

Insecurity



Management can help prevent pilot job insecurity from affecting safety — probably.

BY SIDNEY DEKKER

Last week my airline went bankrupt. I say “my” airline, but wasn’t actually employed by them. I flew as a first officer one day a week to stay current and have firsthand insight into practice on the sharp end.

So I still have my “real” job, that of university professor. But today, 300 pilots — and 900 other airline workers — don’t. As disruptive and devastating as the effects of such a sudden collapse and the resulting layoffs are, they won’t threaten flight safety at this airline, because flying promptly stopped.

But that’s just one airline. As a global economic contraction accelerates, airlines around the world are grounding hundreds of planes. Singapore Airlines announced that it would reduce flights in Asia, and British Airways reported its traffic fell almost 5 percent in September alone. In the United States, airlines are cutting as much as 20 percent of their domestic flying schedules. You would think that would make for a lot of worried pilots.

I remember flying with one captain not long ago, who, for three hours during cruise, was

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engaged in a heated soliloquy, lobbing questions my way every now and again about the multiple potential futures of the airline and, by extension, his own professional outlook. The questions were mostly about possible management actions — finding new investors, being taken over, having the current owners pump in more cash, trying intercontinental routes, merging with another airline in the same straits, or, God forbid, declaring bankruptcy.

I could not answer any of the questions; I knew just as little as he. But the point of his monologue was perhaps for him to air his fears rather than for me to reply. Of course, the cruise portion gave us plenty of time to reflect on such matters. Though, some would say, you never did really check up on the minimum safe altitudes along your route, now did you? We were too distracted with matters of job insecurity. Others would probably say that the captain had flown these routes so often that he had the topographical map of the entire continent firmly in his head, knew the safe altitude numbers per waypoint by heart and could have recited them in his sleep.

How does job insecurity affect airline safety? My experiences and anecdotes count for little, I suppose, so let's turn to the scientific literature instead.

Which is, well ... rather silent on the issue.

There are starting points, however, which, by inference, can lead us to interesting if speculative conclusions. Perhaps more important, the literature suggests what management and others could do to help bridge periods of intense job insecurity to prevent it from affecting safety.

In the early '90s, I was working with a transportation company in Australia which faced cutbacks, redundancies and layoffs. Having been employed initially as public service workers, nobody in the company had any idea that this could happen to them, and they were dismayed

to find that they were not immune to economic contraction and organizational retrenchment. The workers almost universally showed the two predictable psychological effects that the literature has long since agreed on.¹

The first is that uncertainty is almost always worse than certainty. Even if certainty means the loss of your job, it's psychologically better to know than not know and be consumed by fear of what might happen.

This is an acute problem for many pilots in an airline that faces an uncertain future. During the time that I flew with the airline that did finally go bankrupt, a number of pilots told me about their plans to jump ship. Some were considering the Middle East, Asia or business aviation. Others were contemplating leaving the industry altogether, still others were eyeing management slots as a way of cushioning the more volatile life as pilot on the line. But in most cases, these were just vague plans because all of these pilots were aware of the benefits of their seniority and the incomplete information and uncertainty on which they would have to base a decision to leave.

Colleagues who did leave were talked about with great admiration for their courage, particularly if they had landed good jobs elsewhere, or derided for the folly in giving up so early and trading their still-existing jobs and benefits for something perhaps less attractive. Not surprisingly, younger pilots found it easier to deal with the uncertainty because they generally had invested less, if they hadn't paid for their own type rating, that is. This is consistent with the research on job insecurity. The older or more senior the employees — or, in general, the less mobile they are because of their sunk costs — the less frequently they tend to leave in times of downsizing, and the worse the psychological and even health consequences.

Today, there is no such uncertainty for the pilots of "my" airline. With the jobs gone, all the perks are gone too, and it becomes a lot easier to start doing something else, to look for work elsewhere. And it's easier to start coping. That is why all psychological research points to the benefits of certainty over the debilitating effects

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of uncertainty. Certainty allows people to cope. Uncertainty teaches them to be helpless.

The second effect is detachment. Psychologists see the same effects in families of terminal patients: an increasing mental disinvolvement with the emotional object, so as to make an eventual loss a bit easier to bear. With the strong possibility of losing an object, even if it's a job, people start borrowing some of the psychological strain of that loss from the future. They start disconnecting themselves earlier, amortizing the pain.

The disinvolvement syndrome, as it is sometimes known, can be characterized by a loss of interest in the particulars of the job. One experimental study showed that knowledge of safety rules, and thereby compliance with them, decreases in people threatened with layoffs.² This period of disinvolvement can be punctuated by spikes of great hope that the organization — or the job, the seniority — may survive after all, which inspires people to expend greater effort, put in more time, go the extra mile. The implication is that management must be careful with the potential volatility of the information it provides, and instead try to smooth it out. Of course, management can never get this right. Either employees find that managers say too much, giving them hope or despair, or too little, leaving them uninformed and in limbo.

As said earlier, research shows that workers threatened with layoffs violated more safety rules. They also produced lower quality outputs. In this, there may be a trade-off, as threatened workers are also more productive. Possibly that's because they want to create value for the company, or do anything possible to try to stay on as long as there is any hope left. Trading safety against productivity is something that is worth considering as a particular risk in airline operations, of course. Think of a diversion decision, or other go/no-go call in which one alternative is more costly for the airline's bottom line and reputation — both likely already under pressure. Given this finding, one can question the sort of encouraging e-mails or memos from management that exhort everyone to “keep up the great work for our great product,” or something to that effect.

What little research there is suggests that such messages may reinforce the idea that employees have more power over their own fates and that of their company than they actually have, and that their future may be secured through “good work.” The problem is that the definition of “good work” is negotiable. Does that mean *safe* work? Safe work, after all, can interfere with more productive work, faster work, more efficient work. Safe work can mean *expensive* work.

So does “good work” perhaps mean work that does not cost the company unnecessary money, that gets people to their destinations on time, and that says, for example, “Yes, let's take off with those tires that are bordering on excessive wear, which I would like to have had changed but I don't feel I have a choice, so let's go”?

For management, it is impossible to find a good communicative balance between encouragement and realism, between hope and giving up, between telling people to keep up the good work and telling them not to take any unnecessary risks. Perhaps the only thing management can do is think twice about the meaning of such underspecified phrases as “good work,” and consider the illusions they may put in people's heads about the supposed control such encouraged efforts may give them over their employment destinies. Indeed, follow-up research showed that a positive company safety climate, with top-level commitment to safety and safety communication, in addition to safety training and safety management systems, can moderate the negative effects of job insecurity and slow its corrosion of people's safety knowledge and safety compliance, and even keep incidents down in times of retrenchment, threatened layoffs and cutbacks.³

So what to do? For management: Keep the time of uncertainty to a minimum. Uncertainty means people suffer, their health can suffer and, indeed, safety can suffer. What about communication? When facing uncertainty, saying more is probably better than saying less. At least it shows an effort to keep everybody in the loop.

Think carefully about the choice of words in your communication, even if you know that you will never be able to find the right words

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until you can announce something like “we’re bankrupt” or “we’ve found a buyer.”

Never stop talking about safety, especially when the economic screws on your airline tighten and things look really gloomy. Go out of your way to celebrate people who put their foot down and courageously say “no” when others would have said, “Okay, we’ll fly with those tires.”

Regulators may have a rather hands-off approach during periods of downsizing and economic trouble.⁴ They may be extra vigilant about a particular airline, if they have the resources, but do they know exactly what signs of trouble to look for compared with signs of trouble in boom times? In some countries, legislation forces employers to identify hazards and conduct a risk assessment whenever they consider downsizing or some other significant reorganization. Of course this can lead, in some cases, to unnecessary paperwork and nonsensical bureaucratic accountability requirements.

Nonetheless, it is one model that could be followed. However, it would ask an airline to invest in an assessment of safety consequences when it could least afford the resources to conduct such an assessment. In a number of airlines which constantly operate on the brink of economic failure, this would mean that they would have to conduct such risk assessments during their entire existence. Nonetheless, there is merit in reminding management of the potential safety consequences of downsizing and in asking safety regulators to consider such consequences along the same lines.

The least a regulator could do is produce guidance on downsizing and organizational restructuring. Alternatively, if a regulator does not want to clutter the administrative load of a beleaguered airline in economic duress, it could make sure that its inspectors have a protocol or checklist that reminds them of what particularly to look for. Is the discussion alive in this airline about safety and risk, given its changing and probably deteriorating circumstances, and the pressures it feels to become faster and cheaper and better than all the other players in the market? What messages are being sent from management to

the line? How long has the period of uncertainty lasted? Which groups are the most threatened, do they fall into certain age or seniority brackets and what does that say about their particular risks?

In these immediate post-bankruptcy days, I often think about the pilot who kept himself, and me, occupied during cruise with his inquisitive rantings about the possible futures of our airline. Today, there is no more future. Images of eerily quiet crewrooms, empty offices, stranded airplanes, abandoned buildings and mothballed uniforms in closets come readily to mind. Even the e-mail addresses stopped working, so I have no immediate way of contacting the captain to find out how he’s doing. Yet when I picture him at home now, I feel physically affected.

If I believe the literature, though, he is better off today than he was during the weeks of uncertainty. That uncertainty has been replaced with certainty, and at least he can now start coping and looking for a new job — of which there are precious few, by the way. It somehow offers me small consolation. ➔

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Notes

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