

Interview with John Laughter

Senior Vice President for Corporate Safety, Security and Compliance Delta Air Lines



Heather Monaghan (HM): As a regular Delta customer, I am continuously impressed by the teamwork I see when planes arrive and depart. Everyone seems to have great trust in each other and take personal accountability for their role in the safety of the passengers and themselves.

John Laughter (JL): When you look out the window and see the whole operation, it appears to all be running like a well-oiled machine, and at the heart of it, safety truly is our brand. It's not something we advertise. No airline does. No one says, "Fly us, we're the safest," but it is the most important element of our brand. Our customers expect it and demand it, even though we don't ever talk about it. I appreciate you wanting to talk with Delta about safety.

HM: Delta is a massive organization, and you are right at the top of the chain for the safety element of it. What sort of structure do you have in place in the organization to ensure that safety is maintained at every level?

JL: I think safety begins at the top, and I know every company out there probably makes that claim. However, I am fortunate to be part of an organization where they really mean it. Not only my CEO, who I think is the biggest advocate of safety around, but also our Board of Directors. Specifically, we have a safety and security committee on our board, and the board's chairman is a member of that committee. These people commit a lot of time to understanding the top risks and our mitigations against those risks. They are constantly reviewing our safety data, and the metrics we provide to them. These are very engaged senior leaders, and I really think that sets the whole tempo for the company.

My organization, Corporate Safety, Security and Compliance, is the corporate group responsible for making sure that across the company, we're setting policies and procedures to ensure safety - everything from occupational safety (Are employees going home every day in the same condition they arrived in?) to the overall technical safety of the aircraft and the proficiency and safety of the pilots and crew operating the aircraft. And also the biggest safety issue,

which is how do we prevent and avoid aircraft accidents? Corporate Safety, Security and Compliance is a fairly small corporate group that is integrated across all our divisions in the company, again working on policy and procedure, collecting and analyzing the safety data, and working with divisions to make sure that we're all focused on the highest risk items.

HM: Do you engage the employees at grassroots level when discussing policy, procedure, and solutions?

JL: Absolutely. Delta's 80,000 employees include a lot of very smart frontline technical experts. They are the people that know how we should get things done, so employee front-line feedback on what we should do, our policies and their applications in the real environment is absolutely critical. This is a theme that you will hear me say throughout. The culture we have created here is one that needs participation by the employees. It goes without saying that it's a nonpunitive culture. We need them to tell us when there are safety issues, when they make safety mistakes, and where there are human factors we need to consider.

HM: I've worked in health care for well over 20 years, and even though we talk about systemic causes of incidents that probably lead to solutions to the problem, we still see a punitive approach adopted toward an individual or group. How did you get past that? Obviously, there is a place for that, but how far down the line is it? How do you get it so your staff can open up to you and talk about near misses and other things without fear?

JL: It starts at the top with leadership and creating programs that not only allow employee disclosure or report-

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ing of items but encourages it. The biggest example of this in the aviation industry is a program called ASAP and that stands for Aviation Safety Action Program. This is an FAA-sponsored program and is an agreement between the management, employee, and regulator that says if you tell us about a safety issue, we agree there will be no punitive response from the company. This is happening across our company and the majority of our workers are covered by an ASAP program, and those that aren't, we are continuing to work towards implementing those programs. For instance, we receive upwards of 20,000 reports from pilots a year of things that they say, "I just want you to know about this." To me, that is one of the biggest steps you can make to get away from a punitive culture.

HM: Moving on to training, is there any core safety training in the orientation program that is generic to all employees.

JL: When you look at our training program, there are elements that are very similar in terms of ergonomics, which apply to everyone with specific emphasis on the type of job they perform. Then I think that at a higher level, it's the idea of empowering our employees to stop the operation at any point when it comes to maintaining safety. We're running a global, fast-paced, never-shuts-down airline operation at great efficiency. Arguably, this summer we ran the best operation anyone could ever put forth in terms of performance numbers. But if there is a safety issue, not only can our employees stop the operation, we need them to stop it. That is probably the biggest element that I would say permeates all areas of the company and all training in one form or another.

HM: That's very powerful. That shift toward personal accountability within an organizational accountability, I think it's huge how important it is that people own their behavior

and are accountable for it rather than someone waving a stick over them and saying, "You will do this."

JL: I totally agree, and that comes with the transformation as you move away from the punishment-if-you-do-something-wrong culture to this idea of we know you are going to do something wrong, tell us about it, and then our job is to try to eliminate that from happening again. I think that frees employees and creates a transparency that is invaluable.

HM: I want to ask something that might be quite controversial, at least I know it is in my own industry. There is a huge diversity of ethnic groups employed in health care and that often presents some language issues, even though everyone is meant to speak English. Do you or have you ever considered training people in their native language to ensure they understand what is being taught to them even though there is a requirement to speak English?

JL: You bring up a great point, and it's something that as we go forward we're going to have to continue to study and get smarter about, especially with Delta's footprint across the globe. Generally, in the aviation industry internationally, the language required to be spoken is English. In some areas, we know that is not the language that is spoken in the actual execution of a task or job. In our international locations, the trainers get trained in English, and then the trainers go out and may conduct the training in their native language. That's obviously the most efficient for those locations, but in terms of us actually developing the content in a language other than English, I think that is something that we have to keep looking at and studying as we continue to expand.

HM: It's about ensuring that comprehension, which takes

Just Culture

A just culture is one in which full disclosure of mistakes, errors, and near misses occurs through open reporting and there is a recognition that errors are often system failures (not personal failures). A just culture focuses on understanding the root of the problem and engaging personnel in process improvement and policy changes to promote prevention.

me to my next question: How do you know the staff you are training, whatever level, are actually competent and fully understand what they are being asked to do rather than just saying, “Yes, I understand”? How do you get that translation to a competency rather than just check the box to say that they have been trained?

JL: Most of our training will include some element of on-the-job training and sign-off that we have actually witnessed the employee performing the task accurately and faithfully. Rarely at Delta are employees going to go do some operational task where they do a classroom or computer session and then step out into the live environment and do it on their own. Typically, there is some element of on-the-job training (hands-on) that will come with it. Also, there are groups out in our stations that are observing and auditing, such as my team who audits for compliance to procedures. Fundamentally, I think it is in the way we train which requires some degree of on-the-job training or hands-on experience and then sign-off to perform that task, and then coming in behind is some oversight and auditing, where we are continually sampling what is going on in the field.

HM: I think auditing is a very powerful tool. I know in the past when I was in a leadership position in health care, I actually had the staff members audit each other, so they could provide feedback as well. It's incredibly powerful that way.

JL: No question. Our airports across the globe are essentially standalone factories, and to have the head of one city go over and audit another city provides a completely new perspective, and the amount of feedback and growth that we get from that is incredible.

HM: In health care, we have a system of precepting for new staff. For example, new graduate nurses go through a checklist and are assessed for competency, which we've talked about. Do you have a system of buddying people up or precepting them so they learn from somebody who is more experienced?

JL: It is not across the entire company in a formal sense, but there are some areas where we do this. For instance, we have a mentor process on the ramps in our airports. As the new employees come in and move on to do the on-the-job portion, they are partnered up with a more experienced, seasoned worker who becomes their mentor. These new hire employees wear a different-colored safety vest on the ramp so when they are out working around the aircraft, people can visibly see this is a new employee and don't necessarily assume that they are going to operate at the same proficiency as seasoned employees. That has been very successful in quickly ramping up new employees, with everyone pulling together to make sure they get proficient as quickly as they can.

HM: When you have an investigation of an incident or near miss completed, how do you actually disseminate the results to the staff so they can learn from them?

JL: It depends on the nature of the investigation. Sometimes it comes back through various crew briefings and/or policy changes. We also leverage the power of the company size and look for trends across the whole globe. We try to provide those lessons learned or feedback to employees in some kind of form. For instance, there is a monthly publication that goes out to all pilots that gives examples of operational lessons learned. There are also some cases where the person who actually reports the near miss may ask to be involved in fixing it, and sometimes they are the best ambassadors to come back and help train people on how to avoid that situation in the future. It can be very engaging, and it just depends on the situation.

HM: I totally agree with you, and I think that's a great way to go forward with investigations. How do you instill confidence, understanding, and trust between employees so they know they are doing what they are meant to be doing and there isn't a sort of backstabbing or setting people up to fail going on?

JL: I go back to this idea of a just culture because I think that's the key ingredient. Starting at the top and not only saying safety is important but also living it and supporting it. And then employee engagement. Across the company, each of our workers have some kind of employee engagement in safety, which in many cases is one of the vehicles we use to create that transparency to make the frontline part of the solution. In different areas, we have systems of peer evaluation and self-checking, with the goal being to break down as many of the barriers as we can and create as transparent, open, and safe an environment as possible.

HM: If I asked you to sum up how to develop a culture of safety in a large organization, what would be the top three points you would include?

JL: Number one—creating clear expectations from senior



leaders on safety expectations and responsibility. All of us are responsible, but we need some definition of how we are all accountable for it. Number two—integrating safety into every employee’s role. It should not be an afterthought, but as part of the job. Every employee, from those who work in offices to those who operate our aircraft, has safety integrated into their role. Number three—creating trust and transparency, and that’s achieved by open data sharing, non-punitive self-reporting, and empowering each employee to stop the operation. Those would be my three big points.



About John Laughter

John Laughter is Senior Vice President – Corporate Safety, Security & Compliance for Delta Air Lines, responsible for supporting all Delta departments in achieving the highest levels of safety, security, quality, and environmental performance.

John began his career in 1993 at Delta as an Aircraft Structural Engineer and held various leadership positions in the Engineering group, including Interiors Engineering and New Aircraft Acquisition. He also led the TechOps Materials and Planning Organization as well as directed Delta TechOps’ worldwide Maintenance Operations.

Currently, John sits on the Georgia Tech Aerospace Engineering School Advisory Board, Delta Flight Museum Board, Candler Field Advisory Board, and Board of Visitors of the Monastery of the Holy Spirit.

John holds a bachelor’s degree in Aerospace Engineering from the Georgia Institute of Technology and a Master of Business Administration from Emory University’s Goizueta Business School.