

Case Study Comment 1

by Jim Krieger

What is the moral of this story? For me, it is that there are dangers associated with merely paying lip service to safety. There can be no rationalisations to support doing less or taking shortcuts. When we embark on the road to runway safety, we have to be ready to go all the way or be willing to accept the consequences of falling short. Those consequences, like those seen here, will not always be easy to predict.

With that said, let's have a closer look at what happened.

First, we have a flight crew compelled to execute a schedule that is impossible to complete within reasonable duty limits. I have no airline operations or crew scheduling experience, but this situation sounds like a formula for hasty decision making, increased stress, and motivation to take shortcuts to get the job done. All of those items appeared here, and I am sure that none of us would want our

flight crew to be subjected to such things. Haste makes waste in many circumstances but certainly none more potentially devastating than in our business.

Was fatigue also a by-product of this practice? Yes, and at the worst possible time – just when the crew needed all of their vigilance to respond to an alert on the flight deck and detect vehicular traffic on their runway. The resultant vehicular runway incursion occurred more than eleven hours after



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their day had begun and that is a long time by any measure.

Second, admonishments from leadership about the perils of increased costs are rarely justified in discussions even remotely related to safety. The potential for sending the wrong message is simply too great. In this case, however, the message came through loud and clear and exactly as it was intended: "finish your trips or else." The "or else" was the prospect of increased scrutiny during the proficiency check process. Add it all up and you have an environment in this airline that encourages pilots to bend the rules and to bend safety in the process. Is this a "safety" culture? It's not even close. Does it probably work most of the time? Probably, and that is very unfortunate.

On the other side of the mic we have the air traffic controller. Her day starts coincidentally enough with a visit from an organisation conducting a safety culture study. Troubling to her and to me is the fact that some of the meeting participants were not even aware of the existence of the Local Runway Safety Team. That seems to say a lot about the lack of a safety culture already.



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There was also an unsolicited statement from one of the airport management officials about how they have “a good safety culture” and that it is “a top priority.” He went on to say that “if the workforce has other opinions, we have no idea why.”

I wondered what was truly at the source of such a defensive statement and it soon became clear. The airport management team, like many organisations, has been experiencing budget and resource challenges that have caused them to put their runway safety efforts on hold in the hopes that next year will be better. That sentiment is echoed by the ATC representative as well. Together, they rationalised that “they know nothing has changed” concerning local runway incursions and that “a runway safety awareness campaign is not necessary.” While we all know what it is like to face budget and resource challenges, putting runway safety on hold simply cannot be an option. It is too important. Instead of waiting for better times, the Local Runway Safety Team has to figure out new ways to accomplish their safety initiatives. They must innovate and perhaps produce even better solutions in the process.

Finally there were problems with the new electronic strip equipment in the

tower. It apparently was complicated to use and the training for it occurred many months before the delayed implementation of the system. Those issues are not uncommon, as new, stand-alone systems are sometimes hastily adopted with good intentions and then the complexities of the real world intervene. Unfortunately, the consequences of installing complicated equipment four months after training the personnel who will use it are sometimes difficult if not impossible to foresee.

If you consider all the issues confronting all the characters, you realize that you have an environment capable of producing the runway incursion we saw here, or perhaps an even worse incursion next time around. Did any one of our characters really intend for that to happen? I do not think so but it happened nonetheless.

“A Day in the Life” shows us that our efforts to address runway safety cannot wait until next year, cannot be rationalized away as unnecessary, cannot be partially addressed, and cannot be compromised by scheduling practices and ineffective training. It also tells us that to keep our runways safe, we all have to follow a consistent, unyielding course that can’t be significantly altered by anything despite our ever changing environment. No shortcuts are allowed!

This “A Day in the Life” scenario makes me think of yet another Beatles hit, “The Long and Winding Road.” It is an apt description of the path that we will all need to stay on to ensure consistent runway safety in our not so consistent world. ☺

