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INVITED FOREWORD

Goal conflicts and the need to make trade-offs are nothing new to executive teams in any organisation, airlines and ANSPs being no exception. It is, however, an uncomfortable place to be when such decisions involve safety, where the possible consequence of making the wrong decision could be extremely severe. The classic goal conflict for us is that of safety against cost-efficiency (closely followed by safety versus capacity). It is one of which we can very easily be accused, and which is very difficult to refute, even with quantitative evidence. Often, decisions can only be considered 'good' a decade or two later. And if something goes wrong, well, there are always enough people around to say, "I told you so".

We had a situation when I arrived in skyguide, in which I believed that we had – over a period of years – reduced the safety margins in the operation at Zurich Airport too much. The operation was still tolerably safe (otherwise we would have stopped it, of course), but I was concerned that the political environment, in particular noise considerations, had taken too much priority over safety considerations. We approached the partners on the airport, explained our dilemma and, with their agreement, made certain adjustments. We reduced some capacity, reintroduced calibration flights during night hours, and so increased the safety margins to more acceptable levels. My

lesson: when you first come into a new environment is a good time to question what you see; if you do not like it, act, and take the stakeholders with you.

It can be difficult to spot that drift into the danger zone while you are part of the system itself. That requires constant self-challenging and a very open ear to all sorts of people who are trying to tell you things. These important things are often filtered out along the communications chain, especially in a larger hierarchical structure. Another reason to make sure that the top team members spend time at the front-line.

I think an even bigger challenge is the much subtler one of deciding how much spending on safety is enough. If you have an accident the answer will always be, "It was not enough". But how do you determine this without the benefit of hindsight? I find this challenge a really difficult one, and one which requires open, honest and level-headed conversations. It requires good management judgement based on all the facts and opinions you can gather. It is also a reason why I believe

that, although you do not need to be an ex-ATCO to be an ANSP CEO or an ex-pilot to be an airline CEO, it is really important to have someone in the senior team who does have operational experience, to make sure that the voice of operational experience is heard in such conversations.

Goal conflicts and trade-offs are a natural part of business life, and are nothing to be afraid of. Their safe resolution requires excellent listening, creation of enough time for the right discussions, and clarity in the decision-making process.

As a last example, how about this dilemma we faced recently: do we spend 350,000 on a matter of pure compliance (and therefore secure ourselves against an audit finding), or do we spend that money instead on making a concrete improvement in safety? And if we decide for the latter option, how do we have the right conversation with our regulator for the authority to find our chosen path acceptable? What would you do? 

Alex was born in 1968 and educated in the UK; he has a Swiss mother and British father. He obtained his private pilot's licence in 1986 and his ATCO licence in 1996 (Heathrow approach), after studying French and German at Exeter University. He moved around a number of NATS sites from 2003 until 2009, being in charge of air traffic services at Farnborough Airport, Manchester Airport and Area Control Centre, West Drayton Centre (where he oversaw the move of the centre and its associated 500 families to the south coast of England), and Swanwick Centre. In 2009, Alex became Director Strategy and Investment and later also Director International Affairs. In July 2011 he left NATS to take up the role of Chief Operating Officer at skyguide, Switzerland. He was appointed CEO of skyguide from 1 July 2017. He is passionate about safety and finding ways to innovate in ATM to improve the customer experience. Alex lives near Geneva with his wife and 9-year-old son.