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You Can't Handle the Truth!



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Lt Kaffee: "I want the truth!"

Col Jessep: "You can't handle the truth!"

That's the famous interchange from the movie "A Few Good Men" when the characters played by Jack Nicholson and Tom Cruise confront each other in court. Great drama on the screen, and, unfortunately, far too accurate in life.

Let's say we run a company or a flight department within a company. Regulators and insurers tell us that we need to have a Safety Management System and that we need to be IS-BAO Stage 3. So, we start doing the paperwork and pay a vendor for an audit. Theoretically, we are paying an unbiased third party to come in and look at operations with the stated purpose of finding ways to improve, and uncover any possible issues that may result in unnecessary risk to shareholders, customers and passengers. The problem is that, even though we're paying someone to tell us the truth, we don't really want the truth.

We want a comforting lie.

We want to be told that all is well. We want to be anointed as Stage 3 compliant so that we can stop messing with this crap, and get back to doing our jobs.

That's a problem.

In fact, it's exactly the kind of problem that kills people in aviation. Sometimes it manifests itself as fooling the auditors: we make sure everything is spotless, put all the undocumented or questionable items in a storage locker we rent for a month, and we make sure that Bubba has the week off (no way we're letting him talk to an auditor). It also happens in training when we pass people who shouldn't be allowed near a set of controls, people whose initial reaction when faced with a stall is to pull harder on the yoke, or people that would be better off in another line of work. Instead of learning that early on, we make sure they know the answers to the tests and



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know exactly what (and in what order) things will happen on the check ride. We're not only afraid to hear the truth, we're afraid to tell the truth. We don't want to hurt anyone's feelings.

How is that even possible? How does something so absolutely critical to Safety of Flight as straightforward truth become routinely compromised? It makes as little sense as lying to your doctor. You tell him that everything is fine, and meanwhile that spot on your shoulder is becoming metastasized melanoma. In our business, when auditors miss something, one of two things is likely: 1) either a company becomes very good at fooling the auditors, or 2) the auditors don't see the problem.

Both are bad. Auditors walk a fine line, because they learn early in the business that often companies don't really want the truth--they just want to pass the audit. Factual findings are presented by the auditors to the company. The recipients of the audit then gather wood and burn the auditors at the stake. In order to save their skins and stay in business, auditors start "softening" their findings, companies start hearing what they want to hear and everyone is happy until people die in a mishap. We need to learn to handle the truth.

Organizations (and people) often fall into a cycle of believing too much in their own greatness. It goes like this: We are a great flight department, but we've seen or been presented with evidence that indicates we have a problem. But...great flight departments don't have problems, and we are a great flight department. Therefore, the data is wrong, the auditor is wrong, the implication that we have any problems at all is wrong! So we gather our metaphorical wood with eyes closed and hands over our ears, as we hum a comforting tune to ourselves.

When did we become so sensitive?

Audit findings should bring both a sense of disquiet and a sense of relief. They should bother us because we should have been alert enough to pick up on the issues ourselves. Use that as fuel for improvement. Talk about the issues and fix them. We should also be relieved that someone pointed them out and gave us a chance to remedy the issues before we killed anyone. Audit findings are opportunities. Treat them as such.

No one wants to be told that they have an ugly baby, but that's exactly what we need to be told if we want to get better. If you don't want to get better, find another profession. Aviation is too risky to tolerate you.



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