

# Just culture in the real world: flight safety and the realities of society

by Paul Reuter

For years, the aviation industry has tried to establish a solid safety culture, which allows pilots, air traffic controllers and other aviation safety professionals to share information about errors or mishaps in an environment based on trust – one which neither entails blame nor leads to unjustified criminal prosecution.

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dered flow of safety information and the quest of society for accountability.

When we look at society – indeed at all societies and cultures throughout the ages – we see that the need for a set of rules, understandable to all, is a pre-condition for individuals to peacefully live together. One of those rules, deeply rooted in the consciousness of most Societies, is that no wrong-doing should go unpunished. For thousands of years, this system of rules and punishment has worked, more or less successfully, to keep us all “in check”.

With the advent of first the Renaissance and later the Industrial Revolution, European society became much more complex. With the 20th century advances in fields such as medicine, transportation, energy, etc. another phenomenon came to light – complexity. As a result, cause and effect in engineering, work processes, systems, machines and organisations became much less clearly definable.

From a human perspective, it slowly became clear that no matter how well-trained, well-skilled and motivated an individual may be, humans operating in highly complex and dynamic environments are bound to miss information, misinterpret data and make mistakes. If you add economic pressure and inadequate proce-

dures to the equation, then you get even greater opportunities for error. Finally, the human being itself is a delicate system which is thrown quickly off balance by stress, fatigue, sickness or other circumstances.

Despite this, if something goes wrong, the usual reaction of society will be “It's his/her fault. He/she should accept the consequences”. This “instinct” to attribute blame – while a perfectly understandable societal reaction – is extremely counterproductive for aviation.

Whilst those efforts are genuine, welcome and much needed for the benefit of safety, the aviation community has somehow failed to make its case clear. It has also failed to fully consider one of the basic assumptions of both society and individuals – that should something terrible happen, there “must” be someone who is responsible for it and “justice must be served”. A whole set of initiatives, among which the proposed new EU Occurrence Reporting Regulation currently being progressed, bring all that thinking and a whole range of reasonable arguments out in the open. This Regulation may finally be an opportunity to come closer to a workable solution, which will satisfy both the need of the aviation community for an unhin-





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**They said in Orientation course that we'd spend a lot of time in dark, confined spaces... but I didn't imagine they meant this when I chose to be an Air Traffic Controller...**

A fear of punishment will only put more pressure on safety professionals and could have the perverse effect of concealing information that could have been vital to protect others from making a mistake or recognising a problem. The fear of prosecution or punitive action at Company level after reporting an occurrence is still very much present today and it sometimes discourages aviation professionals from sharing details of the mishaps they have been involved in which would not otherwise have come to light. Anxiety that (social) media will single-handedly 'investigate' and pass or imply judgement on them for a mishap is even greater.

While most of us in the aviation community understand the dangers associated with blame and punishment, and have crafted safety strategies that try to counter those threats as much as possible, we sometimes see our best efforts thwarted when CVR recordings are leaked in the media or when pilots and air traffic controllers are prosecuted even before the reports of independent investigations are published. The influence of social media on accident investigations should also not be underestimated. People are by nature quick to judge and, with social media accessible to (almost) everyone, society is often provided with almost real-time commentary as events unfold

with videos, photographs and even a variety of theories on who got it wrong. In the fast-paced world of today, this can sometimes put unhelpful pressure on the necessity for a thorough investigation process.

But a focus on determining "what went wrong and how" without adequately examining the context in which it went wrong, may stem from the view that accident rates give a good indication of our safety performance. But since accidents today are so rare that I suggest that they should be seen as one-off events rather than meaningful indicators of safety. I do not mean that we should stop investigating them, just that we should pay even more attention to smaller everyday incidents which can be the precursors of an accident. We also need to know

1- The Prosecutor Expert Course's main objective is the formation and training of independent Air Traffic Management (ATM) or aviation experts available to advise prosecutors and judges in case of criminal investigations resulting from aviation incidents or accidents.

about people doing the right thing, where people went beyond the specifics of their training and used skill and judgement, to avoid unsafe outcomes. We also need to know about honest mistakes since, most of the time, there are some systemic issues related to these mistakes. Only this information will provide a reliable and complete view of where we are today in terms of safety performance. Yet, obtaining this information is only possible in an environment which “lives and breathes” Just Culture.

In my view it is paramount that society in general and the aviation industry

in particular understand the need to proactively communicate and share safety information and be able to rely on a certain level of protection to do that. The judicial system should not presume that we are circumventing our responsibilities, the media should not fear information blackout or censorship, the travelling public should not worry that we could “get away” with something without being held accountable for it...

That is why initiatives such as EUROCONTROL's Just Culture Task Force (JCTF) and the efforts undertaken by professional organisations to define

and implement Just Culture principles are so important. Initiatives such as the Prosecutor Expert Course<sup>1</sup> – where stakeholders, such as EUROCONTROL, IFATCA and ECA join forces and actively seek interaction with the Judiciary by providing aviation expertise – are also helpful in breaking down the walls between those stakeholders and judiciary. The involvement in this initiative of some judges and prosecutors across Europe shows that there is a genuine interest in gaining a better understanding of the aviation industry's safety systems. It appears that if enacted, the EU Regulation on Occurrence Reporting will provide better protection for reporters from inappropriate use of their safety information. Only an effective occurrence reporting scheme will enable us to achieve safety improvements through pro-active learning from any (safety) event, which will in turn allow us, as a society, to prevent future accidents.

However, we should acknowledge that we are only at the beginning of our struggle and that the road to a stronger Just Culture environment, within and outside aviation, is likely to be long and winding. We need to redouble our efforts and initiatives to get the message across: Just Culture is neither about immunity, nor about impunity, it's about safety. That's the message we should all have in mind when approaching other stakeholders. We expect the media to not attribute blame, but the media expects clear information from us, those customers affected by safety events and issues need explanations and safety regulators need clarifications. An open dialogue about our needs, fears and misconceptions is the way forward.

In the end, an environment built on sound Just Culture principles will not only benefit our industry, but the travelling public as well, and ultimately society as a whole. **5**

