

The Importance of Training

By T. Scott Gross

It was one of those little things you notice when your attention should be elsewhere. My palms were sweating, which was not a particularly good sign for someone piloting a Canadair Regional Jet into JFK Airport for the first time. Actually, this was to be only the sixth time I had landed a jet of any size so perhaps I could be forgiven a little nervousness. One at a time and hoping my First Officer wouldn't notice, I wiped my hands on my pants.

The sweating actually began at Atlanta's Hartsfield Airport. We were cleared from the gate by ground control and I could feel every expansion gap in the concrete. It was raining when we left the gate. The rain had turned to a light snow and reduced our visibility by the time we reached the business end of the long east-west runway.

The CRJ200 model is steered with a tiller to the left of the pilot's seat. You can slow it down or bring it to a stop with the hydraulic brakes mounted as extensions to the rudder pedals. Because I was new to taxiing this 47,500 pound monster, every detail fought for my attention. I worried that the weather at Kennedy would be no better. The approach to Kennedy from the west is one of the world's most unusual approaches. Instead of the long, straight-in approach to the bright white rabbit lights aviators set up from the southwest, you visually locate a miles-long curving series of approach lights. Then you follow along the curve until, miracle of miracles, there waits the runway.

It's counter-intuitive but from five miles out I spotted the approach lights even though

neither the airport nor the runway could be seen in the dark night now a few thousand feet above the city. My First Officer, Skip Barnett, CEO of Atlantic Southeast Airlines, called out the altitude in a subtle reminder that vertical navigation was as critical as the visual lock-on to the approach lights. I repeated his call-out to let him know that sweaty palms aside I was right with him, firmly in control. Skip is a good First Officer and an even better leader. It was an honor to have him in the right seat. After all it was his airplane, figuratively speaking.

We rounded the curve and the lights of one of the world's busiest airports winked from the darkness. Approach released us to the tower, the tower cleared us to land, and I stole another quick swipe at my pants' legs. "One thousand feet, gear and flaps in the green," Skip continued with the check list.

From my vantage point, the far end of the runway looked to be all of a block long. Although I knew this was an illusion, it gave me a start. The glide slope indicator was showing a perfect red over white indicating that our path to the runway was right on the money. The airspeed, thanks to Skip, was also right on the money. My attention switched back to the view through the windscreen with runway in the window, and the red lights at the far end of the runway steady.

The radar altimeter announcing altitude every ten feet began the countdown beginning at 50 feet. At 10 feet I increased the flare ever so slightly, more by intuition than

the numbers. I was, in pilot terms, 'sniffing for asphalt' and I was rewarded by the gentle touch of the mains on the runway, right on the numbers and more than a mile from the far end. I had plenty of time to stop but wanted to make the high speed turn off. Good pilots can land on the numbers painted on the end of the runway, but great pilots fly all the way to the gate.

"That was awesome!" It was a voice from somewhere behind me. "Do you want to try that again?" I was on the tiller and steering toward the gate. "I think I'd like to stretch after that one!" The lights came up and Skip and I joined Brian Wilson, our check pilot, on the small deck of the simulator, all \$17 million dollars of it. The simulator is so realistic that the first flight pilots take in a real aircraft is also a revenue trip. Even the FAA says I can log the experience in my flight book! Pretty good training, huh? Here's the good news. You don't need a \$17 million dollar simulator to simulate serving customers in your operation.

Training is the process of providing multiple experiences in a compressed span of time. It's a great way to increase skill levels. I'm living, flying proof of that! And forget about taking complexity out of a job. Consider putting it in!

I, for one, wouldn't mind seeing us re-engineer the workplace with the intention of *adding* complication to make the job at hand challenging enough to keep regular people from going absolutely bonkers. The added benefit would be that when customers made out-of-norm requests, employees would be

able and comfortable to handle them.

Along with the requirement to think, which comes from a properly engineered job, comes the requirement for management to empower and take a few small risks. Eliminating variance (risk) through standardizing the job process and focusing employees into narrow, mind-numbing tasks is yet another way to offend thinking customers and employees.

Thinking Point

When you make jobs so idiot-proof that only idiots can stand to do them, you have no right to complain about the quality of help!

Thinking Point

Few employees are stupid but a ton are truly ignorant. Stupid means you can't know how. Ignorant simply means that you don't know how.

Thinking Point

Stupid you can avoid; ignorant you can fix.

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