

Why We Plan

ALPA's most successful leaders are masters at developing strategic plans and putting them to work for their pilots

By Air Line Pilot staff

Editor's note: Four seasoned ALPA MEC chairmen—Capts. Jay Pierce (Continental), Lee Moak (Delta), Dave Nieuwenhuis (Atlantic Southeast), and Dave Webb (FedEx)—sat down with Air Line Pilot on September 8 to talk about an important subject for which each has earned an impressive reputation —strategic planning.

Air Line Pilot: Why is strategic planning important?

Pierce: Strategic planning is what keeps the team operating in sync. Setting goals is relatively easy; how you achieve those goals can be fairly complex. Without a strategic plan, it's akin to riding a horse without a saddle or a bridle—you're just along for the ride, and you have no directional control. The strategic plan gives you the mechanism to achieve your goals.

Moak: At Delta, we look at strategic planning as critical to accomplishing anything. Once you've agreed as a group on what the goals are, the next step is to develop a strategic plan. Within the strategic plan, you're going to have tactics to help you achieve your goals. Strategic planning is critical to achieving your goals—without it, you can work really hard and end up somewhere other than where you wanted to end up.

Webb: At FedEx, we've had to follow some of the precepts that worked so effectively for the corporation. Strategic planning is one of those precepts.

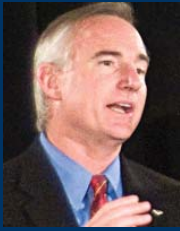
It's essential to developing the roadmap for how you're going to accomplish the goals that the group develops. It also gives you a benchmark to see how you're doing. If you have no plan and no roadmap to achieve your goals, it's very difficult to know whether you're getting closer to achieving those goals or going off in the wrong direction.

Nieuwenhuis: It's the MEC's responsibility to administer the whole plan throughout the process, moving from one benchmark to the next. The strategic plan is the glue that holds the whole operation together, from the MEC level to the Strike Preparedness Committee, the Negotiating

Committee, and the Grievance Committee. Not to say that the plan can't be flexible, but without it, you don't know where you're going to end up.

Air Line Pilot: Each of you has had successful strategic plans, and they have delivered some very good things for you. Capt. Webb, you had a strategic plan when you went into negotiations for your current contract. What might have happened had you not

had this plan, and what did this plan deliver for you?
Webb: Well, unfortunately, we don't have to hypothesize about what the results would be without a good strategic plan and, as a product of that, the unity that it provides among the members. The FedEx pilot group has struggled for many years to organize and develop a union and subsequently negotiate a contract, and early on, we did not achieve the results that I think most of the pilots expected. So I can't imagine, in today's world, that any pilot group could be successful without having a very detailed strategic plan. Just by the nature of our organization, there's turnover: We have elections every year. The representation on the leadership bodies changes. Things occur in people's lives that take them out of the process. And these are multi-year ordeals. The strategic plan for negotiations takes 2–3 years to prepare and 2–3 years more to execute. You've got to have some stabil-



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ity, some consistency; you've got to have that Rosetta Stone, so that as people come or go, or events distract you from your goal, you have a way to refocus everybody.

Air Line Pilot: What part of your plan created the leverage for you to eventually get this contract?

Webb: I think that the plan and the leaders' commitment to the plan, and communicating those things to our



The MEC chairmen are, from left, Capts. Jay Pierce (Continental), Lee Moak (Delta), Dave Webb (FedEx), and Dave Nieuwenhuis (Atlantic Southeast).

members, and the constant engagement that the leaders had with the members, created a level of unity and support from our pilots that had never been seen before at FedEx. If you were part of an airline's management team, and responsible leaders within the MEC were making reasonable demands in relationship to the viability and the profitability of the corporation, and then you looked out the door over the heads of the Negotiating Committee and saw nearly 5,000 pilots all saying, "That's right, they speak for me," that would be a very difficult thing to overcome. And I think the confidence built among the members through the plan, and more importantly, the MEC's commitment to implementing the plan, and sharing the appropriate parts of the plan at the appropriate time with the members, was a significant factor. It never happened at FedEx before.

Air Line Pilot: Capt. Moak, people have watched the tactics of a plan that played out when US Airways tried to take over Delta, and the Delta pilots felt that wasn't in their best interests and you blocked it. Could

you talk about quickly planning that operation and the strategic vision that underpinned it?

Moak: We used the same fundamentals that we use for contract negotiations and have used in the Delta-Northwest merger. We said, "Okay, what's the goal?" The goal was we didn't want to allow the hostile merger of Delta Air Lines by US Airways, which would have put 1,000 Delta pilots on the street and left 10,000 Delta employees without jobs. The next step was to develop the strategy to accomplish the goal, and then the tactics to accomplish the strategy.

I still remember the day when we got the word that the hostile takeover had started. I immediately brought the MEC into session. We assessed the situation; we decided what we wanted to do, and we immediately mobilized all our assets. We contacted ALPA National, which was very supportive. There were some complications, but we worked through them quickly and started down the path to the strategy.

What's critical is to keep everyone *focused*, because a lot of people will want to talk to you about the work that's going on at that moment; and if

you're quarterbacking the strategy to accomplish the goal, you need to ask, How does this help me accomplish the goal? If something has nothing to do with the goal at that moment, you set it aside as not a priority.

People have a tendency to fall in love with the *tactics*. Sometimes we have to be careful that the tactics don't become strategy, or the goal. Picketing is an example. We're not picketing randomly or for fun. We're picketing as part of a strategy to accomplish a goal.

Some of the tactics for the strategy were we came to Washington and we did a video shoot, a photo with a banner, and a picketing operation in which all the Delta MEC elected leaders picketed in front of the abandoned US Airways headquarters. We did that with the idea that we would create in the news media the message that US Airways would do the same thing to the Atlanta headquarters of Delta Air Lines.

Another tactic: We had rolling billboards in Phoenix, rolling around the headquarters of US Airways, with a very clear message that we would not support the merger. Then we moved all of our pilot leaders to New

York City, and we went after the financing of the deal. Without the financial community supporting it, you wouldn't have a hostile takeover. With the news media carrying our message, tactically, it helped our strategy. A few months later we were able to accomplish the goal—US Airways called off the hostile merger.

Air Line Pilot: You were very successful, and you stopped the merger. But then it seemed that you and all the MECs basically said at that point that if there is going to be another merger, we're going to be in the merger at the front of it, not at the back of it. There will be no merger unless we are. It seemed that your strategic initiative aligned with FedEx's, Continental's, and United's, and with ALPA National's. Everybody was saying the same thing. Then the Delta-Northwest merger came down the pike. What happened then?

Moak: The goal was that if there was going to be a merger, the Delta pilots, the Delta MEC would be involved in the merger and would have a say whether it would occur or not. Most people probably doubted that a labor union could stop a merger or make it work. But we were coming off our previous success, and we took a good look at what was happening with airline industry consolidation, the economy, the price of oil. Our airline's management team, the senior executives, decided that if they needed to consolidate, they were going to get on board with the pilot group first, which was our goal. There was more than one candidate for the Delta merger consolidation scenario; they included us with both the candidates they were looking at. Ultimately we made our voice heard, and we decided to engage in a long-term strategy to help effect a merger that was best for not only the

Delta pilots but, we believe, for the pilots we were merging with and for ALPA at large.

Air Line Pilot: Capt. Nieuwenhuis, you were in negotiations for a new contract for five years. For that whole five years you were using a strategic plan. What was it like to try to maintain focus and a plan for five years?


Nieuwenhuis: One of the keys was that we had set goals that were high, but they weren't pie-in-the-sky. So whatever management threw at the pilots, the pilots still believed in the goals.

Also, instead of focusing on big rallies and speeches, we kept our communications with the pilots very personal and one-on-one. It's more time-consuming and it does cost a little bit of money to do that, but if the average member can look at you and say, "Yeah, I know that guy, and I

to go to your company's headquarters in St. George, Utah, and have a rally to show your company that the entire piloting profession was with you. What did that mean to your pilots?

Nieuwenhuis: SkyWest had never seen anything like that before—almost 100 guys in every color of uniform, marching in support of their fellow pilots. Frankly, I think it scared the hell out of them, because they knew they didn't have anywhere else to go. There wasn't going to be any race to the bottom, there wasn't going to be anybody being pitted against each other. It was a wild success, not only for Atlantic Southeast, but for all of ALPA.

Air Line Pilot: Capt. Pierce, you have a strategic plan in place right now called "Tandem." What does "Tandem" mean?



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have a rapport with him," he's going to trust where you're leading him. While five years in negotiations was a long time, no one ever lost sight of what they *could* have; they said, "It's not worth it for me to give this up and cave right now; we're going to keep going."

Air Line Pilot: About three-and-a-half years into your strategic plan, you mobilized the entire Board of Directors while they were at the BOD meeting

Pierce: Our MEC and our leaders came up with a strategic plan for our contract bargaining efforts that involves a major tactic we call "Flying in Tandem." It puts the Negotiating Committee at the tip of the spear; what they achieve and the progress that's made at the table decides how our Strategic Preparedness and Strike Committee and our communications functions ramp up or down, solely predicated on progress at the table. As long as



The MECs have to have the latitude to represent their constituents, but in a way that we make sure we're not trampling each other. —*Capt. Webb*

progress is being made, we have a certain level of, and a certain tone and tenor to, our communications and to our SPSC functions. If the talks break down or stall, then instead of the Negotiating Committee taking the lead, we put the SPSC and communications functions on lead, with the sole goal of getting the company's attention focused back at the table so we can put the Negotiating Committee back doing the work that they need to be doing. So far it's worked quite well.

Air Line Pilot: Can you cite an example of when the company stalled or did something you didn't like and you were successful in bringing it back again?

Pierce: A couple of times we didn't feel the progress was being made at the rate we would like for it to be made, so we ramped up the SPSC and communications functions to apply pressure. In every case where we have done that, we have started to see the attention on the contract that we feel it warrants. We've had two very successful rallies that applied a certain amount of pressure. I agree completely with Capt. Moak—picketing and holding rallies just for the sake of picketing and holding rallies doesn't serve a strategic plan. You have to have a message. Both of the two rallies we held, one on Wall Street and one in Houston, were attended by more than 500 Continental pilots. They were tremendously successful by any measure. Both of them had strong messages that we wanted to get across,

Air Line Pilot: There is a real desire for ALPA—the whole union, all parts of the union—to plan strategically. Do you think that ALPA does a good enough job of that, and if not, what do you think it should be doing?

Pierce: I think that ALPA supplies the tools; I'm not sure that every MEC, mine included, has taken proper advantage of the tools. We have a good, strong strategic plan, but it is going to have to change, based on events. You have to be able to adjust, and I'm not sure that we come back to the toolbox often enough when we need those course corrections.

Moak: I agree with Capt. Pierce. The thing that's important to note here is that we have an MEC set of goals and an MEC strategic plan. I want to give one example of when ALPA National and the other MECs really helped the Delta pilots. That was when we went into bankruptcy. Delta had never been in bankruptcy; several of the other airlines had been in bankruptcy. We didn't know what to expect. Our goal was to get out of bankruptcy with our contract intact. I called the MECs at Continental, United, and Northwest—Northwest had also just gone into bankruptcy—and a few of the pilot groups whose airlines had been in bankruptcy. In short order, they came to Washington; ALPA National set up the forum for us to have a national bankruptcy summit. We listened to what had been done right, what had been done wrong, and what suggestions they had for Delta and Northwest. We had

and I know that those messages were received, because work at the table intensified and progress was made.

our goal already, and we changed and developed a strategic plan and ultimately a tactical plan and moved forward. That's a great example of how working together, especially in this arena, can benefit the pilots and ALPA.

Nieuwenhuis: One of the other keys is constant communication between MECs. We've been working in our subgroup, the pilots who fly for fee-for-departure airlines, for the last few months, trying to come up with ways to facilitate that, because we have certain things in common. All of ALPA has a lot of things in common, but if you could synergize what's in common among pilots of like airlines, then it can translate into the others as well; and then before you know it, you're across the entire spectrum of ALPA. If we're not talking to one another on a regular basis, no one knows what's going on. We don't want to go over paths that have already been cut by somebody else, not realizing it. That's a waste of money and time. If we can get control of that, we can forge new ground and not rehash old stuff.

Air Line Pilot: The ALPA Constitution and By-Laws provide a lot of leeway for MECs. Do you think that the MECs should work hard to try to align this a little bit better and work to make sure they don't hurt each other?

Webb: It depends on the issue. There are dramatic examples of the Association doing a phenomenal job of strategic planning and then executing the plan. One that comes to mind is One Level of Safety. There was a clearly defined goal; ALPA's members absolutely embraced it. ALPA put together a strategic plan, executed the plan, and accomplished the things that we wanted to accomplish. So we have in the past done a very good job. There are always going to be situations in which it's very easy to get broad sup-

port for a plan. As you carve down to the MECs, and into the areas where we're competitive against each other or we're talking about U.S. interests versus foreign interests, it's a lot more difficult. The MECs have to have the latitude to represent their constituents, but in a way that we make sure we're not trampling each other.

file, and if you don't have the buy-in on a plan like that with their direct elected reps, then it doesn't matter what the other governing bodies do. It's gonna fall flat when it hits the crew lounge, so those guys have to be involved, and those guys are the Board of Directors, so that's extremely important.

The challenge is to not let the tactics take over the strategy and the goals. **Webb:** We're supposed to represent pilots from widely diverging backgrounds, demographics, beliefs, desires, goals, and situations, and we're not lobbyists for small percentages of those constituents. We have an obligation as elected representatives to do what's right, not what's convenient, and not what's palatable. That takes a certain amount of backbone. If you go into the strategic planning session that the Board of Directors is about to embark on, or a local council or MEC meeting, and it's clear to you that you should lead your pilots in a particular direction, and you know there's going to be some resistance to that, you've got to be able to stand up and say, "I know that there's some concern about this, but this is why we're doing it this way." You've got to have some conviction, and it's not always saying what people want to hear. Regarding the comment made just a minute ago about great strategic plans sitting on the shelf—that's not because there wasn't value in the plan, or that there wasn't a roadmap that was actually going to provide the ability to achieve the goals that the people that designed that plan really believed were important. In many cases, it's gathering dust because there would be opposition; there would be misunderstanding; there would be political differences, and it was easier just to put it on the shelf.



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—Capt. Pierce

Air Line Pilot: Do you think that the Board of Directors—all the representatives who have been elected by the pilots—should put together an ALPA National strategic plan and then have the MECs try to work with that?

Pierce: I think it goes back to alignment. We have so much more in common than we do differences. Pay, retirement, and job protections are going to be key to all of us. I think that if the Board works hard and that if they look at it with an eye to establishing principles and a template or a framework, they can develop a national strategic plan. And that would be a valuable tool.

Webb: Our governing bodies, our national officers, our staff, and our members in general all have to be a component at different levels of not only establishing the goals and the strategic plan; our execution is critically dependent upon the support at each and every level.

Nieuwenhuis: You have to have the buy-in with the pilots, the rank and

Moak: The ALPA difference is that we have MECs from many different pilot groups that are working together to further the profession. We're not an independent union that only thinks about their narrow interests. We all agree on 95 percent of the issues, and on 95 percent of the goals. The real challenge is to not let the 5 percent that we disagree on, that 5 percent that makes a union an independent union that won't be with us, define our relationship. We focus on the 95 percent, and that's where our strength is. That's the ALPA difference.

Air Line Pilot: Any final thoughts?

Moak: I just want to emphasize—we took the job at our airline to be an airline pilot, not a strategic planner. But that's really what you do every day as an airline pilot. You have a goal—to arrive at your destination and see your passengers deplane safely. You have a strategic plan, and you have some tactics to accomplish that. The tendency is, though, to not clearly understand goals, strategic planning, and tactics.

Pierce: It's important to understand that the strategic plan that you develop very likely will outlive you in union service. The strategic plan for a contract cycle is two years in development, two years in execution at a minimum. A strategic plan will outlive you in union service, but it will serve the pilot group for a long time if it's done well. 🌐