

# The Preparation for a Defining Ethical Moment

*Train staff to spot signs, raise questions and take action to avert damage*

By Marianne M. Jennings, JD

©iStockphoto.com/jvannice

Ethics  
Accepted standards  
It includes

**U**S Airways pilot, Captain Chesley “Sully” Sullenberger refers to it as “That Day.” January 15, 2009, was “that day” when a flock of geese hit one of the engines of his Airbus A320 flight taking off from LaGuardia airport in New York City.

He felt the lag from the failed engine as his mind raced through the possibilities of diverting to Teterboro or turning around to LaGuardia. Scenarios were running through his mind. Not enough power for Teterboro, N.J. Turning back would be a risky maneuver. He made his decision and glided the plane onto the Hudson River. Everyone survived. In recounting “that day” with the Smithsonian’s *Air and Space* magazine, Sully described his decisions and actions:

*The way I describe this whole experience—and I haven’t had time to reflect on it sufficiently—is that everything I had done in my career had in some way been a preparation for that moment. There were probably some things that were more important than others or that applied more directly. But, I felt like everything I’d done in some way contributed to the outcome.<sup>1</sup>*

Captain Sullenberger’s experience and reflections sum up how it works when we face those life-defining, career-defining and organization-defining ethical dilemmas. Everything we do up to those critical decision points is the preparation. Captain Sullenberger described his preparation, which included training, simulations, handbooks, participation in NTSB crash investigations, observations, and reading and studying about flights, crashes, engines, and all things re-

lated to air travel. Captain Sullenberger’s methods of preparation translate across to the preparation for those defining ethical moments in organizations.

## **Preparation: The formal ethical infrastructure**

Just as airlines have their training and handbooks for pilots, organizations have their codes of ethics, handbooks and training. Organizations that lack these formal ethical infrastructures are not giving their employees a critical aspect of preparation.

Captain Sullenberger also noted how well trained the crew members were. He said that he could hear the crewmembers through the cabin door after he made the announcement about the emergency landing. In unison, they were repeating to the passengers, “Heads down. Stay down.” He said it was comforting for him to know that everyone was on the same page. Everyone knew what to do and what to say. The training kicked in.

When it comes to ethical dilemmas, employees should also all be on the same page. Training should give them the methods to raise questions and report issues and the language to use when confronted by a supervisor asking them to cross an ethical line. When everyone has been exposed to the same repeated training, regularly, crises situations will find them relying on what has been drilled into them and made a part of the culture.

## **Preparation: Studying the missteps**

Over the course of his career, Captain Sullenberger had participated with NTSB in studies and investigations of crashes so that he could learn of other pilots’ mistakes. So it is with ethics. Unless we study the situations where people made mistakes, we will continue believing nothing

<sup>1</sup> Linda Shiner, “Sully’s Tale,” *Air and Space*, February 18, 2009. [www.airspacemag.com/as-interview/aamps-interview-sullys-tale-53584029/#xJyMTVCWUvi7pc7e.99](http://www.airspacemag.com/as-interview/aamps-interview-sullys-tale-53584029/#xJyMTVCWUvi7pc7e.99)

## Organizations that lack formal ethical infrastructures are not giving their employees a critical aspect of preparation.

could possibly go wrong in our organization because of our formal ethical infrastructure of training and a good code. For example, Sully knew that his first priority was getting the nose of the aircraft down because so many previous crashes resulted from attempted landings with the noses of the aircraft up. That knowledge was critical to the safe water landing.

The same is true for ethics and compliance. Unless employees understand what it feels and looks like for ethics to go south, they will not make good decisions in averting an ethical crisis. There are common factors that precede ethical crises. For example, in Enron, HealthSouth, Madoff, Finova, Fannie Mae and other companies, unprecedented performance preceded the ethical collapse.

Volkswagen's ethical and legal issue of the installation of software to shut off emissions controls except during emissions testing has historical precedent for ethical issues. Years prior to the revelation of the falsified emissions, many were raising questions about how VW was achieving such low emissions with diesel engines. In fact, California regulators raised questions about the phenomenal emissions performance of the cars two years before VW made its announcement of the deception.

Studying what crashes look and feel like and the precursor warnings help employees to spot the signs and raise questions or take actions to avert damage.

### **Preparation: No one is immune**

Captain Sullenberger's involvement in the industry demonstrated a willingness to take lessons from wherever and whomever he could. Too many times, we turn a blind eye to what is happening in our industry with the assumption of, "Not at our company."

Volkswagen leaders should have been asking questions because the auto industry has a longstanding history of evading emissions regulations.<sup>2</sup> Volkswagen, Ford and Chrysler were all fined for various forms of cheating on auto emissions, starting as early as 1972. In fact, there was

a term in the industry for engineering around emissions requirements: "defeat devices."

Perhaps the better approach in our preparation would be to look around the industry and explore this question, "Why would we be immune from what everybody else seems to be doing?"

### **Preparation: Simulations**

Sully explained that through flying various aircraft and simulation exercises he was able to learn about the weight and feel of aircraft, what moves work, what moves cause more harm, and how to recover from unforeseen events. Those simulations also gave him the ability to think and act quickly under pressure.

In ethics training, we use hypotheticals and, on occasion, real examples that have happened in our own organizations. However, we seem to be missing the depth of simulation training. We can sit in training classrooms or at our computers and determine the correct answer to the ethical dilemma, but we are not doing so under the reality of pressure. Pressure comes from a supervisor, peers, goals, looming performance evaluations or bonuses hanging in the balance. We solve the ethical dilemmas in a sterile environment with no time, earnings or other clocks ticking as they are in flight simulators.

*Unless we study the situations where people made mistakes, we will continue believing nothing could possibly go wrong in our organization.*

Ethics simulation training is available; we just fail to recognize it. All of us tromp through ethical dilemmas each day but fail to recognize them as training. Learning to see that the day-to-day dilemmas, no matter how small, are the training for the defining ethical dilemmas at work is critical to safe landings. Ethical dilemmas are the same in terms of underlying issues. Only the fact patterns change.

<sup>2</sup> Danny Hakim and Hiroko Tabuchi, "An Industry with an Outlaw Streak against Regulation," *New York Times*, September 24, 2015, p. B1.

