

# COMPETENCY AND MORAL DILEMMAS: “WHAT WOULD YOU DO?”

Sometimes in our working lives, we have to make decisions that involve a kind of competency that we don't teach or even talk about: moral and ethical decision-making. Most of us face situations where we feel uncomfortable with the possible choices, because none is clearly preferable. As part of the EUROCONTROL safety culture programme, 'moral dilemmas' have been developed based on realistic situations. These dilemmas have been used in workshops to uncover assumptions, values, beliefs and decision processes. We share some of the dilemmas with you hoping that similar sorts of dilemmas become part of your own professional discussions. You may have to wear shoes that you have never worn...

**Steven Shorrock, Anna Wennerberg, and Tony Licu.** ►►



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You are controller with both TWR and APP ratings – one of the few in the unit with dual ratings. There is an ongoing clash between TWR and APP controllers, following a serious incident. One group blamed the other for the outcome, and a serious dispute followed. The formal and informal relationships that existed were severely affected. Even coordination became 'unhelpful'. You know that a few controllers in TWR and APP are willing to build bridges, but some of the older union leaders are against this. By intervening, you put yourself in a risky situation, potentially splitting two groups into three.

What would you do?

2

You work in an ANSP where the working language is supposed to be one language, but staff come from different nationalities and speak different languages. Some staff (who are mostly in their 50's) struggle to speak the 'official' language, and they speak limited (operational) English. They prefer to speak in their native language. Many of these people were promoted to supervisors to reduce misunderstandings in coordination. Now there are communication problems relating to supervision. Staff get by, including via translation by those who are fluent in both languages. But misunderstandings happen. People feel uncomfortable to raise this language issue and there is no clear answer. What would you do?

4

You are a young ACC controller who works part time in a safety department. You notice a conflict between the safety department and the controllers. The ACC controllers see the safety department as trying to impose restrictions. The safety department sees the ACC staff as rejecting any ideas for improvement, and keeping safety staff out, making it hard for them to do their work. Both see the other as a constraint. You get on with both groups of staff, and enjoy both safety and operational work, but the controllers are starting to perceive you differently. You think they are keeping you out of some discussions. The easiest route would be to stop the safety work, but this would make the division even worse.

What would you do?

5

You are a new technician and are uncomfortable with local practice regarding the maintenance of a high voltage (3000V) circuit. Work is done on the circuit using gloves and boots that are certified up to 1000V. Working in this way is forbidden by the organisation, but the other technicians say that they don't have enough time for full isolation, and there has never been an accident. But when you have tried to highlight and discuss the risk with the others, this was unwelcome. By raising this issue outside the group, you think you will be excluded from the close-knit group, and this will severely affect your working life. What would you do?

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You are the safety manager of an ANSP. Senior management is very proud of the ANSP's safety achievements. The maturity of the safety management system (SMS) has been rated independently as high, based on your responses to questions about the SMS. However, based upon updated guidance material, the self-assessment of the 'safety maturity' of your SMS could result in a drop in your ANSP's rating, even though the SMS is no different to how it was during the last assessment. In some areas it has even improved during the last year. Knowing that a drop in your scores will be very awkward for you as safety manager in front of the top management, what approach would you choose? On the one hand, you want to give honest answers, but on the other, having to explain to your senior management could affect your relationship and even your career prospects. Would you rather ensure that your previous scores are unchanged (since the SMS is the same), or reduce the values of your self-assessment in line with the new guidance?

What would you do?

6

You are an ACC controller. Several of your colleagues work far away from the centre. In order to maximise their personal time, some work two or three double shifts, with eight hours off in between. This is permissible within your regulations exceptionally, but has become more routine. Of course, during the night, they get some rest when possible. But the controllers are using coffee and stimulant drinks in an attempt to remain alert. You think that you notice some effects in their performance, but can't be sure. By raising the issue, you may start a chain of events that prohibits this working schedule, which will directly affect their personal lives.

What would you do?

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You work as a safety specialist on a major new tower project at a busy airport. The safety assessments have been conducted as usual and all risks have been deemed acceptable, or are due to be accepted or signed off by the Unit Manager or Safety Director, as appropriate. The project is critical for airport capacity and is due to be opened within two months, with a transfer from the old tower to the new one. On time delivery at the planned O' date will be seen as a great success for the ANSP, airport and all staff involved. There is much media attention and public figures have visits planned. Everyone involved in the project has incentives (including cash bonuses) attached to a timely O' date, including you, your colleagues (who are now friends), and the Unit Manager. During training, you decide to observe the controllers in the simulator. This is the first time that anyone other than training specialists has done this. You notice that many can use the new equipment, and so are being signed off as competent, but they can't do the job. Some are clearly frustrated and upset and several can't maintain 'the picture' of the traffic. If you raise this to the Director, the Director will not sign off the 'residual risk' from the risk assessment without your assurance. If you tell the Director about what you saw in the simulator, the whole project could be put on hold. But it feels very uncomfortable to ignore it. What would you do?

8

You work as an operational expert on a major project. You have helped to conduct safety assessments, including quantification of the risks involved. Shortly, prior to sending the risk assessment for approval, you find that a miscalculation, resulting in values that are significantly incorrect, and different to those that are deemed acceptable. However, you feel strongly that the risk controls that are in place, and the monitoring arrangements, are robust, and you know that safety assessment is not an exact science. The project will be of significant help to operations. What would you do?

9

You are the Operational Division Director and still keep your ATCO licence valid. This means that once a week you are on duty. A young ATCO from the unit complains to you that some supervisors don't use a fair approach in putting the controller on the position during shifts. Supervisors put the ATCO behind the radar screen for two hours duty, followed by 30 minutes break. Other ATCOs, who are friends of supervisor, are put on the position for one hour duty and one hour off. You as the Director of this Division have this issue officially on the table. But you are keeping in your mind that you are coming to the shift as ATCO as well and you need to have good relations with supervisors. What would you do?

“What would you do?”



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10

You are a supervisor in an ANSP that has recently published a 'league table' of supervisors based on delay statistics. The aim was to introduce some competition, influence behaviour and improve efficiency. But you notice that you are near the bottom of the list. When faced with a decision to divert flows of traffic in bad weather, you realise that this will increase delay and you feel embarrassed at your place on the list. You think it is safe not to divert, but if it were not for the list, you would probably divert. What would you do?

11

You are a controller in a regional unit. The new procedures for your unit were designed in head office, far away from your unit, by someone who has never worked in your unit. If you follow the procedures, you believe that an incident is likely. If you use your own judgement, you are comfortable that the traffic is safe. But if something does go wrong, you know that you will be blamed for not following procedures. You have raised the problem with the procedures with the procedure writer, to no effect. What would you do?

12

You are a Unit Manager in a unit with quite a lot of traffic. The employees take pride in being part of delivering a 'no delay' service to the customers. In daily work, some of your colleagues feel high pressure to achieve targets on capacity and efficiency. You have noticed that there is a tendency to use rather thin buffers. The result is that there are regular losses of separation. These are rarely serious, and most of the time they are marginal losses. Many ATCOs, including supervisors, have no problem with operating this way. Higher management questions the losses of separation, but at the same time there is praise for handling the traffic so efficiently, both from your immediate and higher management, and from airport management. What would you do?

13

You see a colleague and close friend on your shift make a mistake with safety implications, and you know that this colleague has no intention to report it. The error cannot be captured by any monitoring that is in place, so it is unlikely to be known unless you report it. No aircraft was in jeopardy but the error could potentially be seen as a symptom of a deeper trouble with the working methods that are in place, and someone else might make a similar mistake. What would you do?

Do these sorts of examples bring any moral dilemmas to mind? You are likely to have encountered problematic situations where there is no clearly preferable solution, or perhaps you can imagine some realistic scenarios. Would you be willing to share a moral dilemma, so that others might use them in learning and discussion? If so – and if you have any feedback on your use of moral dilemmas – please contact [steven.shorrock@eurocontrol.int](mailto:steven.shorrock@eurocontrol.int).



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