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Measuring Success

By Captain Hartley Phinney
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"ALPA gives the Company everything." Numerous times pilots say to me that it does not matter what the PWA says, the Company just needs to create a crisis and ALPA will give them what they want. Nothing is farther from the truth. These pilots have misunderstood a basic principle of law, that a contract is a mutual agreement between the parties who sign it. It is entered into with the best of intentions by both sides, and when it no longer fits the circumstances the parties can modify the agreement to fit the new circumstances. When one side does not honor the terms of the agreement - in our case, the Company - then ALPA enforces the terms.

"I want to file a grievance," are words I hear every day. The pilot believes a violation of the PWA has occurred and has every right to expect his union to provide assistance. As chairman of the Contract Administration Committee, I am charged with enforcing the contract and helping pilots to bring their issues to resolution. There are many ways to bring the agreement back into compliance. Grievances are the most visible, but perhaps the least effective for many issues once you bring complexity, nuance, and detail into the picture.

It puzzles me when some Delta pilots take the relatively low number of *open* grievances as proof that our union is "too comfy" with management. This is, in my opinion, simply not true. The only adequate measurement of union effectiveness is that the goal of contract administration is achieved, regardless of *how* this is achieved. It must always be driven by results, and not by appearances of toughness that look pretty but don't actually carry water for the Delta pilots.

In truth, no pilot comes to work wanting to file a grievance; each of us really just wants to be treated properly under our Pilot Working Agreement, and compensated if we are treated improperly.

Every issue, and there have been over 1900 in the year to date, at Contract Administration starts with a conversation. The story comes out, and we organize the facts as they relate to the contract. Usually, the problem is cleared up by actively engaging the counterparts in the company responsible for the section of the contract in question. It can be as simple as a phone call.

And I did mean "usually," which also means "not always." If active engagement does not produce a satisfactory resolution, I either help the pilot engage another Delta employee or start the formal grievance process, but the pilot involved is the only person who can decide that his or her grievance is "resolved." I am never the person who decides.

So do I *file* every requested grievance? No, but the pilot has brought his issue to resolution - the football has crossed the plane of the goal line, who can argue that we should have used a different play? Why take points off the board? In a formal grievance process, the pilot could be stuck waiting months or years for a resolution; direct engagement has the potential to get the pilot compensated in the same month, and results are all that matters to pilots with contractual issues.

This manner of doing business is equally beneficial to both parties; neither ALPA nor the company wants to squander money on lawyers when we both know the likely outcome and that outcome can be reached by other means. Your union is more efficient in its duty to its membership, and your company has a better bottom line.

We actively engage the Company when pilots come to us with issues and successfully reach resolution outside of the formal grievance process the majority of the time. This happens because the Company recognizes it is in their best interest to work with us and that keeps ALPA from having hundreds of outstanding grievances.

We don't give the Company anything. We hold the Company accountable and actively work to improve the pilots' lives at every opportunity.