

Case Study
The friend (cont'd)

Case Study Comment 1 by Eileen Senger

"Tower, an aircraft just passed close above me", we can all hear the upset voice from the vehicle driver. "Where is he", the assistant controller shouts out loudly in the tower; it's a question for nobody, just an expression of desperation. "He should wait at the holding point".

Everything is silent in this situation. It's like everything has stopped momentarily. Or perhaps it's because we don't know really what's happened. "I'm vacating the runway at the holding point" the vehicle driver transmits.

Friday 7 April 2006

"We from the management have absolutely nothing to do with this serious incident". The Operational Manager is in a meeting with the Inspectors from Head Quarters who have come to find out what has happened. "When we received the full report of your visit last year, we put a copy in the tower for the controllers to read". "They are required to sign to confirm that they have read and understood it. That has been our standard procedure for years". "They should know not to handle this amount of traffic during these weather conditions as you clearly pointed out in your excellent report".

No one say anything, everybody waits for someone else to speak. They can hear the distant sound of voices from the coffee room down the corridor. "Can you confirm that the stop bars were working properly" one of the Inspectors asks in a quite friendly way. "And what about your alerting system", she continues. "Can you please explain to us how it operates"?

Monday 10 April 2006

When thinking about it today, I believe I saw something on the screen entering the runway at the threshold. Perhaps it was the vehicle? I hadn't alerted Fredrik, why should I have done, after all the runway was his responsibility. I never forget people who do not keep their promises.....



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Being a controller for upper airspace, I can only assume how the situation with the inspection vehicle should have been handled. But there are certain points in this story that apply to all of us working in the field of aviation safety, be it as controller, pilot or infrastructure or company manager. I have only picked out a few.

Let's start with the impression that within this ATC provider there does not seem to be an open culture for voicing one's opinion. In the interests of safety but also the working environment, it is only beneficial to create a proactive space where young minds with little seniority but a fresh view and fresh ideas are especially encouraged to speak up, share their opinion and think out loud. There should always be the chance to raise questions about current procedures, systems or working habits – if not face-to-face then even more ideally in an anonymous system. There should be a clearly understood structure so that every individual



knows who is their contact person for questions or concerns. The protagonist in this story is asking himself the right questions and identifies the offer for help from the visiting Inspectors as such, but because of his junior status, he prefers to keep a low profile.

The story also shows just how important it is to have your training of any one individual carried out more than one instructor and preferably several different ones – different in personality and different in working style. In this way, the trainee will not copy one (possibly bad) behaviour but can 'cherry pick' what they like best from each one. There are frequently



many different ways of dealing with a particular problem, as well different opinions about the working styles of colleagues. A trainee should always be encouraged to give their opinion and point out anything they see as conflicting guidance to their instructors. Instructor Peter may be well-respected and a leader, but as a member of an older controller generation he doesn't appear to care too much about soft skills. He would be one of those colleagues sitting at the Team Resource Management Workshop with his arms crossed in front of his body muttering that he thinks this is b...shit for softies and all he cares about is sitting on position and moving traffic. Fortunately,

the recognition that a shallow hierarchy and a basic knowledge of human factors are important ways to improving safety has been widely promoted in many ATC providers and airlines.

The claim that safety is put first has to be brought to life and led consistently by the example of senior management. If the top of the company does not live up to its own professed standards, how can they expect the bottom to do so? As it operates at the ATU Unit in the story, it is just an empty shell held up to protect the management against any criticism. Everyone is busy safeguarding their own position and making sure that if something

happens they cannot be held responsible or, in consequence, legally liable if it comes to that. Colloquially we call this butt-covering. The Inspectors are visiting to check the prevailing way of working and the procedures in use for flaws but this only seems to be a paper exercise. They say that they are there to help but neither the airport representative nor ATC management are interested in giving them any real chance to point out deficiencies and recommend improvements to deal with them. The findings of the visit are on paper so they are covered, they distribute it to staff and shove the problem down the line. Such behaviour always occurs at the expense of the weakest link, invariably the people on the front line who have no Master's in management or in law just a hands-on, very practically-oriented education. And the weakest of those are the newly qualified controllers.

RECOMMENDATION:

All of us have been in situations where we were faced with the possibility that if we had spoken out we might have made ourselves look ridiculous or seem stupid. Because our idea seemed odd or because we didn't understand something and someone had to explain it again. If this is combined with any personal animosity between colleagues, be it from a situation years ago or because it's just someone you've never been on the same wavelength with, the only thing that can save the situation is our professionalism. Check again if you are in any doubt. Speak up if you are in any doubt. That is the only real way to cover your butt! ☺