



From Where I Sit “Fix the Problem, Not the Blame” *A non-punitive reporting culture is essential to flight safety.*

by Geoff Goodyear

In all manner of human endeavor and accomplishment, there are usually five distinct phases that we go through: initial enthusiasm; subsequent panic; the search for the guilty; a prosecution of the innocent; and, finally, praise and accolades for the non-participants.

This is the way of things—the sooner one accepts this natural order, the sooner one can get on with one’s life! Actually, I don’t mean to sound too cynical, but the core theme of this axiom is that there has to be someone to blame. We instinctively look for that person whenever we discuss an accident or incident, which is okay, but sometimes we confuse blame with cause.

Take, for instance, my family. We used to be in the construction business, and, as part of that, my dad started a diving company that provided underwater construction and consulting services. This was back in the days of Jacques Cousteau and Lloyd Bridges, and it was pretty cutting-edge stuff for 1960s Newfoundland.

The name of the company was Newfoundland Underwater Diving Engineering. It was quite a mouthful to say so we commonly used the acronym NUDE—which led to no end of confusion when fielding queries from potential clients. Now, I was still a young lad back then, busy terrorizing the local population, and was considered far too short and clumsy to be directly involved in diving activities. It was not until I got a little older (although no taller or less clumsy) that I was allowed to don the rubber suit.

One day, NUDE received an urgent call from Newfoundland and

Labrador Hydro. They had just completed a multi-million-dollar hydroelectric generating facility, filled up the power canals, and were preparing to turn it all on when workplace rumors began to swirl that one of the employees had accidentally dropped an axe into the main penstock. It was immediately recognized that a steel axe head driving through a set of brand new turbines could do some serious damage.

The much vaunted start-up had to be delayed while the NUDE crew was called in to see if there was indeed any truth to the rumor. Dad and his diving buddy collected all their gear, hopped in a truck and set forth for the south coast of Newfoundland.

A large crowd of people gathered to watch the divers prepare to enter the power station’s forebay. After all, it was not everyday that one got to watch fools swim in freezing water, and, yes, the mystery of the infamous phantom axe was also about to be solved.

The dive team groped their way to the bottom of the penstock, fumbled about for five minutes or so, and, sure enough, there was the axe. The rumor was true and the potential damage to the turbine had been prevented. All was right with the world.

There was a slight gasp from the crowd as dad broke the surface with axe in hand. As the divers climbed the ladder back into the real world, interest in the effort quickly waned and the crowd dissipated, save for one elderly laborer who shuffled about to wait for the last of the crowd to dissipate. He sheepishly sidled over to dad and sat down in front of

him to get his attention.

“How much did it cost you guys to come down here today to get that axe?” he asked.

Dad thought for a minute, doing some quick mental math: two divers for the day, truck rental, gas, meals, etc... “Oh, I guess it will cost about \$1,000,” he replied. (This was a time when a dollar could buy about three gallons of gas or a six-pack of beer.)

An incredulous look came over the man’s face. “Jesus, if I had known they were that concerned about getting the axe back, I would have bought them a new one!”

It was obvious to dad that he had just met the guy who had dropped the axe. It was also obvious that the man’s issue was one of avoiding blame, as opposed to determining cause.

When we apply this theory to helicopters, we have to remember that for any safety system to work, one has to focus on cause as opposed to blame. And, for that to work, there has to be a culture of non-punitive reporting; a willingness on the part of the crew to come forward with reports (even if they are a little self-incriminating); and a willingness on the part of the operator to accept the information in the spirit in which it was presented.

Determining cause as opposed to blame is not always an easy distinction to make. Despite all the protocols and standard processes we may implement, the fuzzy science of interpretation is all that stands between the reflex of blame, or the contemplation that can actually unearth the cause.

