

Experience on task in a just culture

by Captain Dirk DeWinter

Should we be more forgiving towards experienced pilots in a Just Culture? Many presentations in the Flight Safety Foundation Go Around Safety Forum hosted by EUROCONTROL earlier this year cited the inability to meet approach stabilisation criteria by the required height as one of the main reason for go-around initiation.

There can be many “external” reasons for this such as unexpected shortcuts; runway changes or wind changes. Experienced pilots can often anticipate and mitigate these obstacles better than less experienced ones. Enhanced Crew Resource Management (CRM) techniques such as Threat and Error Management (TEM) have been particularly developed to assist less experienced pilots with their anticipation skills. The aviation industry tolerates the fact that inexperienced pilots tend to cause more go arounds because they are expected to learn from the experience.

But experienced pilots can also be “caught out” and be unable to meet the stabilisation criteria at the required ‘gate’ height. Here personal pride may begin to play an important role. The experienced pilot may find it difficult to admit he’s been caught out and will often try every trick in the book to get stabilised and may even continue beyond the gate height because he believes that with his experience he can still put it right.

This problem often shows up in the content of air safety reports (ASRs) and in Operational Flight Data Monitoring (OFDM). Whilst inexperienced pilots often initiate more go-arounds, experienced pilots are frequently involved

in continuing unstable approaches and in resulting significant safety incidents.

Why do these experienced pilots act this way? Is it indeed because of personal pride as suggested above or because of “must-land-it-is” – trying to make the schedule and ‘doing the right thing’ for the interests of the Company? How should a Company that has committed to a just culture react to this non-compliance with the stabilised approach criteria? Should an experienced pilot be given more ‘credit’ than his inexperienced colleague?

All pilots learn from experience. While Captains may prompt their First Officer early in an approach when they sense it is not going the right way, I believe that there is little learning value in this. More learning value may be obtained when they execute a go-around and recognise why and where the approach became unstable. Even a short post-flight debrief could provide more useful information and pointers.

So what will the First Officer conclude when his experienced Captain continues to land from an unstable approach? The majority of approaches defined as unstable are followed by normal landings, although the safety margins are significantly reduced and

the industry consensus remains that a stable approach is a pre-requisite for a safe landing. What will this First Officer do the next time he finds himself flying an unstable approach?

Companies have tools such as OFDM, LOSA, line checks and recurrent simulator checks to verify that their Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) are being complied with. However, the ‘role-model’ function of experienced Captains should not be underestimated. Their knowledge and experience should give them a better appreciation of the reason behind a safety-critical SOP such as adherence to stabilised approach criteria.

Just Culture is often described as an atmosphere of trust in which people are encouraged to provide essential safety-related information, but in which they are also clear about where the line must be drawn between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. A pilot who breaches a single significant SOP or displays a serial disre-

CHECK LIST

- ☒ experienced pilot
- ☒ approach stabilisation
- ☒ go-around initiation
- ☒ can avoid safety incidents
- ☒ 'role model'

gard for less significant examples of them as a deliberate act cannot expect immunity. However, if the deviation was neither premeditated nor intentional and would not have come to light except for a voluntary safety report by the pilot concerned, then a remedial training package is more likely to be appropriate than punishment.

While both experienced and less experienced pilots are equally protected under the just culture philosophy, I conclude that the aircraft commander, because not only his rank but his corresponding experience and function as a "role-model", has less right to plead unpremeditated or unintentional non-compliance with safety critical SOPs such as stabilised approach criteria. So in their case, the corrective measures should be focussed around training which will also make them better role model for more junior pilots. **S**



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