

Safety versus Corporate Culture in airlines (Australia)

The Australian Transport Safety Bureau has called for comments on a proposed new confidential safety concerns reporting scheme or REPCON as it currently known, in the air transport, rail and maritime industries.

It is probably the most important and difficult set of changes ever proposed to the public administration of safety in these industries in this country, and the ATSB website has an unofficial draft of the regulations, and a discussion paper with examples of how REPCON works, and an explanatory letter.

The timetable is for this first round of responses and comments to be made by 16 December, followed by a revised draft of the proposals, then another round of consultations, and then legislative approval bringing the final form of a new REPCON into law in 2013.

Supposedly confidential safety reporting procedures in this country, and abroad, have seen some of the whistle blowers side lined, demoted or sacked, and part of the problem is that in a wide range of circumstances, management would have no difficulty identifying the person reporting a particular concern because of the specifics.

This is part of the challenge of crafting a better REPCON process.

There is in the real world, a serious risk to a career involved in defying a corporate culture that takes dangerous or unsound risks, particularly in airlines in which the management either despises the technical skills of the pilots and maintenance engineers, or sees them as too costly.

Lets keep in mind that in Jetstar in 2007, not only did the airline change the binding approved flight manual procedures so that they no longer required pilots in a go-around situation to first ensure that the engines were set to go around power, but it kept no paperwork, and conducted no safety management analysis of the changes, and which were changes that nearly lead to a crash in July of that year at Melbourne airport.

In its current reports and inquiries, the ATSB has produced evidence that AirServices Australia is entrusting incompetent or inadequately trained controllers to keep airliners apart in Australian skies, in circumstances where safety outcomes would almost certainly be better served by watertight confidential reporting of roster and training abuses by management.

The manifest risks to public safety that had arisen in Jetstar and which are identified in AirServices Australia today could have been better minimised by laws that encourage and protect more insider information being safely provided to the safety authorities.

The issue of an improved REPCON process is in direct opposition to the notion in many corporations that what happens in the company stays in the company, and that the unauthorised disclosure of any information about operations is a dismissible offence.

These days, emails, and electronically circulated memos and operational documents can all be traced or given unique digital fingerprints that will identify who received any particular copy of a presentation. Company phones can be checked for incoming calls from numbers matching those of reporters, regulators or competitors.

The task of securing anonymity is so technically daunting that it may be necessary to recognise that absolute confidentiality is an impossibility, and that the law may need to revert to severe penalties for those individuals and companies that persecute safety informants.

There is a huge amount of work to be done to give Australia the safety dividends of more timely and detailed information from the work place, unfiltered by managements.

<http://blogs.crikey.com.au/planetalking/2011/09/16/safety-versus-corporate-culture-in-airlines/>