CEOs Pilots

Recent accidents draw corporate board scrutiny

THE FEBRUARY 3RD CRASH IN BOISE, IDAHO, THAT TOOK THE LIFE of Micron Technology CEO and Chairman Steve Appleton was yet another executive/pilot accident — the list is long and keeps growing, unfortunately — that draws attention to the subject and to the risks, rewards and fundamental responsibilities of those involved. Should a corporate board of directors place limitations on the business and/or personal flying of the company’s chief executive? In my opinion, the answer is, Yes — a wildly unpopular response for many entrepreneurial aircraft owner/pilots.

I have worked with a number of executive/pilots whose situational awareness and crew resource management skills they developed in the cockpit work well in the board room and executive suite. Recently I watched a former fighter pilot begin a corporate planning session by stating: “It is vital to have a good plan. In my prior profession, where I killed people, we always started with a plan.” Everyone in the meeting turned off their mobile devices and paid attention.

That executive/pilot knows how to keep his crew focused on the mission. And yet, the subjective fears that companies have about executives who fly can be boiled down to two issues: focus and mission. Can an executive truly put aside business concerns and focus on flying? And, even if the executive is concentrating on the task of flying, will the importance of accomplishing the “mission” impair his or her judgment? It is relatively easy to create objective requirements for pilot training and currency. The subjective threats related to focus and mission are far harder to quantify.

Maintaining focus is not a problem unique to flying CEOs. As iPads become Electronic Flight Bags, crews now have the chance to watch Airplane! when they should be reviewing approaches.

Placing too much weight on the importance of mission success is not a problem unique to executive/pilots, either. Emergency medical service flight operations obviously suffer mission pressures on pilot judgment. And professional corporate pilots also know mission pressure, since the accomplishment of a single flight might make the difference in winning a key contract whose loss could otherwise result in layoffs within the company.

When corporate boards want to protect a CEO/pilot, they don’t need to be overly creative. In a 2006 report on EMS accidents, the NTSB determined that: “in the EMS environment, conducting a flight risk evaluation would require the pilot and possibly another person (a manager, a flight dispatcher, or another flight crewmember) to assess the situation without being influenced by the sense of urgency that can accompany the initial call requesting services.”

The first choice for protecting the CEO-pilot should be to hire a seasoned, professional pilot to share the flying duties. While vacation, days off and other factors will likely prevent this additional pilot from sharing every flight, the risk level subsides on every flight that does have two aviators in the cockpit.

And regardless of the back-up pilot’s whereabouts on any given flight day, the fact is that much of every pilot’s responsibilities involve preparations and decisions made before anyone gets in the plane. The NTSB’s comments about EMS apply quite well in the world of CEO-pilots. Someone should assess the mission with the pilot prior to the flight. This is known as flight release, and it’s an integral part of air carrier safety.

The process of flight release can be simple. Some Part 91 pilots don’t even realize that they have such a system in place. Most of my business flying has been Part 91. The February crash that took the life of Steve Appleton occurred in an experimental Lancair, the same kind of airplane I fly in my business. And though the FAA does not require it, I am subjected to a release system before every flight. I have to answer a succinct series of questions that assess the weather, the airplane’s status, the mission and my fatigue level. If the answer in any category falls below my minimum, the airplane stays on the ground until it can be rectified. It’s that simple. And no matter how important the mission is to my firm, my wife just never thinks that any flight is all that urgent and can issue a Down chit as well. She performs precisely the role that the NTSB wrote about in their report on EMS operations.

While hiring a professional copilot is the first step in protecting a CEO-pilot, that act alone doesn’t guarantee safety. A TBM 700 crash in 2003 took the life of a CEO-private pilot, a passenger and an experienced pilot hired by the company to fly with the CEO. The CEO was in the left seat, the professional in the right. The NTSB tersely determined the probable cause to be: “The pilot’s failure to fly a stabilized, published instrument approach procedure, and his failure to maintain adequate airspeed which led to an aerodynamic stall.”

But why didn’t the professional pilot take over? The weather was 300 ft. overcast and 1 mi. visibility. Why didn’t the pro let the amateur continue with an approach that was beyond his capabilities? We will never know.

CEOs are charismatic, driven, self-confident leaders who are accustomed to having things their way. Getting Type-A executive-pilots to stay within safe boundaries can be a challenge, but for their companies’ and for everyone’s sake, that is the primary responsibility every time they assume the role of aviator. At that point, they are executives no more.

By Kent S. Jackson
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