

# INTERFACING NOTES FOR THE INCIDENT INVESTIGATOR

Incident investigators work at a particularly important safety interface in ANSPs – between operational staff and management. It is a role that requires not only skills in analysis and writing, but also in collaborating, relating and persuading. In this article **Sebastian Daeunert** lets us into his experience as an investigator at Frankfurt, and gives some advice that is relevant for anyone who has recommendations or suggestions concerning safety



## KEY POINTS

1. A good relationship with the sharp end and the blunt end is a precondition for being successful in safety management. You have to understand both worlds.
2. You have to be able to understand the pressures and demands that are on the people whom you target with your recommendations and suggestions.
3. Honesty, credibility and transparency are vital if you want to receive information from front-line staff.
4. Safety recommendations and suggestions must make realistic and relevant demands. Do not hide out-of-place requests labelled as 'safety' in your reports.

When I changed from being an active air traffic controller to the role of incident investigator for our tower I had this gloomy vision. I had grown up with the old system. When I had my first loss of separation as a controller – a missed approach following a departure – the usual lines appeared in the investigation report: “The controller apologised and assured he would never do this again”. I was ordered into the replay lab and played back my misdeed and told to never do it again. With a humble feeling I went back to work.

This was something I wanted to change. I did not want people to be scared when they had done something wrong. I wanted people to come out of that little replay lab feeling that we had improved something. As time went by and I attended a human factors study course I decided to put my new ideas into practice and wrote my first ever ‘systemic no blame’ investigation report. I told my boss, who was used to just signing these, that he had better read this one in detail as it was “something new”. A loss of separation had occurred during a handover situation. My report portrayed how people had gotten under pressure due to the lack of a supervisor in the tower. A weather situation led to an overload. Things had been forgotten due to a rush to get ATFM measures up and running. Technicians were taking things apart during this apocalyptic setting, which was even more enhanced by a ‘spotter’ colleague who was taking photos of airplanes in the middle of it all.

I will never forget his words: “If what you write is true, we might as well shut this place down. It’s a quagmire.” He then continued: “However, I support your new approach, but you must help me with my superiors in explaining what the motivation behind it is.”

This was one of the best moments I experienced in safety management, finding an understanding person who supported a new approach. Now these kinds of reports are standard, but at the time it was a revolution. It worked because my boss was willing to go through with it. So what is the key to a successful interface and what are the interfaces we have?

In investigations, but also when making safety recommendations or suggestions, there are two important connections.

The first one is how you interact with your controllers. Given the principle of work-as-imagined and work-as-done, it is of course an advantage if you have recently worked as an ATCO, or are now. It is all about trust and acceptance from your controllers. But to be honest, I see a certain time period where this trust can be maintained after going out of active controller duty, but one day you will turn into a fossil who will start to compare now with your days gone by. Investigators must always be aware of that fact.

### Trust and acceptance are not ‘givens’; they have to be earned.

Trust and acceptance are not ‘givens’; they have to be earned. ‘Your’ controllers have to be sure you are on their side and you are doing what you are doing to help them live in a better, safer world. Your measures have to become reality; promises of a better world alone won’t do the trick. Your role as an investigator and safety person is under no circumstances to whitewash anything. To the contrary, I had many unpleasant topics I had to bring up with controllers. But my experience is that when you explain why you see things this way and you are predictable and reliable you might get a discussion but no one ever leaves your office on a bad note.

Transparency can easily be reached by being present. We run twice yearly safety briefings but there are numerous other occasions where I explain what is new and what we are doing. A regular presence in the ops room – not as a spy but as a colleague – is also important. Interfacing with controllers for me is the easy part; all it needs is honesty, transparency and goodwill.

Another fine moment happened in 2015 when two controllers came to my office. They said they had just experienced an overload situation created by an over-eager colleague who had pushed them so far that one of them had completely lost the traffic picture. They had discussed this with the colleague

who felt he had done nothing wrong and so announced they would go to my office and tell me to investigate it, even though by definition it was not an incident. The accused controller replied that this was absolutely okay with him and he had no problem with it. In the end, we had a group session with a TRM trainer where we closed the matter.

Management is the other side that safety management faces. This is far more difficult as management itself is under certain pressures. You also want to bring things up that may not have been part of an incident and will be faced with the question of why you are bringing this up now when nothing has happened.

Therefore, here is some advice on what has what has worked for me.

Occasionally some of my colleagues try to repackage things into the ‘safety gift wrap’ proclaiming that this and that is a safety issue when it is not. It is something that controllers also like to do. This loses credibility for your request quickly as everyone knows it is just a way of trying to make it look more urgent.

A sure way to repel any positive reaction is what is known as the ‘wet dog effect’. Come in wet from the field, shake dirt and water at everyone in the room and then be astonished why people back away instead of listening to you. This is what happens to the safety people who say that the entire situation is totally out of control. Structure is important. Make your points and separate them. Be precise. Be structured. What exactly do you wish to achieve?

### Stay with the facts. Be credible and consistent.

Stay with the facts. Be credible and consistent. Do not smuggle things you always wanted to have as a necessary measure into an investigation report. Be realistic with your recommendations. Convince management that changing a specific item will also be of an advantage to them. Do not just explain that a safe environment will be beneficial for them. Do not threaten by proclaiming that they will all go to

jail if this or that happens and they did not prevent it, or the other more subtle threats. Stay with your argument and the benefits that you see.

Be aware that even though you may feel something is really pressing, safety is only one piece of their mosaic. They are into financial obligations, productivity, even careers and politics. It is normal that not all recommendations are accepted or met with euphoria. After all, our dilemma is we can be seen to harm productivity; our recommendations cost money and yet we can never prove that an accident has not happened because of our recommendation.

Finally avoid getting into that gloomy human factors cloud. Some managers are very human factors minded (I am lucky that mine is) but many think it

is some kind of voodoo and you are some kind of priest who talks in weird words about vague things, totally disconnected from the real world. Always use the language that everyone understands and connect your human factors arguments to the facts that you want to bring across. If your management takes you seriously, you will be able to achieve a lot.

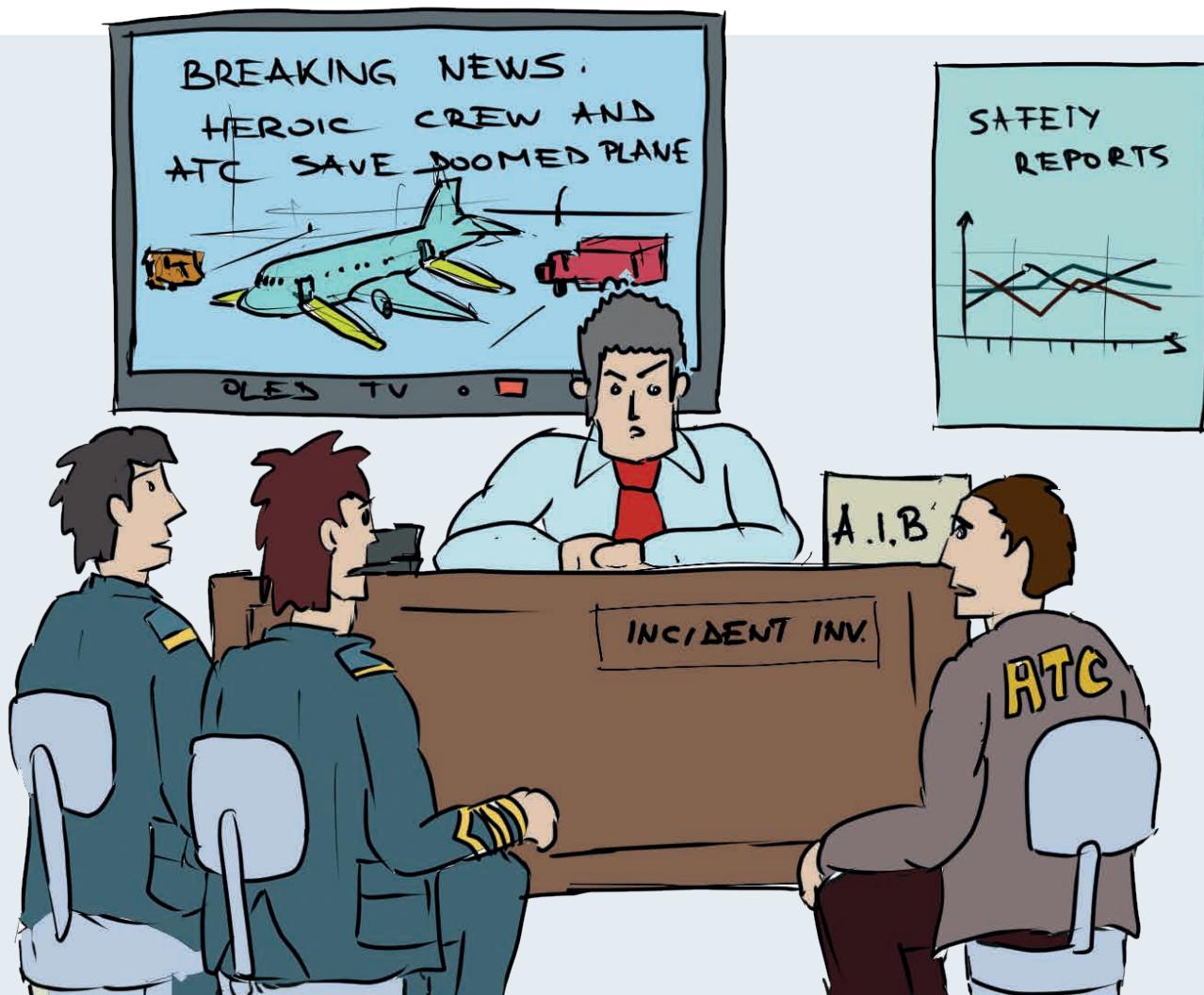
Another example is when I was able to communicate that we had a problem with complexity. My management agreed to a human factors initiative, which has now spread into our central safety management who are supporting us on the subject.

To sum things up, in order to reach your goals, be honest, transparent and fair and try to see the problems of

whomever you are collaborating with. At the same time, concentrate on the things that you find in the specific case you are investigating and the related recommendations that you want to bring across to your management or controllers.

If you don't succeed the first time round, be persistent and keep bringing the problem up until it is solved. S

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"You cooperated well, but the use of nonstandard phraseology and procedures made it look like a very sloppy job..."