HOW NOT TO PERFORM A RUNWAY CHANGE

Front-line staff are the experts in their own work, and have expertise in the tools that they use. But sometimes, operational procedures are changed without appropriate input from operational staff. These changes can result from gaps between work-as-imagined and work-as-done, and can widen the gap when it is assumed that the procedure is working well. In this article, **Alexander Schwaßmann** provides a short example that operational readers may well relate to.

KEY POINTS

- **Before changing a procedure, management should understand if there is really a problem.**
- **When introducing a procedure, test the procedure, monitor any side effects after it has gone live, and provide proper training.**
- **Controllers should not simply disregard a procedure because it apparently makes no sense. You might not know the whole story behind it.**
- **Be sure to raise concerns before a new procedure goes live. Document any problems with a new procedure so that management knows that amendments are needed.**

The following occurred at a European aerodrome sometime in the last millennium. For years, ATCOs had orchestrated a runway change in a very safe and efficient manner. The aerodrome controller would coordinate with the airport authority and approach control that a runway change was to be conducted. All parties would agree on the exact time, and the approach controller would coordinate with the CNS service about when to switch the ILS to the opposite direction. This had worked for years without any serious incident and minimum delays for the airlines.

Then the management introduced a new ops order with respect to runway changes. From now on, it would be the approach supervisor who would handle the runway change. Tower would inform the supervisor that a runway change was necessary. The supervisor in turn would coordinate with all parties concerned and effect the runway change.

The tower and approach controllers looked at the new ops order, decided it was not necessary, and continued to change runways without involving the supervisor, and without any issues. Management in turn believed that they had satisfactorily solved a problem. That nobody else had identified a problem to start with did not seem to matter. And because nobody used the new procedure, no problems were reported. But in fact, work-as-imagined was now different from work-as-done. This meant that if anything went wrong, the ATCO would be at fault for not following the new procedure.

One day, the controller-in-charge at the tower decided that this state could not continue, and decided to resolve the issue by putting the new procedure to the test. He called the approach supervisor of the day and told him a runway change was necessary. The supervisor was taken by surprise because that request was new for him. Although he was dimly aware that a new procedure had been introduced some time back, he had not received any training for it, and because it had never been used before, he had no experience with applying it. So, recollecting what little remembered from reading the procedure a couple

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of months ago, he phoned the CNS service and asked to switch the ILS to the opposite direction. Unfortunately, he forgot to inform the approach controller, who was unpleasantly surprised when suddenly four aircraft on approach reported that they had lost the ILS signal. Puzzled, the approach controller phoned the tower and was duly informed that a runway change was in progress "according to the new procedure".

The TWR, meanwhile, had told all aircraft awaiting start-up and take-off that a runway change was in progress, and that he was waiting for a signal from the supervisor-in-charge that it was completed. The whole process took almost half an hour to sort out, which effectively shut the airport down for that period of time.

The same day, the new procedure was withdrawn and the old one was put back into effect.

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