

New Faces Bring Fresh Ideas to ALPA's Pilot Leadership Cadre

By **Rusty Ayers**, ALPA Senior Communications Specialist, and **John Perkinson**, Staff Writer

Pick up any newspaper or turn on the television and you're likely to run across a story about airline pilots. The issues that surfaced in the aftermath of the Colgan Flight 3407 accident and other recent incidents have raised the public's awareness of the realities pilots have been forced to endure with globalization, bankruptcies, mergers, and other industry challenges during the last decade.

To prepare themselves to confront these realities and the demands of representing their pilots, the largest class of newly elected ALPA representatives in recent history gathered in Herndon, Va., for the Association's annual Leadership Training Conference. The 4-day event exposed the latest generation of ALPA leaders to the wide array of tools and resources available through the Association, with presentations from every ALPA department and briefings

"It's really good to come for all the teambuilding and unity exercises with your fellow crewmembers, and to see what the Association is doing to benefit pilots in the industry as a whole."

—Capt. Susie Latvala (FedEx Express)

on the hot-button issues affecting the airline industry. The Conference also included discussions on leadership, fiduciary responsibility, the duty of fair representation, and local council officers' upcoming role as strategic planners at this fall's ALPA Board of Directors meeting.

The Conference participants' personal experiences and expectations reflect a changing workplace and the stress associated with a profession drawing so much news media attention, public scrutiny, and challenging labor-management relations. And yet, the ALPA member representatives who attended the Conference revealed a deep-seated desire to improve the profession and to secure better work rules and compensation to more accurately mirror the proficiency, expertise, and enormous responsibility that every airline pilot brings to the job.

Taking the lead

"The onus is on all of us as individuals to be leaders," said MD-11 Capt. Susie Latvala, the new chair of FedEx



Capt. Susie Latvala
FedEx Express

Express Local Council 79 in Anchorage, Alaska. "We can all personally be better mentors for our profession as well as for our Association."

Latvala brings previous ALPA experience as the vice-chair of her council and as a former member of the pilots' Jumpseat Committee. This was the second Leadership Training Conference that she has attended.

The FedEx 15-year veteran said, "Since I've been involved in the union, more

of the information presented to us makes sense because I can better correlate the references when discussing various terms and concepts. It's not the fire hose of information you might expect, and I see a lot of correlation.

"I have a better understanding of things I had been somewhat familiar with, particularly legal issues, which is so important in the grievance arena. We have a lot of questions and some misunderstandings about the grievance process at our council," Latvala noted. "It's really good to come for all the teambuilding and unity exercises with your fellow crewmembers, and to see what the Association is doing to benefit pilots in the industry as a whole."

Setting a high standard

"You are going to set the initiatives that we carry out," ALPA's president. Capt. John Prater, told the new officers about their strategic planning duties, as part of his opening remarks. "You won't get off the hook by rubber-stamping something set in front of you. You'll be making the decisions that move this union forward."

Prater spoke with attendees about their new roles and the importance of relationships, particularly the Association's ties with the AFL-CIO. He talked about ALPA as a member of the International Federation of Air Line Pilots' Associations and the union's recent support of the Lufthansa pilot strike to help attain better job security (see page 36). "Let's face facts, we're part of the labor movement," he said, adding, "Are you prepared to be leaders of the union?"

Prater also talked about the need for unity to wield the



Capt. Jeffrey Sanchez
American Eagle

leverage necessary to protect and promote the airline pilot piloting profession.

"We need to keep a unified group," agreed Capt. Jeffrey Sanchez, the captain rep for American Eagle Miami Council 126. "The industry's changed, and it continues to change," he said. "We need to keep focused and remember that it's not the legacy carriers versus the regionals. We're all in this together."

Sanchez, who flies ATR 72s to destinations around the Caribbean, started with New Air in New Haven, Conn., in the 1980s. He later flew for Pilgrim Airlines, which was bought by Business Express, which was later absorbed by Eagle, so Sanchez knows something about airline mergers and acquisitions.

Since this was his first Leadership Training Conference, Sanchez said, "I hope to help my pilot group a little more. Everything that I've done has been on instinct. I've always been able to call the people in the master executive council office or in Herndon if I had questions. But this is a more formal education on some of the processes." He said that Miami is a small base and that the pilots have a good rapport with management, but he wants to be prepared if circumstances change.

Serving others

Capt. Denis Prefontaine, a Jazz CRJ pilot and the new secretary-treasurer for Council 223 in Toronto, was attending the Conference to help his pilot group with its current collective bargaining efforts. "I wanted to get more involved," he said, explaining why he ran for office. "I have tremendous respect for my local officers right now and the Jazz MEC. I really feel these pilots are going to put a great contract out and that it's going to be good. I want to be on the ground floor and help spread the word."

The 10-year Jazz veteran,



Capt. Denis Prefontaine
Jazz

"I wanted to get more involved. I have tremendous respect for my local officers right now and the Jazz MEC. I really feel these pilots are going to put a great contract out and that it's going to be good. I want to be on the ground floor and help spread the word."

—*Capt. Denis Prefontaine (Jazz)*

who gave the Conference high marks, said, "I'm learning quite a bit, and I found that the most useful part right now is the communications available to ALPA officers—newsletters, videos, all those tools. It's very interesting."

Looking beyond Jazz, Prefontaine's greatest concern for the profession is "the race to the bottom—everybody willing to fly certain equipment cheaper than their brothers at another airline. I hope it will stop."

He added, "A lot of people say it's our own fault; pilots are our own worst enemies. You have one company that wants to fly cheaper, and people there go along. But I think a lot of it has to be placed on the airlines themselves. They charge the cheap fares that aren't really enough to sustain the airline, but they don't worry about it. They figure there's always bankruptcy protection or a bailout. It's kind of a scary thought, and I really hope that we as ALPA can help people see the light."

Maintaining a professional image

Professionalism was highlighted in several of the presentations during the Conference. Larry Deist, who recently became Delta's Atlanta Council 44 F/O rep, shared his concerns.

"Individually, we all have a responsibility to create the most professional image possible—the way we interact with our customers, the way we interact with each other, the way we present ourselves. It starts with each individual and progresses into the local council and the master executive council. At the national level, every department has its own share of responsibility. Government Affairs needs to be knocking on doors. Engineering & Air Safety needs to be knocking on doors. Anybody in an activist role within ALPA needs to be aggressively pursuing the improvements that they are charged with," he said.

The former U.S. Air Force pilot stressed that airline pilots need to make their occupation a profession again. ▶▶



F/O Larry Deist
Delta



ALPA's Annual Leadership Training Conference

Just as a new-hire pilot isn't expected to sit down in an unfamiliar cockpit and immediately go to work without advanced preparation, ALPA recognized long ago that newly elected union representatives require special training to prepare them for the unique demands of their elected positions. That recognition led to the creation of the Association's annual Leadership Training Conference, a 4-day forum for new local council representatives.

Held every year in February, the Conference is designed to give ALPA leaders a detailed education on the services ALPA has to offer and what's expected of pilot reps. It's an intense ground-school-type environment in which attendees receive numerous briefings during the day, then work to build relationships with their fellow reps and officers from their network systems and from across ALPA at scheduled evening events.

The curriculum and format continue to evolve to meet the needs of the pilot reps, but the week typically begins with welcomes from ALPA's president and other national officers, an overview of the Association's strategic planning process, and discussions on leadership and ALPA structure. Much time is devoted to effective leadership characteristics and communication skills. The new reps learn that effective communication begins with listening—listening to their fellow pilots in the crew rooms and flight decks. There's also a half-day session on collective bargaining in which ALPA staff members play the roles of master executive council officers to demonstrate how—and how not—to conduct oneself during a tense meeting. Day 1 ends with an address by a national labor leader. This year Elizabeth Shuler, the new secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO, spoke to attendees.

On Days 2 and 3, the new reps receive in-depth briefings on the Communications, Government Affairs, Economic & Financial Analysis, Representation, Legal, Engineering & Air Safety, Finance, and Membership and Council Services Departments and on aeromedical issues, the Canada Board, and the Fee-for-Departure Task Force. The reps are taught how to help their fellow pilots who call with questions regarding aircraft accidents, medical questions, grievances, and more. They tour the ALPA offices in Herndon, Va., and are equipped with cell phones, laptops, ALPA e-mail addresses, and other physical tools needed to do the job.

Day 3 ends with the annual National Officers' Forum, where individual reps take the floor and exchange questions and comments with ALPA's president, first vice-president, vice-president-administration/secretary, and vice-president-finance/treasurer, and on the final day of the Conference, ALPA experts advise the new reps and officers on legal and lobbying disclosure requirements. They also hear presentations on membership and organiz-

ing efforts, and wrap up their week with veteran pollster Phil Comstock, whose "Know Your Members" session uses nationwide polling data to help the leaders understand what their members are thinking.

More than 120 pilot volunteers from 28 of ALPA's 38 pilot groups attended this year's Conference, including eight pilots from AirTran and North American Airlines, two of ALPA's newer pilot groups. These pilots will make up more than a third of the Association's leadership, when the ALPA Board of Directors holds its regular meeting in Florida this October.


In addition to its training function, the Conference also provides representatives of non-ALPA pilot groups an excellent opportunity to learn about the Association's many programs



Brendan Kenny, Government Affairs director, gives a legislative overview. Capt. Prater is on his right; Kelly Hardy, senior government affairs specialist, is on his left.

and services. In past years, the majority of these non-affiliated groups have mounted ALPA organizing campaigns soon after leaving the Conference. The non-union pilots agreed it was an eye-opening experience, coming from airlines where they are used to flying with no union benefits or protections.

"We've been so impressed that ALPA is not being pitched to us. We're here as observers to see how ALPA operates," said one non-ALPA pilot. "We've been very impressed with the training these reps receive. Everything that ALPA has to offer has been explained very well," he said. "We would absolutely love to be here [as members] a year from now."

The Leadership Training Conference, a staple for new ALPA local council officers, is hosted by the Association's Leadership Conference Committee, led by Capts. David Farmer (Delta), Mark Moore (Delta), and Tom Wychor (Mesaba). The Leadership Conference Committee falls under the auspices of ALPA's newly formed Leadership Committee, which is chaired by Capt. Bill Dressler (ExpressJet). 

WILLIAM A. FORD



Capt. Brett Walker
Continental

"Pilots, from top to bottom, have taken a big hit since 9/11 in pay, retirement, work rules, and working conditions. My hope is that we can have a positive effect, going forward, to make this the profession it once was and the profession it should be."

Capt. Brett Walker, a B-737 pilot and Continental's Houston Council 171 captain rep agreed. "When you put the uniform on and go to work, you've got to represent your airline and

ALPA and do the best you can. The union must get out there and let the public know about our impressive safety record and the training we go through and the professionalism we display every day."

Walker, a former striking Eastern pilot, has flown for a wide variety of airlines during his pilot career before he started with Continental 13 years ago.

Recently, he's concentrated his free time on raising two sons. "Now that they're older, it's time to step up and do something for our pilots," he said.

Making the most of the Conference

"I have been learning a lot about leadership skills and how to create unity within the pilot group," said Diana Feddersohn, the new Council 146 F/O rep at Island Air as well as the new MEC chair.

"As a smaller council pilot group, wearing multiple hats has its challenges; however, it also provides us the opportunity to be more nimble and to get things done quickly and efficiently," said Feddersohn.

This is Feddersohn's first airline pilot job, but she previously flew for a charter operation in California, doing aerial mapping and marine mammal survey work. Feddersohn also brings previous union experience to the table as an assistant to the shop steward for the International Association of Machinists when she



F/O Diana Feddersohn
Island Air

"I have been learning a lot about leadership skills and how to create unity within the pilot group.... I think ALPA is doing a great job—keeping the pilots and the public informed about all the issues at hand and ensuring that we provide quality and safe service for our airlines and the public, our customers."

—F/O Diana Feddersohn (Island Air)

worked as a city ticket office agent for United Airlines.

The Honolulu-based Dash 8 pilot remains optimistic about the future of the profession and the work that the Association's pilots are doing to support it. "I think ALPA is doing a great job—keeping the pilots and the public informed about all the issues at hand and ensuring that we provide quality and safe service for our airlines and the public, our customers."

Keeping a balanced perspective

F/O Tom Nelson, Air Wisconsin Norfolk, Va., Council 50 secretary-treasurer, has personally experienced the instability in airline pilot ranks from fee-for-departure airlines attempting to undercut one another for legacy-airline contracts. Originally hired at Midwest Airlines regional subsidiary Skyway, Nelson was soon furloughed while still in training. He moved on to Mesaba, but was furloughed there as well after just a year on the job, when Mesaba declared bankruptcy.

Like several of his fellow status reps at the Conference, Nelson was initially asked by someone in his MEC to run for office. "I've been a rep for about a month, so I'm brand new at it. There was an opening at the local council; a previous secretary-treasurer had found a different job. One of my roommates is an F/O rep, and he said I should do it, so I'm giving it a shot to see what it's like."

Nelson talked about the struggles of entering the current airline profession. "It's difficult to survive making \$16,000 a year F/O pay. Some people assume you're unprofessional because you make so little money, and that's not the case at all. It's insulting. I'm 29 years old and I get called on it every day. People enter the airplane and say, 'You're so young!' I *am* young, but I'm just as professional as anybody else."

The 29-year-old typifies the new breed of ALPA leaders: tempered by career adversity but determined to work cooperatively with his pilot group and other MECs to improve the piloting profession. 🌐



F/O Tom Nelson
Air Wisconsin

Perspectives on Professionalism

Since ALPA's formation in 1931, professionalism has been a key ALPA tenet, the foundation of everything the Association and its members say and do. But with the profession under intense news media and public scrutiny, ALPA has placed new emphasis on pilot proficiency, conduct, and training, creating a new Professional Development Group (see page 20)

and encouraging individual master executive councils to improve their mentoring of younger pilots. We asked a number of new and veteran ALPA leaders attending the Leadership Training Conference for their perspectives on what it means to be an airline pilot and what, if any, improvements need to be made.

Capt. Bob Ward (United)



"Professionalism should be a constant drumbeat for airline pilots, but we've allowed ourselves to be distracted by other issues—career survival, putting food on the table, and keeping our airlines operating. We haven't had the time to keep beating that drum. Recent events, however, have forced us to rethink what being a pilot professional means, and now we're coming back to it. We can't allow ourselves to be distracted again. Professionalism must be a constant concern, just like safety."

Capt. Rich Castle (ExpressJet)



"I think it's a global picture of managing expectations. We're the only industry in the United States where every 6 to 12 months you go for a jeopardy event that measures your skills and your proficiency. There isn't any other industry that does that or meets that level of professionalism. The professionalism is there—perceptions aren't always what they seem."

Capt. Dennis Vanatta (Sun Country)



"Really it's an issue of remembering that at all times, you represent the profession—when you're talking to your neighbors, when you're talking to your family. Keep foremost in your thoughts that you are a professional pilot and represent yourself that way because the offhand comments you make can easily show up in a newspaper the next day."

Capt. Al Gallo (North American)



"I think it's a professional commitment that one has to make, both mentally and physically, to participate in your profession and to take advantage of all the opportunities, not only what ALPA offers but also what the company you work for offers." 🌐