PAN FOR CONTROLLERS AND PILOTS:

THE NEW ZEALAND AVIATION PEER ASSISTANCE NETWORK

In New Zealand, air traffic controllers and pilots have come together to create a Peer Assistance Network to provide a trusted 'port of safety' when things are not going well. **Herwin Bongers** describes the PAN initiative.

As air traffic controllers and pilots, we need to operate to an unusually high standard of performance. But being human means that we are still vulnerable to the effects of stress and emotional strain. If someone breaks a leg, nobody expects that they will be able to run a marathon anytime soon. For some reason, we seem to think that psychological issues are different. We turn up for work when our ability to perform is compromised. The Work Health Organization and International Labour Organisation (2000) have studied the consequences of compromised mental health problems in the workplace and found a deterioration in planning and control, poorer decision-making and increased error rates.

Perhaps because our jobs are so critical, the fear of losing our medical certificate and our career may drive us to avoid seeking help. So, what do we do when life issues start to impact us?

In 2014, after two suicides amongst our controllers, the New Zealand Airline Pilots' Association (NZALPA) decided something needed to be done. The aviation Peer Assistance Network (AvPAN NZ) was formed.

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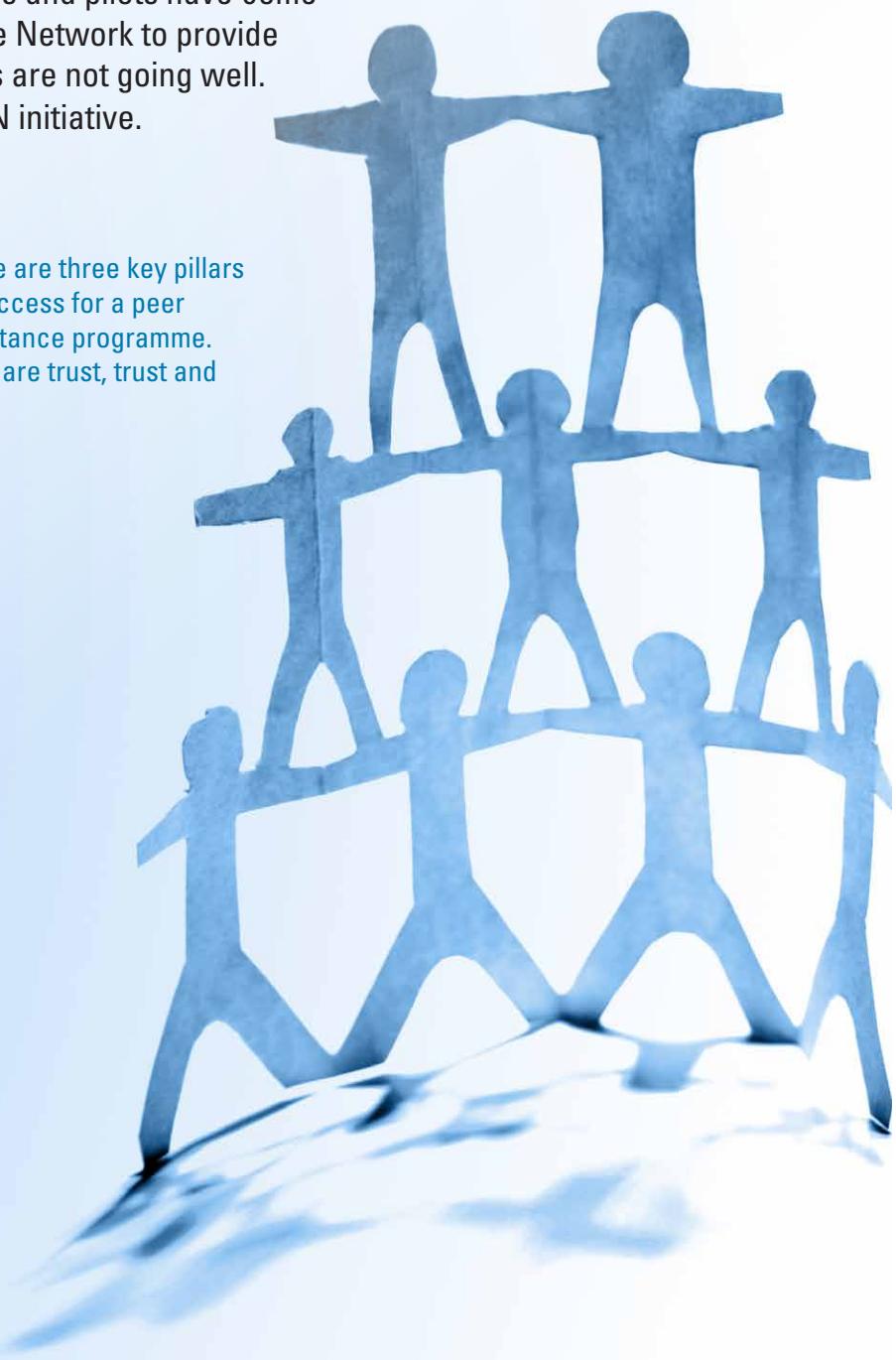
This was for two reasons. One reason was to provide a trusted 'port of safety' when things are not going well. Another was to enhance the safety of aviation by providing accurate information from a colleague who is expertly trained. One goal here is that the decision to take time off can be made fully informed with facts and not rumours or suspicions.

We are lucky in New Zealand because air traffic controllers and pilots have a close association. So, we were able to create a Peer Assistance Network that includes support volunteers from both areas of the industry. In five years, we have trained 40 volunteers who have assisted in over 300 requests for assistance. We've learnt from our mistakes and are continually evolving.

The shared work experience of peers helps to build trust, empathise and understand situations that are unique to our professions. It also helps to remove stigma from asking for help and making it safe to ask the questions. This is why a programme like PAN is so important to both pilots and controllers.

But, no matter how well-intentioned people are, there are some traps for such a programme. To avoid the traps there are three key pillars of success for a peer assistance programme. They are trust, trust and trust.

- The trust of **controllers and pilots** is of vital importance. This is slowly built up over time by strictly following confidentiality protocols and through success stories becoming known about. Conversely, if a peer discovers that their personal matters have been shared without their knowledge, they can feel betrayed and negative news quickly travels. The endorsement of the programme by the unions is also critical.
- The trust of the **management**. The programme can't be viewed as a way for workers to hide from proper clinical help. Escalation protocols have been developed, and volunteers understand and adhere to these.
- The trust of **health professionals**. To avoid the pitfalls of peers delivering 'help' which clinically worsens a situation, training has to be of the highest quality. If needed, individuals must be guided towards professional help. Ongoing training of volunteers is vital.

Because studies show that often the seeds for mental health issues later in life can be sown early in a career (particularly during ab-initio training), it is important to have proactive and positive conversations around mental health. With this in mind, young instructors receive training to understand stress and to know what to do about it.

As for the future, we see the challenges ahead are for global peer assistance alliances, where we can set protocols and share data to influence better workplace practices, improving training outcomes, reducing bullying and making our lives and jobs more satisfying and safer. ⌇

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Reference

Work Health Organization and International Labour Organisation (2000). *Mental health and work: Impact, issues and good practices*. Geneva.