

Podcast Transcription

Fly by Night: First Officer Kandy Bernskoetter – Pilot Assistance Team Hotline (PATH)

Captain Chris Lee My guest today is First Officer Kandy Bernskoetter. She is the PATH Chair. Hey, Kandy. Thanks for coming.

FO Kandy Bernskoetter Thanks for having me.

Captain Chris Lee Kandy, talk a little bit about your background before FedEx and what you've been doing at FedEx?

FO Kandy Bernskoetter Well, before FedEx, I was at ATA Airlines. I was a 757 first officer in Chicago Midway. Before that, I actually worked at Walt Disney World. I worked at Vanguard Airlines. But after 9/11, we went out of business and I had no flying job for about a year and a half. So, I went down to Orlando and worked at DinoLand in the Animal Kingdom. If anyone's ever been on Primeval Whirl, I was there. That was me. I actually have a string of jobs. FedEx is my 6th airline as a pilot, but my 7th airline because I actually started out flight instructing but working at Southwest Airlines as an ops agent. Since I've been at FedEx, I started as a flight engineer on the 727, actually really liked that job. When I left ATA, my chief pilot gave me two words of advice, essential power. I didn't know what it meant until I got here. I'm really proud to have that rating because it doesn't really exist much anymore. And then I went to the MD11 for about seven years and I've been a 777 FO for about eight years now.

Captain Chris Lee Talk a little bit about your union experience.

FO Kandy Bernskoetter Well, when as a new hire in 2004, I saw a poster on the wall at the training building that said Captain Al Haynes was going to speak at world headquarters. I know most of you recognize that name. He's the Captain of United Flight 232, Sioux City, Iowa, DC10 accident. And I went and saw Captain Haynes speak, and he mentioned that the critical incident response program didn't just save his job, it saved his life. And I thought that was a very powerful statement. And I volunteered for the CIRP committee as soon as I was off probation. And I worked in that realm for 2005 through 2012 and ended up being the Chairman. And I was the Pilot Assistance Vice-Chairman for a while. And then we started PATH in 2015. So, I'm sort of the founder and Chair now. And about two and a half years ago I took on the position at ALPA National as the Membership Chairman.

Captain Chris Lee What is the PATH Committee do?

FO Kandy Bernskoetter The Pilot Assistance Team Hotline or PATH started in 2015 to help pilots with all those issues that didn't really fall into another committee at ALPA. I found when I was CIRP committee chairman or critical incident response program chair we got a lot of those calls where it didn't really fit in anywhere else, but nobody else had any kind of skill set to deal with the issue. But we weren't really trained to handle the issues that we were getting. So, in 2015, we put together PATH modeling it off of a program that Delta Airlines had where pilots could call and ask those questions and get help and resources for the things that again, didn't fall in another committee. So, we typically take questions about medical situations, aeromedical questions, mental health, and counseling.

We're sort of the place to go when you don't know who to call because we'll find out who you need to talk to. Now, we're not experts. That's really key because we're pilots. We can't be experts in aeromedical, retirement, insurance and contract, all those things. We can't be experts and do this work as well. But we know who the experts are. And we want you to get your questions answered by the experts.

Captain Chris Lee How many calls do you guys get?

FO Kandy Bernskoetter You know, it really varies. We are open 24/7, 365. If you need to talk to someone at 2:00 a.m. in the morning, well, this is FedEx. Probably somebody is awake. But, you know, we'll answer the call anytime any day. We might get no calls in a day or a week and then we might get 10 calls in a week. It just really depends on when the pilots need us and decide to pick up the phone.

Captain Chris Lee How many people are on your committee?

FO Kandy Bernskoetter We have about 15 path peers. None of us are managers or in any kind of position like that. We're all just regular line pilots though we have a few flex instructors, there's Captains and FO's. We have every age group, gender, background, civilian, military. There's probably somebody on the PATH team that every pilot would find they had something in common with or can make a connection with.

Captain Chris Lee What do you want pilots to know about PATH?

FO Kandy Bernskoetter Well, first of all, it's confidential. You don't even have to tell us who you are or you can call anonymously. We don't give out proprietary information. So, it's OK to call and you don't have to say who you are. I find most pilots tend to do that and that's fine, too. So, once you know, it's confidential, it's available anytime. And we are here to listen and help you find the information and the resources you need to deal with your situation.

Captain Chris Lee I'm sure pilots are hesitant to call and discuss issues they may be having.

FO Kandy Bernskoetter Yeah. Yeah, I think some pilots are for sure. I would say I'm probably the same way. It's really hard when you're having the problem to see you're having it or to admit that you're having it. But I'll say that the earlier you call usually the better. Sometimes I use the analogy of getting a toothache. So, you make the appointment with the dentist, but maybe you wake up Monday morning, your tooth feels okay. So you don't go. I doubt the tooth is going to heal itself. It's just kind of going to get worse. So, if you can call earlier, I really advise that. You shouldn't be embarrassed by anything you have to say. Anyone calling, you're certainly not the first pilot to go through probably what you're going through. I reassure you that you're not alone on the island.

Captain Chris Lee Let's talk about the training, the path peer volunteers go through.

FO Kandy Bernskoetter We do two full days of training. We start out with a half-day just talking about the background of PATH, what it is and the logistics of how the calls work and then what the resources available are to send our pilot callers to. And the second day we do a whole day with a mental health professional and we do a version of mental health, first aid. That's sort of a community program anyone can take though we don't do the whole certification, but it's really how anyone can recognize a person who's going through

a mental health issue or crisis and how to find them help. So, we talk specifically about depression, anxiety, panic attacks, addiction, people maybe that are schizophrenic or, you know, extreme things that most pilots wouldn't have. But just how to recognize anyone that has an issue and how to get them help. So, we do that on day two and then throughout the third day and the first and second day we practice call scenarios. So, we start thinking from the very beginning what a typical call might look like and then how to answer it. So, we do a wrap up on the last day. Also, how to take care of ourselves. We do compassion fatigue and self-care because you can't be helping others unless you take care of yourself first.

Captain Chris Lee And, the resources available to you guys are abundant.

FO Kandy Bernskoetter Sure. I mean, there's ALPA resources, our aeromedical office called AMAS out in Denver, plus our Aeromedical Chairman and other committee chairs here at FedEx ALPA like our R&I committee, our benefits specialists. But then there's resources at the Company. Sometimes it's best to call pilot benefits admin or sometimes maybe the fleet captain is the best way to go. There's Harvey Watt. There's Anthem. Mental Health Resources, we publish an article and it's available in our pilot assistance library to anyone on how to choose a counselor. What the different licensures mean and then how to find somebody and vet somebody to see if that's somebody that you and your family would want to go talk to.

Captain Chris Lee Talk a little more about the confidentiality and any exceptions to that.

FO Kandy Bernskoetter Anything you say to a PATH peer stays confidential. We don't use e-mail. We might have to take some written notes just to remember some items. But once the case is closed, the notes are destroyed. There is an exception to confidentiality. If you threaten yourself or someone else we do have to call a third party and I think most people understand that exception. But we really are a place where you can admit something that maybe you're embarrassed about or that's really difficult or is something that you're just not ready to talk about and we're a place if you're looking for help, we'll try to find you the help you need.

Captain Chris Lee Is there anything you don't do?

FO Kandy Bernskoetter We don't answer contract questions. You really don't want us to. We don't have that training. We're really here for like physiological, psychological, aeromedical questions to be good listeners and to get you the resources you need to get those questions answered.

Captain Chris Lee Well, Kandy, thanks so much for being here. Any final thoughts?

FO Kandy Bernskoetter Path is available 24/7, 365. We really do mean that. Logistically the way the call works is you call the ALPA FedEx MEC office at (866) FDX-ALPA and then listen to the message and it'll tell you what key to press to get PATH. When you press the key, you go to a third-party vendor that then puts you on hold and finds the pilot peer for you to talk to. Sometimes that could take a few minutes. We have a rotating call list, but we don't do shift work because we don't have the ability to do that. We just don't have enough people, time or money. So sometimes it might take a while to get someone on the line. So, I ask pilots just to be patient or if you get accidentally disconnected, to please call back. That doesn't happen often, but if it does, we certainly want to talk to you if you'd like to talk to us.

Captain Chris Lee Well, thanks again, Kandy, and thanks for listening. If you have any questions or topic ideas, please send us an email to fdxpodcast@alpa.org. And as always, be safe out there and we'll see you next time.