, "same accident, different people, location and tail logo."

Very few accident investigations do not discover weaknesses and shortcomings in practices and procedures of the airline concerned. No airline is immune. Even the best-run operators can discover, to their surprise and horror, "dirty linen" in their day-to-day management. Airline boards and managements should constantly strive to abide by the old adage "always behave in a way that you will be proud to explain at the subsequent court of inquiry."

Mike Ambrose, director general, European Regions Airline Association

If safety is to be taken to the next level of achievement, more attention must be given to "breaking the accident chain." Identification and correction of events that adversely affect air safety is essential to ensure that unusual events do not become incidents and incidents do not become accidents. The air safety committee (ASC) within each operator is a vital part of this process. Any airline that does not have such a committee should create one. It is a vital forum, the compulsory creation of which could easily justify separate regulation.

The ASC should function as the clearing-house for both the exchange of safety information and concerns, and the instigation of corrective actions. It should provide a key service to the board and president of an aircraft operator. However, it can only do so if the conditions under which its members participate facilitate open discussion.

It is arguable that open and uninhibited involvement is unachievable if the ASC is chaired by the operator's CEO. The company's CEO, president, chairman or COO chairing the ASC has objectives and concerns that are wider than safety. He or she will almost certainly be influential in commercial, budgetary and personnel matters. They can thus unwittingly be a strong inhibitor to both managers and lower grade staff who might be unwilling to raise legitimate safety concerns counter to the CEO's corporate objectives.

Regardless of the size of the company, the CEO, staff and shareholders of any aircraft operator should feel certain that relevant safety issues are being managed proactively but, when the CEO is leading the ASC, that is very far from certain.

Many of today's CEOs lack the operational and technical experience of their predecessors; their skills are concentrated in other areas essential for the company's success, e.g., finance and marketing. It is likely that their instincts — and perhaps even their enthusiasm — for detecting safety problems that might be lurking just below the surface are unlikely to be as finely honed as those of experts in safety and technical matters.

Conversely, CEOs who have achieved their positions following a successful career in, say, flight operations, might be reluctant to accept publicly ideas that challenge the way in which they have previously operated. In each case, there is a strong argument to bar the CEO from the ASC's chairmanship.

So, how can such surety be achieved? One step is for the CEO to strongly and personally promote a "penalty free" reporting culture throughout all departments of the company. The second step is to appoint an independent, external and suitably experienced senior executive — or a non-executive director — to lead the ASC: This should be a person with a demonstrable record of experience in safety matters. Their personal circumstances should be such that they are not beholden to the company for income, and their ultimate principal concern is protection of their personal reputation and integrity. The CEO can remain on the ASC but only as a participant, albeit a senior one.

Under this type of ASC chairmanship, the most career-vulnerable employee within the ASC has more protection. It is far, far more difficult for safety issues that are legitimate — but perhaps "uncomfortable" from a corporate viewpoint — to be dismissed by the company.

When this type of ASC chairmanship is first introduced, all ASC participants, including the CEO, might be wary of the newcomer. Yet, if the right person has been chosen it should soon be possible to encourage a level of openness and trust that would have been unachievable under the chairmanship of the CEO. They should rapidly become an essential partner for the CEO and board as well as for the person responsible for day-to-day operations and safety issues, but remain impervious to other non-safety pressures.

Only when that independent ASC chairman ensures that serious safety issues will always be openly raised for discussion and correction can a conscientious CEO sleep comfortably at night. ●

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