

The Dilemma of the Flying Manager

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*Peter v. Agur, Jr., President
The VanAllen Group, Inc.*

It is said the two happiest days in an airplane owner's life are the day you buy it and the day you sell it. I'm selling mine now. It's a beautiful Baron we bought a year and a half ago for our very active consulting business. I will miss her.

The official story is we flew her less than 80 hours last year because our average stage lengths have grown to about 800 miles. But in my heart of hearts I realize I cannot run a successful business and fly safely, too. As much as I dislike riding on the airlines, I know we are a lot safer in the back of an MD-88 at the end of a long day. My gut has made it clear to me I was not in the saddle enough to be comfortable, much less fully proficient, as pilot in command.

As a manager, you, or someone you know, may face a similar dilemma. I know a number of flight department managers who have made the same kind of decision and handled it well.

Before he retired from United Technologies, Robert L. "Bob" Smith was director of travel services for the entire company. His responsibilities included commercial travel services for five major business divisions plus corporate headquarters and oversight of five business aircraft bases with 13 aircraft and their associated organizations. Bob's background includes having been VP of flight operations for an airline as well as a McDonald-Douglas production test pilot. If anyone can fly an aircraft, it's Bob.

Bob knew his primary responsibilities were to his customers and to the business leadership of his department. Each of those took a lot of his time and energy. Bob did not want to give up flying completely, but he also had the maturity to know he was not going to be at his best in the cockpit on a part-time basis. He came up with an effective solution. Bob attended the simulator training and was type rated like any of his captains. But he established a policy that any manager who flew less than half a load could only act as a first officer on any flight. Bob's flight activity was only one third of a line captain's. In addition, that person's ground title had no influence in the cockpit. In other words, Bob made himself a co-pilot.

His reasoning was based on observations he had made earlier in his career: fulltime managers do not make good part-time captains. If he was going to walk the talk of "safety first," he must openly acknowledge that a full-time manager should not also be a part-time captain.

Mobil Corporation's general manager of Global Aircraft Services, Pat Andrews, has a similar attitude. "An aviation manager's safety responsibility begins with an honest assessment of whether he or she can maintain the proficiency and focus expected of other captains in the organization. Our PICs are required to fly a minimum of 50 hours



each 90 days. No exceptions for managers - so I always act as SIC, adhering to a 30 hour per quarter recency of experience requirement. The message our crews get reinforces our priority on safety. It is a message of serious respect for cockpit command - done right, it is a full time job.

"However, we also recognize the high value gained by encouraging our base and senior managers to stay on flight status," she continued. "There is no substitute for the time a manager is able to share with other team members and our customers during a trip. Those trip experiences are invaluable because they improve communications and, in the end, the quality of our services.

"Our approach considers the highest priority of safety while making it as easy as possible for our managers to be effective. It works for us," Andrews concluded.

In contrast to UTC and Mobil, the office responsibilities of a one - or two-aircraft operation do not usually require a dedicated ground-based manager. But a larger or more complex organization does need the attention of a professional (read "full-time") manager. The organizational and fiduciary responsibilities of running a multi-million dollar business of a multi-aircraft flight department deserve your focused and competent attention, just as managing the front end of a complex air-craft at the end of a long day while making a minimums approach deserves the finest focus and capabilities you can muster. The best practice is to make a choice between which you are going to be: a professional manager or a professional pilot. Then do it.

I will miss my Baron. I will not miss the anxiety I felt about busy schedules, bad weather, and my fading proficiency. I also know my business and our customers will benefit from my undivided attention. The skies will be a little safer without my divided attention. It is not a fun decision, but it is the best practice for me.

What is the best practice for you?

Pete Agur is the president of The Van Allen Group, Inc.. He is also a member of both the NBAA Safety Committee and the NBAA Corporate Aviation Management Committee.