

THE LIMITS OF LEADING OTHERS

For codes of behavior to work, several conditions have to be fulfilled. Above all, the organization behind the parties involved has to be engaged – the case of Czar 52 illustrates what can happen if it is not.

The story

On June 24, 1994, a B-52H Stratofortress bomber was taxiing toward takeoff at Fairchild Air Force Base near Spokane, Washington. The plane was part of the 92nd Bomb Wing. Its call sign was "Czar 52." The B-52 is a heavy bomber with eight engines, a wingspan of more than 50 meters, and a maximum takeoff weight of a good 220 tons. It costs \$53 million.

There were four crew members on board. The commander was Lt. Col. Arthur "Bud" Holland. He was regarded as one of the best B-52 pilots of his generation. The flight was a practice for an airshow scheduled to take place on June 26. One of the rules stated that the maximum bank of the plane was not to exceed 45°. As always, Holland ignored the rules. On the day of the airshow, he flew with a consistent bank angle of 64°, slowly increasing it to 89°. At that point, the plane stalled. Shortly afterwards, people on the airfield watched in disbelief as the B-52 fell from the sky, hit the ground, and exploded. All four crew members were killed.

Initially, it looked like a tragic accident. But there were other demonstrations of Holland's "flying skills," previous airshows in which he flew extremely aggressive and daring maneuvers, sometimes at a height of 100 feet above ground. He was given verbal warnings only. In 1993, Holland was tasked with commanding two B-52s as part of a bombing training mission. Here, too, he drew attention due to his reckless maneuvers. During one exercise, he flew dangerously close to another B-52 while in formation. In another, he forced a crew member to climb into the open bomb bays to film the drops. Both these stunts were in blatant breach of safety regulations. In March 1994, Holland had the command of a B-52 to demonstrate bomb drops to a camera team from TV station Channel Four. On this flight, too, he performed the most daring feats. Among other things, he flew so low over the camera team that they

had to run for cover. The wing flight commander spoke to him and let him off with another verbal warning.

What can we learn?

Standards of behavior and leadership principles are of no use to anyone if an organization cannot, or will not, ensure they are visibly and tangibly embedded at all hierarchical levels. To successfully lead others (and yourself) requires a functioning organizational framework in which an expected behavior is the norm. If this is not yet the case, processes leading to it will certainly not succeed overnight. Often, people at all levels have to be convinced of a behavioral merit, and the necessary framework in the form of regular trainings, briefings, and debriefings has to be installed and used. If this does not happen, leadership principles and standards of behavior will remain ideas.



The case study *Czar 52 – The limits of CRM* is taken from the book *Confronting mistakes: Lessons from the aviation industry when dealing with error*, written by Jan U. Hagen, associate professor and director of Open Enrollment Programs at ESMT. The book was published by Palgrave MacMillan.