

Case Study Comment 3

by Job Brüggén

Lonely for not speaking up about lack of use of the stop bar in peak hours. Lonely when the awkward questions finally arrive and nobody is giving an answer, or – worse – the blame is put on somebody else which the narrator is clearly very uncomfortable with. Yet, the narrator is clearly also part of a closely-knit community and acts completely naturally as part of it. He respects the clear existence of a hierarchy in the group, gives credit to seniority and does not ruffle the feathers of the leaders in difficult times. Very human, very normal.

The whole process cannot be a surprise to anyone familiar with the ATC world. Students are selected to 'match' the current controller community. Students are taught to fall in line with everyday practice. The student will be listening attentively to the people around him and accepting the role models provided by the bosses – he wants to be a controller, after all. The end result is a validated controller who behaves exactly as he has been taught to.

It would be easy to state that safety culture needs a boost here. Probably the operational people themselves think their safety culture is excellent. But 'drift into failure', or 'normalisation of deviance' are the descriptions that come to mind when reading this case. Management should take an active role here in knowing what is going on and not accepting any deviances from what are agreed procedures. "Er, yes we know declared capacity of this sector is 40 movements per hour but experience has shown we can safely push 50 or sometimes even 60 movements per hour."

Who is finally accountable for such decisions? Would that be the CEO?

This is quite a sad case. The narrator must feel lonely. Lonely for abandoning his friend. Lonely for not getting explanations where he thinks it is normal to get explanations. The statue of the cat. The labelling system. The purpose of the Inspectors' visit...

Yes it would, but he handed responsibility for this to his ATC Manager. The CEO still has to make sure that the ATC Manager follows the agreed procedures in his company. He needs to have the means to verify that the ATC Manager does follow them. And of course the ATC manager needs to make sure that the Operations manager follows the procedures and so on to the level of the controller. Going back up the corporate ladder, safety performance reporting is not just about the number of incidents, but about how well the process is being managed and controlled. I would not be surprised if this particular (fantasy) CEO only gets serious incidents reported and is informed about the running of his (safety) management system only by how many audits have been carried out.

It would be a capital mistake in this case, to put blame on the controller, the narrator, Peter, or Fredrik. They are just products, as they are expected to be, of the blueprint of the company.



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People are not acting badly with intent, they just conform to what they think is expected of them. Give them room to action their good safety intentions over their normalized behaviour of deviance. They can be helped by taking safety performance monitoring seriously.

RECOMMENDATION for this virtual company is simple. Start at the top. Investigate how the CEO has dealt with his accountabilities and handed this down to his managers. Is that all clear and simple? Does that include the priority for safety over capacity? Study how they subsequently take this into their divisions and how they report to their CEO. How is safety performance reporting included in this? Can the CEO reasonably expect to be aware of all situations where he may ultimately be called to account? What measures is the CEO able to take to put things right? Does he indeed do that or is it only theory? On the lower level, the recommendation would be to enable monitoring of 'adherence to procedures'. Confront the workforce with the results and demonstrate that procedures are there for a purpose and you expect them to be adhered to. Safety Culture at work in its purest and simplest form. 5