Pilot In Command

Authority | Responsibility | Accountability

by Robert M. Jenney

Although this article presents many viewpoints previously made, it seems appropriate to restate them in a single, concise presentation since the designation "pilot in command" needs to be clearly understood, honored and protected.

Qualities of Command

Aviation regulations grant authority, require responsibility and provide a chain of command.

To command is to direct with authority, the power or right to take action or make final decisions. Responsibility is the obligation to personally fulfill a duty, requiring accountability for actions taken or decisions made.

These terms are principled qualities that speak of duty, character and service to others. In addition to jurisdiction over others, command requires an individual to demonstrate personal reliability by exhibiting self-direction and self-control.

The power of authority should in no way condone or imply authoritarianism, that selfish personal trait that expects unquestioning obedience. The obligation that responsibility imposes is desired and freely accepted. To command is to lead, to bring out the best in oneself and others, not to dominate. And, control is to act with measured response, not in a dogmatic (i.e., controlling) manner.

Regulatory Structure

Federal Aviation Regulations state:\n
The pilot in command of an aircraft is directly responsible for, and is the final authority as to, the operation of that aircraft.

This statement is clear and concise. It leaves no room for ambiguity. It should not be open to interpretation.

Impact of the FARs

A fundamental principle of management is upheld in this regulatory charge to the pilot in command—authority and responsibility are held in proper balance. There are few things potentially more frustrating and inherently conflicting than being committed to an assignment without the authority to act prudently
and decisively. Conversely, the assumption of power without being held accountable is a formula for guaranteed abuse.

Command implies control. And, as we have established in other articles, control depends on stated objectives, plans of action, searches for corroborating information, and personal commitments. It is true that the pilot in command, when assuming this position, takes on weighty responsibilities, but it is also true the PIC is granted the right to act decisively in performance of these duties. The regulations express an individual freedom to honor, cherish and protect, and this freedom is conferred on all pilots who assume command without regard to age, experience or type of aircraft flown.

**PIC Leadership Forces**

The PIC’s leadership image is presented in the accompanying graphic. Its force structure can be described as follows:

- **Vision.** Accountability—the PIC is open to challenge that lies ahead, fully acknowledging personal accountability for his deeds and actions.
- **Courage.** Authority—the PIC willing accepts the power of this position, acting wisely and decisively.
- **Reality.** Preparedness—the PIC is prepared and can be depended upon. Nonetheless, he continually seeks information and support from others.
- **Ethics.** Responsibility—the PIC values the special trust placed in him, willingly accepts the responsibility of his position, and understands his duty to others.

**Cockpit Organization**

Without question, the cockpit is a hierarchical organization. The chain of command is established—no democracy, no votes. The PIC rules.

In the single pilot cockpit there is no organizational conflict. Conflict may exist within a flight department or within a company, or may develop within the aviation system, but the pilot is the final decision maker in the single seat cockpit.

In the dual pilot cockpit the pilot in command is the authority figure. He may delegate responsibilities to his copilot and empower his copilot to act in his behalf, but in doing so does not relieve himself of any responsibilities related to his command.

**Possible Authority Erosion**

Although, in the dual pilot cockpit, the PIC places trust in his professional colleague, the final authority that is granted should not be diminished by the
team approach. However, a perception exists among some in the pilot community that CRM programs tend to erode the PIC's authority.

Mike Malherbe, South African Airways A300 Training Captain, acknowledges existence of this point of view exists, but finds CRM team management is accepted by most pilots:

I don't believe there is a general feeling that teamwork erodes the authority of the captain. In the past, many accidents have been prevented by the assertiveness of other crew members, and others occurring because of unassertiveness. This has penetrated down to the ranks, and I have found a general acceptance of the principles.

However, the few "diehards" have rebelled, refusing to part with their authoritarianism, citing the erosion of authority as cause.

Bob Mudge, CRM training developer, has a philosophic insight to this topic of authority erosion:

Actually, the captain gains responsibility with an effective CRM program. He has to make sure this backup function of monitoring and support is in place on every flight. That's his job.

In Bob's eyes, if CRM training is effective, then the possible erosion of PIC authority would not be an issue.

The Real World

However, it would appear that not all such programs are fully effective. Norm Komich, airline captain and CRM instructor, comments on his experiences regarding PIC authority:

There's some confusion on this issue. If the FO says "go around" should the captain go around automatically? My answer is it's got to be proceduralized and put into print. If you want the FO to challenge you've got to give him the authority to do so. Otherwise, if you have an accident, then the FO should have spoken up; if you didn't, then maybe the FO didn't need to speak up. The industry hasn't addressed this issue.

Here's an example close to home. A captain made the decision to takeoff when he shouldn't have due to severe weather. Result? The FAA pulled the certificate of both the FO and SO for six months, "based on CRM."

Until practical issues such as these are satisfactorily addressed in policies, procedures and training programs across the breadth of the industry, it's likely that negative perceptions will continue to linger.

Flight Crew Relationships

Authoritarianism. The possibility exists that a flight captain may tend to use the PIC authority as an excuse to act without regard to input from other crew members. On this potential abuse of trust, Mike Malherbe observes:

It has been my experience with some captains that they believe it is easier to make unilateral decisions rather than spend time and energy obtaining consensus. However, practical problem solving techniques and similar LOFT training normally indicate how valuable the other crew members are, and how a good manager and leader would utilise all the resources available to him or her.
Based on Mike's experience, unilateral behavior may be less prevalent today because of modern training methods and their maturing influence.

**Subordinate Roles.** Acknowledging that final authority is granted to the PIC, it's interesting to consider the role of the second in command. Bob Mudge compares the SIC's operational and management roles:

*Operationally, if the Captain forgets the gear, the copilot says, "Do you want the gear down now?" They've had this shared responsibility in operations for years. No one is suggesting that if the Captain is the final authority he's not to get monitoring and support from his crew. Sure, the PIC is in command but when he starts to fail operationally you don't let him fail. You can't in management either. One crucial SIC job is to monitor and support the management function.*

With responsibilities clearly defined, the SIC performs an essential function in the cockpit management structure. This role is one of leadership, one that's a great deal more than just being a "good soldier." The SIC has the opportunity to broaden both leadership and management presence in the cockpit.

**Being Accountable**

As noted earlier, the PIC is accountable for actions taken and decisions made. Norm Komich reflects on his personal experiences:

*When I was in the Air Force, I was very friendly with a PIC who was killed. It was part of my job to be involved in the accident investigation, and it was embarrassing to find out the extent of his screw-up. It was an embarrassment, not only to the organization, the command and the Air Force, but to his legacy.*

*I don't know how well pilots realize the long range implications of their actions. When you have such an incident, if you die, you're done. You go to heaven. But you could be looking down and say, "Holy cow, look at my son—he's got to go to school and have the kids talking behind his back that his father killed himself because he was reckless in an airplane." The point is, you've got accountability.*

Norm's story is personal and sobering. In addition to dramatic encounters, it's important also to consider routine operations. There's a personal impact, as well as an impact on others, whenever behavior is questionable.

On being accountable, Norm makes a telling motivational point:

*I was first officer on a 727 when we made a nose gear-up landing due to mechanical failure. Later we were sitting in the room waiting for the FAA and the captain made one simple statement. He said, "You know, we did everything right. How would we be feeling right now if we'd done something wrong." That was a shocker. There's the motivation to do the job right.*

An impact for us all to consider as we individually explore the full meaning of PIC accountability.

Norm concludes with a comment on a possible training scenario:

*This is the stuff that pilots love in a hangar session ("Let's hear a war story"). It leads to questions like, "When did you feel you were accountable to someone else?" Free form, it makes for a wonderful training session.*

And, perhaps a topic for discussion at Aviation.Org.
PIC Perspective

Authority, responsibility and accountability are concepts that are theoretically clear in concept. An effective PIC understands these principles and their resulting obligations, and conducts himself accordingly.

To support the PIC and other crewmembers, cockpit management programs must address the practical issues associated with these fundamental management principles. It's not enough to simply treat the symptoms of poor management.

Credits

1Federal Aviation Regulation 91.3.
2,5Mike Malherbe, Correspondence, 1998. Airline A300 training captain.
4,7Norm Komich, Conversation, 1998. Airline A320 senior captain and CRM training instructor.

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