

Case Study Comment 2

by Captain Dirk DeWinter



Captain Dirk de Winter

is has over 11,000 hours flying time over the last 22 years. He started as a cadet pilot with SABENA in 1987 flying Boeing and Airbus aircraft. Before starting his flying career Dirk obtained an academic Master degree in Electronic Engineering at the University of Brussels. Since January 2009 Dirk has been working part-time in EUROCONTROL Agency.

The behaviour of Peter, the trainer, in this case study is a classic example of “non-adherence” and “practical drift”. Being close to retirement he has reached his maximum experience level. He knows best – no need to label aircraft or use the stop bars since that might interfere with the goal he sees. He firmly believes his primary duty is to maximise traffic throughput. All these ‘nuisance’ procedures must have been developed by those ignorant ‘admin people’. He’s the real operational guy. He has been working like this for many years now with great results. Nothing has ever happened to him, so his work method must be safe. Yet we know he was just lucky that nothing that would have needed the procedures he willingly omitted had ever happened.

Our lead character is young and inexperienced so he looks up to his instructor Peter. He’s reluctant to challenge him – with his reputation and experience he must be right.

The training he received must be confusing for him. The local on the job training was

not consistent with his initial training at the ATC academy. The first instructor there had avoided answering his questions leaving some ambiguity in his understanding of the procedures. Peter, his second instructor, is providing negative training. Instead of highlighting the importance consistently applying safety critical procedures such as the 24hr use of stop bars, he focuses on moving the traffic. He even ridicules the two inspectors from the Headquarters, why would he need their help?

As expected the two young trainees operate just as their instructors have taught them during their on the job training. They display the same “non-adherence” and “practical drift” behaviour. Safety critical procedures are omitted to keep the traffic moving. One day a situation develops that passes through the reduced number of safety nets and an incident happens.

Management is very surprised. How could this have happened? All the procedures and the safety nets are in place. The recommendations from the Headquarters Inspection were distributed to all staff and they signed for receipt.

But are all the recommendations in respect of procedure actioned? Signing for receipt is an administrative verification but does it mean the procedures will necessarily be applied in operations? Such a more difficult assurance process was clearly not in place. What is more alarming is there was no audit

of the training being delivered. The local on the job training was not using or promoting the standard procedures or Best Practices for runway safety. This meant the routine non-adherence to standard procedures was being passed on to the next generation of controllers. They learn by example don’t they?

Was Management aware of this practical drift? Probably not. The ATC manager was not very receptive to the advice from the Inspectors “...we appreciate all the good advice and then continue as before...”. The Airport Manager was focused on the delay the proposed procedures would generate in low visibility conditions and the financial consequences. The existing procedures had been in place for many years now and had enabled the movement of a high volume of traffic without any incidents. So the procedures must be safe. The fact that management was not aware that the staff had to cut corners to achieve the traffic throughput was very convenient. In case of an incident their part of the job was done, they had published the procedures to be followed ...

RECOMMENDATION:

Training Staff have a “role model” function. They should not only selected because of their teaching skills, but also for their way of strictly applying the standard operating procedures and focus on safety in general. 5