



Australian Government

Australian Transport Safety Bureau

Recent developments and experiences from the Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB)

**Submitted by Chief Commissioner Greg Hood for the ITSA Annual
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Background

Since becoming an independent statutory authority in July 2009, the ATSB's base appropriations continued to reduce over successive financial years as the agency competed for funds with other important initiatives in federal budgets. To manage these fiscal constraints, the ATSB had progressively reduced our staffing profile by an overall 25 per cent. In managing these reductions we facilitated a proportioned downsize across every business area within our organisational structure including corporate services.

Conversely during this period, there has been a significant and sustained increase in passenger growth and operating complexity across all three of the transport modes that we are required to cover as part of our mandated legislative functions as outlined in the Transport Safety Investigation Act 2003 (aviation, rail and maritime).

The Act states that the ATSB's primary function is to improve transport safety, and our government's "Statement of Expectations" requires us to continue to give priority to transport safety investigations that have the potential to deliver the best safety outcomes for the travelling public. When taking into account the known and projected financial and environmental challenges facing the agency, it was incumbent upon me to seek ways to maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of our operations. We could no longer afford (literally) to be complacent and continue with the mantra of "that's the way we do things around here".

The long-standing organisational structure was rigid and consisted of too many divisional lines that presented a range of constraints, limitations and variabilities in how we allocated resources and the way in which we worked. Our resources and deliverables were primarily geared towards completing occurrence investigations and I was concerned these resources were not being selectively allocated towards investigating those accidents and incidents that would have the greatest potential for safety learnings and enhancement.

To demonstrate our overall effectiveness, I determined we must change organizationally to improve transport safety outside of these traditional investigations, through safety issue investigations, through greater interaction with operators and regulators, with data and other intelligence in our possession, and through education and promotion.

Recent developments

Following a number of meetings with our Government, we have been successful in gaining some additional funding under a budget initiative entitled “improving transport safety”.

Concurrently, and based on my knowledge of other multi-modal/multi-sectorial agencies and acting on my own experiential learnings, the ATSB, over the past 14 months has implemented a significant transformation initiative known as the “Evolution” program. This program, in essence, was designed to enable better resource allocation and utilisation across the agency. It was underpinned by a number of change imperatives including:

- Shifting our strategic focus towards becoming a fully capable and mature data-driven organisation - moving from reactive to proactive with a strong desire to eventually become predictive;
- Recognising the importance/imperative of improving safety by raising industry and community safety awareness, knowledge and action through safety education and promotion;
- Moving from output or report focused, to outcome focused – making a difference;
- Improving our cumbersome procedural framework;
- Re-establishing accredited learning and development pathways;
- Strengthening our recruitment, performance and talent management frameworks;

- Developing a culture of empowerment, performance and continuous improvement;
- Re-energising our workforce; and
- Establishing greater financial assuredness and sustainability.

Ultimately, the overarching objective of the program was to create an environment where all ATSB employees work collaboratively as “one team”. Implicitly, our staff will be empowered and given every opportunity to bring to bear their collective core investigative skills, shared values, passion and drive to improve transport safety.

The Evolution program has certainly lived up to its connotation. While there have been changes within our organisational structure - most notably the introduction of multi-disciplined/modal investigator teams - the program has also provided the impetus to refine our business practices and expand our deliverables.

The ATSB will have a renewed focus on data collection, analysis and research, and will raise industry and community safety awareness through increased safety education and communications. The ATSB will be able to more selectively allocate resources to investigate accidents and serious incidents that have the greatest potential for improving safety for the travelling public. We will also make advances in the timeliness of completed reports.

Experiences

As the incoming Chief Commissioner (appointed on 1 July 2016), I took every opportunity to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of our operational environment, our business model/practices, our people and the challenges we collectively faced. In gaining this appreciation I committed to an intensive meeting agenda with all relevant government authorities and industry stakeholders. I also facilitated a program of one-on-one discussions with every staff member. This allowed me to garner many ideas as to how we can improve our operations – which were largely consistent with my own observations and thoughts.

Around 3-4 months into my appointment I had determined that we needed to embark on a “step change”, where we would take our current resources (people and business operating systems) and realign them to achieve greater operational efficiencies and effectiveness. Along the way I needed to create an environment

which empowers our people and maximises their opportunities for personal and professional growth. I knew that a critical success factor for this evolution would be a paradigm shift in the way we think, moving from an accepted point of view to embracing a new one - noting the ATSB had not undergone any significant change in a number of years.

Volunteerism, communications and speed have been the critical components underpinning the success of the program. While we adopted John Kotter's change management principles and engaged an external project management service provider, the actual design and delivery of the program needed to be owned by our staff. In response to my call for expressions of interest to be part of the change management team, I was humbled and pleased to receive nominations from about 50 per cent of the workforce. Clearly there was a strong mutual desire to be part of the exciting challenge of evolving the ATSB.

Over the period of the program we conducted over a dozen all-staff Evolution meetings, facilitated as many sub-project meetings and maintained continual updates through my weekly intranet posts. Having a dedicated Evolution intranet page and building a professional relationship with the relevant unions has also enabled greater communications and staff engagement.

While we didn't achieve my ambitious timeframes designed around key milestones, I am pleased that the full implementation was completed within an overall 12 month period. That acknowledged, there has been brief periods of lost momentum which have reinforced Kotter's sustaining change principles of "Don't let up, Make it stick and Create and Celebrate Short-term Wins".

Overall, I found the following Charles Darwin theory very appropriate given the circumstances:

"It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change".

Conclusion

I look forward to providing greater detail around how we have specifically addressed the programs change imperatives and how we have improved our investigative practices through my upcoming presentation. I believe the audience will be particularly interested in how the ATSB will be maturing its data-driven

capabilities, refining its investigation workflows, improving its communication strategies and expanding its workforce capabilities.

Kokoro kara - Greg Hood.