If you've ever looked in the cockpit of a vintage aircraft from the 40s, 50s, or 60s, one thing that you undoubtedly noticed were acres of analogue "steam gauge" dials and a forest of toggle switches. These controls were deliberately designed to provide pilots with all of the information about all of the aircraft systems all of the time.

Lessons from the Cockpit

BY JAMES A. NORTZ

Even though this kind of cockpit layout seems to be rather sensible, it often had the unintended effect of making the pilot's job harder. The problem was that all these "essential" gauges and switches provided so much information that the pilots could not effectively deal with it. I recall a documentary about the Vietnam War in which an American fighter pilot described his response to this information overload. He said that even though it was against the rules, the first thing he and his copilot would do after they took off was to start shutting warning systems down. He explained that if they didn't do this, there would be constant flashing lights and alarms sounding as they entered enemy airspace where surface to air missile systems would be trying to get a radar lock on them. Even though this may have made them more vulnerable to getting shot down, they always took the risk because they needed to focus on only those things that were essential to accomplishing their mission.

As fighter aircraft became even more sophisticated over time, the potential for information overload was further exacerbated. Fortunately, aircraft manufacturers listened to the pilots and responded by greatly simplifying cockpit information panels.

The F-35 Joint Strike Fighter that is still being developed by the US Air Force is one of the latest examples of this work. In this more modern cockpit, almost all of the old dials and switches have been purposefully removed and replaced by a large liquid-crystal touch screen. The entire system was specifically designed to reduce workload by displaying only critical information pilots require to complete their tasks.

Fighter pilots are not the only professionals that are vulnerable to information overload. Corporate managers and directors face the same challenges. They are tasked with accomplishing their business missions in "enemy territory" every day in an increasingly complex regulatory environment. As anyone who has been one knows, corporate managers and directors are already subject to significant information overload. Every day managers are barraged by hundreds of emails and are expected to study and understand the blizzard of financial performance data from internal accounting systems, all the while jumping from one meeting to the next and, once in a while, focusing on the people they are responsible for managing. Directors often get hundreds of pages of documents a few days before board meetings that frequently contain more information than anyone could be reasonably expected to process and respond to.

The problem is that unlike fighter aircraft corporations have done comparatively little to improve or simplify gauges designed to provide critical information about the organization's compliance and ethics performance. Truth be told, many have been flying since take-off with virtually no gauges at all. This "flying blind" strategy has worked for some that have gotten lucky and stayed aloft, but many others have crashed and burned.

As compliance and ethics professionals work to develop meaningful metrics and dashboards in response to various government mandates, they would be well-advised to learn from aircraft designers. The object should not be to gather every scrap of available information regarding enterprise ethics and compliance performance. To navigate well, those in charge need to have the critical few bits of information that will help them make informed judgments and ensure a safe and successful flight. Some examples of "gauges" you may consider installing include ones that measure and report on:

- the state of the organization's ethical culture,
- the capability maturity of key compliance management systems,
- the status of planned corrective actions in response to audit findings,
- employee turnover,
- fines related to employee misconduct,
- detected financial losses from employee fraud,
- legal fees and investigation costs associated with employee misconduct, and
- recordable injury rate.

The actual compliance and ethics metrics you should choose will depend upon the kind of "aircraft" your management is flying and the information they deem critical to performing their jobs. But, as with aircraft cockpits, fewer compliance and ethics metrics may increase the probability that your corporate "pilots" will actually look at and respond to the instruments on their dashboard. ◬

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