

THE CONTROLLER

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THRIVING, COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS



by Darrell Meachum,
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As the first edition of "The Controller" since IFATCA celebrated its 50th birthday in October, it is only fitting that the focus of this publication concerns the relationship between air traffic controllers and ANSP management.

I have had the personal privilege of serving as an air traffic controller for almost 29 years, before my retirement in late 2010. For 20 of those years, I also served the membership of my home association, NATCA, as a union official.

In that time, I gained a reputation as both a hard-nosed employee advocate and a valuable partner with management, willing to collaborate with my employer to forward the ANSP's mission and to protect and safeguard employees and the profession. I learned it was unnecessary to change my costume or even my attitude to deal with different management styles. I was the same person in every instance; serving more as a reflection or mirror image of the management official with whom I was working.

While I admit many people, on both sides of the management/labor equation, confuse position with personality, and individuals with organizational policy, I can honestly say, I felt pride in my profession for the entire length of my service, and that included pride in having worked for my employer. While individuals and management philosophy at the top of the Federal Aviation Administration changed, I still received my checks from the FAA, not the individual managers at the top. People employ this perspective every day when they say they do not like the particular leader of their nation, but remain loyal and faithful to their country.

What my 20 years as a Union official taught me, is that employers have more say in the development and outcome of the employer/employee relationship than employees. I have heard employers dispute this, but employers hold more power in the relationship. How much sense does it make for an employer to say – though I have heard it often – "I will treat employees better once they treat me better"?

Frankly, the truth is that employees are a reflection of their employer. A management philosophy that treats employees with honor, dignity and respect is generally rewarded with the same; not distrust and destruction.

I know some of my friends in management will disagree, but I have experienced a variety of ATC management styles firsthand. I began my employment as an air traffic controller less than 9 months after the fateful PATCO strike in the USA, witnessed the rebirth of a union formed by replacement workers, and was buffeted by the swinging pendulums of management philosophy USA federal employees endure due to a routinely changing political climate in Washington.

One oft-stated theory concerning the underlying reasons behind the dispute between FAA management and USA air traffic controllers leading up to the 1981 PATCO strike was a lack of employee control in the workplace. FAA management stated the most recent management/labor dispute in the USA during the second Bush administration was largely predicated on the belief the employer needed to take back control of the workplace from the employees. The fact that employers occasionally see employee involvement as a loss of management "control" in the workplace reveals a lot about our chosen profession and the people in charge of establishing the necessary balance between management and employee rights.





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Assuming they have the ability to insulate themselves from external political factors, ANSPs must decide how much influence their employees will receive in their workplace, especially when it concerns operational procedures and technical equipment. IFATCA will always encourage ANSPs to achieve their objectives through collaboration rather than confrontation with air traffic staff, regardless of whether a professional association and/or labor union represents the employees.

It's true that collaboration appears more expensive initially, as the employer must pay for ATCO involvement early in the process. As the 1981 and 2006 labor disputes in the USA demonstrated however, confrontation unavoidably results in delays in improving the system and eventually, additional expenditures are necessary to put faulty concepts and projects back on track.

IFATCA does not believe employer/employee collaboration will prevent all management/labor disputes or industrial actions. Clearly, technical and professional issues are only a portion of the issues that can lead to ATC management and labor crossing proverbial swords.

The real test of a thriving, collaborative relationship between employers and employees comes during the darkest of times, when external and internal forces are aligned against success. New employer or employee leadership, industrial relations disagreements, political shifts, societal turmoil, personality conflicts; all introduce tempting circumstances to diminish or abandon collaborative management/labor relationships concerning professional and technical issues.

Whereas IFATCA encourages employees and employers to collaborate as full partners at the ANSP level, IFATCA stands

ready to do the same internationally with our collective employers' representative, CANSO. While IFATCA is not interested in serving as a substitute for interacting with organized labor officials, IFATCA sees opportunities in building a relationship with CANSO similar to the one IFALPA and IATA share.

IFATCA, similar to our sister Federation, IFALPA, is an apolitical Federation of occasionally political organizations, especially the half of our membership that function as labor unions. We believe it is wise for international Federations of employee and employer associations to avoid taking sides in industrial actions or management/labor disputes. It is clear to everyone though that the situation is complicated by the fact the principals in any workplace struggle are likely members of either CANSO or IFATCA, and that it is difficult to separate quality of life issues with quality of work issues.

CANSO and IFATCA have the opportunity, when such circumstances inevitably occur, to assist their members by keeping the lines of communication open. That opportunity disappears the moment one Federation calls for action or attempts to influence the debate on behalf of one of its members against the other party in an internal-ANSP dispute.

To date, the IFATCA Executive Board has concluded CANSO is not yet prepared for a fully functioning collaborative partnership with air traffic controllers to promote safety, efficiency, and regularity in international air navigation through the

development of safe and orderly systems of air traffic control.

The IFATCA Executive Board foresees the necessity to manage the inevitable conflict of interests and perspectives between ATM employers and employees as an opportunity for both; one that we hope will lead to stronger collaboration at all levels.

In the mean time, the next generation systems are being designed and built. How quickly and efficiently these will become operational, will to a large extent depend upon the degree of involvement by line air traffic controllers in the future system's conception and implementation.

We trust this edition of the magazine will provide some lessons learned from past-experiences with various ATC management philosophies and open a door for more productive communications, if not a more collaborative working relationship between ANSP management and employees. ☺

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Photo: Theumf, Dreamstime.com



FAA AND UNION COLLABORATION

THE SHORTER ROUTE TO BETTER DECISIONS

→ David Grizzle
Photo: FAA



by David Grizzle, Chief Operating Officer,
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A new spirit of cooperation between the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and its labor unions is enhancing our ability to provide the safest, most efficient aerospace system in the world.

The 2009 contract between the FAA and National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) provided multiple opportunities for collaboration. In addition, President Obama's Executive Order of December 9, 2009, created a formal process of labor/management forums to improve delivery of government services. Finally, the FAA's senior management believes strongly that robust collaboration and clear decision-making authority are a potent combination to drive better decisions with shorter overall cycle time.

After many discussions, the FAA and NATCA agreed on a sustainable collaborative process. Both labor and management wanted to create:

- Cooperative and productive labor-management relations throughout the Agency,
- Improved delivery of aviation services to the American people.

To accomplish this, NATCA and the FAA met during the spring of 2010 to discuss how collaboration would fit into the Agency's mission and future. Why? The reason is simple. People doing the day-to-day work know where change is needed and have the experience to find innovative solutions. Collaboration harnesses this expertise at a pivotal time, as the FAA champions the development and implementation of NextGen.

Last year, FAA field managers and NATCA facility representatives at 10 test sites across the country began to formally collaborate on issues related to procedures, technol-

ogy and airspace. Already, this teamwork is paying dividends. Some examples: three air traffic facilities in Alaska collaboratively agreed to more than 20 changes to Letters of Agreement, improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the flow of air traffic. At the Washington Air Route Traffic Control Center, collaborative team came up with an airspace redesign plan. This will save airlines an estimated \$19 million in annual fuel costs while reducing carbon emissions by more than 100,000 tons. In addition, a realignment of operational areas will save the facility almost \$4 million a year in reduced payroll costs. And seven facilities impacted by the New York/New Jersey/Philadelphia Airspace Redesign are using the collaborative process to resolve complex technical issues between multiple facilities. As a result, airplanes will soon be moving out of and through the New York area more efficiently.

In fact, the test sites have been so successful that we are rolling out the collaborative process nationwide. FAA managers and NATCA facility representatives from nearly every air traffic facility in the country have been trained in the collaborative process.

Collaboration is crucial to advancing safety throughout the National Airspace System and creating a vibrant and effective safety culture within the entire FAA. Over the past few years we have received thousands of valuable safety reports from controllers through the voluntary, non-punitive Air Traffic Safety Action Program (ATSAP).

We are now working with our other union counterparts to increase collaborative involvement. The FAA formed the Partnership for

Safety with NATCA and the Professional Aviation Safety Specialists (PASS) to identify and mitigate risks before an incident or accident occurs. The FAA has partnered with NATCA and PASS to conduct in-depth studies on workplace fatigue among both Air Traffic and Technical Operations employees. And we recently began a Technical Operations Safety Action Program similar to ATSAP.

Nationally, senior FAA executives and leaders of all unions that represent FAA employees have formed a Labor Management Forum to bring different perspectives to the table as together we tackle agency-wide issues. Strong union support was essential for the launch of our current Workforce Engagement initiative, which empowers employees to work together locally to improve their individual workplaces.

Collaboration at all levels is worth the effort because it almost always produces better outcomes. At the FAA we have been able to accomplish things that we probably couldn't have done without collaboration. As facilities around the country form their own collaborative work groups, I expect many more successes. ☺

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