



# DO THEY CARE ABOUT SAFETY?

Different people have different goals but we don't always understand others' perspectives. **Florence-Marie Jégoux** considers how can we understand others' priorities and decisions, while avoiding assumptions.

## KEY POINTS

- **We can easily be wrong about others' priorities and trade-offs.**
- **Priorities and trade-offs only have meaning in context.**
- **We need to make cognitive effort, and come together in groups, to understand the perspectives of others.**

When I was working as an ATCO, I often encountered behaviour from pilots and peers that I didn't understand. For instance, one evening in a busy tower sequence, a fighter pilot told me he was "short fuel" before entering the CTR. I asked if he declared pan-pan or mayday. "No, short fuel," was his reply. I had procedures for pan-pan, for mayday, but nothing for "short fuel". As a young ATCO, I did not know what to do with him, with the commercial IFR I had on final, and the microlight VFRs in downwind, in the crowded airspace.

ATCOs worked alone in this tower during the evenings, so I couldn't ask anyone. And this fighter plane was coming very fast, much more than my brain speed. I didn't want to take any chance of a crash, may it be in the air or on the ground. So I moved the IFR aside from final, stacked the VFR on downwind, and cleared the fighter pilot to final approach. When he was on short final, after traffic information, I cleared him to land, and he replied, "Finally, we're gonna do a chandelle."

What? They said they were short fuel, but they prefer to play in tower area, instead of landing, disregarding all the other traffic that I stacked? They don't care about safety!

After they did their chandelle over the city, they landed with my IFR on final and the VFR still in downwind and my hectic CTR. And I never got the phone call I asked for.

### Can we really know about others' priorities if we don't debrief?

At other times, I had misunderstandings with ATCO peers in approach: "You told me that this plane would arrive via NW and it came via SW, it completely screwed my plans and my sequence!" What was not said aloud was: "Are you thinking about safety?"

Whatever our work, we tend to define our own priorities, which change over time: safety, performance, fuel consumption, time, spacing... And when our priority is not considered as much as we want, or in the way that we want, we tend to get upset at others.

But let's take another example: do you care about your health? Chances are you will answer, "Yes, of course". But do you adhere to recommendations doctors make about health? Sufficient regular sleep, food hygiene, moderation, not smoking, exercising, not drinking, etc? Chances are you will answer, "some, but not all."

That's the point. We all make trade-offs, all the time: cost-benefit trade-offs, performance-safety trade-offs, efficiency-thoroughness trade-offs, etc. We juggle priorities, and try to do our best, adapt and adjust with moving constraints. And other people make their own trade-offs, with their constraints, their priorities, which we are not always aware of. Can we really know about others' priorities if we don't debrief?

Now working as a safety analyst, I analyse safety-related events. I have now to pay attention again to this cognitive pattern, because seeing mostly events where safety is at stake, puts me at risk of so-called *déformation professionnelle* (Shorrock, 2013): "They don't care about safety!" It goes hand-in-hand with another cognitive bias: the "tendency to attribute the cause of events to front-line actors" (Amalberti, 2013) and the tendency to think from our point of view – work-as-imagined. It requires cognitive effort to see things from another's perspective. We are initially reluctant to make this cognitive effort, as shown for a long time in psychology, and more recently in neuroscience: reducing effort is a brain constant (Bohler, 2019), and we can see it as lazy, or as thrifty.

We have to find better ways to take into account the perspectives of others. Non-violent communication (Szczukowski, 2018) is a good way to understand others' points of view. Fortunately, our team also works across disciplines, with people from different backgrounds to enrich our own perspectives. We also study all stakeholders and the system as a whole to understand trade-offs that are made not only at the front-line, but also at other levels of the organisation. Trade-offs are universal throughout the aviation system. Understanding of trade-offs among all actors would improve safety. ↳

### References

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