

Defending the Profession Means Defending ALPA (and Vice Versa)



*Chris Beebe
MEC Chairman*

“The overriding reason that pilots become involved in ALPA is to fix the union and not the company. Why?”

I must confess that there seems to be a pervasive attitude among us that ALPA is constantly in need of an overhaul. The odd thing about this is that as pilots we normally try to resist change. The one great exception to this rule is our union. The overriding reason that pilots become involved in ALPA is to fix the union and not the company. Why?

While walking through the terminal in PHL a few weeks ago, (yes, in uniform, flying a trip) I was approached by a pilot. The conversation, although one sided, went something like this: You know, you ALPA guys always seem to be out there giving something to the Company so you can get something for yourselves.

After giving some thought to why someone might make a remark like this, I began piecing this together with the “Let’s change ALPA” credo or, under another name, “Let’s throw these bums out because the next group of bums can’t be nearly as bad.”

I suppose it is like all of us to complain about whatever is bothering us at the time. It could be the last person you flew with, the lack of a jetway driver to meet your aircraft, or the quality of the overnight hotel. In many cases, though, it is ALPA and we should be honest as to why we arrived at this conclusion.

You guys do a great job taking care of yourselves

Part of it is human nature. Boys will be boys (sorry, people will be people) and all that. There is something more insidious at work though. I think in general, we have formed an opinion about ALPA based on a number of factors: rumor, this and other MEC publications, rumor,

council newsletters which I will tell you I sometimes disagree with, rumor, a general lack of willingness to participate and instead complain, rumor, a general lack of understanding about how our union works, and finally rumor. Let me give you one example: Does the MEC Chairman vote on MEC resolutions?

Be honest with your answer here. The fact is that the MEC Chairman acts on behalf of the MEC when they are not in session. When in session (read: any time a vote is taken) the MEC Chairman simply runs the meeting to allow for the business of the MEC to be conducted. I get to vote if the MEC splits on a vote 6-6. Generally I don’t because I don’t view myself as a swing vote but rather an administrator whose job is to get our work done. So, the short answer is no.

Here’s another example. Can the Negotiating Committee, or any other committee or individual, for that matter, effect a change on their own in regard to our contract?

No, they can not. Any modification must occur with a vote by the majority of the MEC. In fact, the MEC’s Policy Manual provides that any significant change to the contract should be sent to you, the membership, for a vote. There is one exception to this and that is the Merger Committee. They are the only committee in ALPA that can execute an agreement on behalf of the MEC without their consent. On this issue alone, we could spend another page or two as to why it is so important to elect people to our committees for what they bring to the job and not what is politically expedient.

The message to be gotten from the preceding questions is to demonstrate a couple of key

(and probably wrong) beliefs about our union. No one person or committee can act on its own with the one exception I pointed out. No one person or committee can execute an agreement without the approval of the representatives you elect, the 12 voting members of the MEC.

Credibility and unity

Now, here's my next point and this one will not make me any more friends at the AFA or IAM: we are the only employee group that has the ability to shut this airline down, bar none. In the end game, our only obstacle is ourselves and our collective commitment to attain our goals. That's why unity is so crucial and I will talk about that in a moment. WE, the pilots, can make virtually anything happen at this airline that we want to. That degree of influence carries with it a huge amount of responsibility. This is where I get to say again that our careers and the well being of our families are linked to the fortunes of this corporation. That is why we pay so much attention to things like what the competition is doing about RJ's, AJ's, SJ's, or whatever they are being called these days. We can bring back the 1 for 3 duty rig. We can bring back any thing we want to. We can conclude any agreement we choose. All we have to be willing to do is pay the price.

Trust yields Unity yields Trust ...

Let's talk unity for a moment. Unity is borne of trust. That trust must be in the people you elected to the MEC, the people they elected to various committee positions, and trust in your fellow pilots to make the right decision. That right decision, by the way, is the one that agrees with your decision. Yet, what I see, and am told, is that (fill in the blank) is a no-good, out for himself, management stone who will give up anything to help himself. Think about that for a moment. And while you are thinking, add this into your process. Do you honestly think we can be successful in 2003 without the trust and unity that must be developed now?

How can anyone in ALPA do something for himself that would not affect all of us? How could one pilot do something that would help him or her alone? The simple answer is that they can not. Since I am the one to bring this issue up, I'll use myself as an example. I have over 13 years to go to age 60. I'm not looking for a job with the company or another full time ALPA job. I fully realize that decisions made today will affect me for at least that amount of time.

In fact, I want future generations of pilots to enjoy what I have or more. I daresay that all of us, including your representatives, feel the same.

Just say "no"

Are you feeling any better about your union yet? My point is that we can always come up with a reason to be suspicious of those who represent us. In rare cases, I have seen this borne out, but in the vast, overwhelming, numbers in the high 99.99% range, it's simply not justified. Let's go on.

ALPA is a democratic organization. Like most democracies, we have a system of checks and balances to preserve majority rule and minority rights. The problem that I see is that when a position is committed to by a majority vote, the minority takes that opportunity to tell you why the majority is a bunch of company influenced nit-wits with no other agenda but themselves. Rather than go with that opinion, have you ever called one of those company influenced nit-wits to find out why they voted in a particular way? Or isn't it just easier to write them off in hope of finding SOMETHING wrong about them. So, let's throw the bums out because the next group can't be nearly as bad as these guys. Or can they?

Keep in mind that when someone votes against a particular position, whether justified or not, it gives them the ability to tell you that they voted no in the interest of being able to get you a better deal. This is a no lose situation. They have already lost the vote, and now, rather than support the view of the majority, they can snipe at them by telling you about the BBD (the bigger, better deal). Here's the bottom line: on tough issues, it's a lot easier (and politically correct) to vote no or abstain on an issue. It is much tougher to vote yes. Why? Because it takes that much more work to tell you why an issue was voted up instead of down. On to the next piece of this puzzle.

Communications and more

Communications, communications, communications. Sounds a lot like real estate except it is even more pivotal to your future. Another conversation with a pilot goes like this: "I'm tired of getting letters from Stephen Wolf with your name on them." Fair enough, but the real beef was a perception that I was attempting to influence this pilot by distributing information favorable to the company. So, let me try this on you. Feed is good. Additional feed means addi-

“ WE, the pilots, can make virtually anything happen at this airline that we want to. That degree of influence carries with it a huge amount of responsibility. ”

“Here’s the point: You can agree or disagree, but you should have the same level of information as the MEC has in order to make your decision on the merits of this debate.”

tional passengers. Additional passengers mean more flying. I know, I know, I’m getting close to your comfort level. In other words, here we go again with another company message from Freebie Beebe. But what’s a mother to do? The *facts* are that as a short stage length carrier, we are both more vulnerable to loss of feed but we also benefit in a disproportionate way from additional feed. Here’s the point: You can agree or disagree, but you should have the same level of information as the MEC has in order to make your decision on the merits of this debate. This allows you to agree or disagree in a constructive way and not in concert with our old friend rumor.

Now tell me, how I can give you all the information you need without at least a part of it looking like it was generated by the company? I could exclude information in the interest of

having you like me more. I could bias the information so you might feel better about it and guess what? I get a lot fewer phone calls than I do now. I could send you nothing. But, is this fair to you, me, or the entire pilot group?

It seems like now we have gone full circle on this trust issue. So, let me leave you with some rules that I live by:

- Given the same information, nine out of ten pilots will make exactly the same decision.
- Complete information allows for an informed (and satisfying) decision.
- What looks good and feels good today might not have that rosy glow to it a year from now. Understand the upsides and downsides to any decision.
- Anything less than 50 years is considered temporary.
- The truth will set you free.
- Five minutes of sleep prior to 6:00 AM is worth one hour any other time of the day.

The summary

Alright, alright, I’ve occupied enough of your leg to SFO. Here comes the summary. Your union is what you choose to make it. After you elect your representatives, back them up and at least call them in regard to their viewpoints on the issues important to you. Trust them to make decisions on your behalf. Monitor how your representatives vote on issues that are important to you. Understand that the pilots who work for you, either in committee positions or as representatives, are committed individuals who put in extraordinary amounts of time on your behalf. Individual agendas are pretty easy to see but very difficult to implement. If you are interested, get involved. But make it involvement to build a better mousetrap, not to continually disparage individuals and the union we have built over the last 60 plus years. Finally, chart our course wisely and recognize that our collective future is based on the decisions we make today.

