Those of you who do not travel may not realize that last year was one of the worst for air traffic delays. According to one industry study, the number of aircraft delayed daily rose to 1,291 in 1999 from 948 in 1998. During July of last year, delays were up 76% over the previous year.

The CEOs of several airlines even sent letters of apology to their most-frequent travelers. Some of these letters pointed to problems that existed due to basic network confusion.

There are 21 high-altitude centers and 185 airport approach facilities. At times, these operations seemed to be following differing weather reports, forecasts and operating practices.

To minimize the delays, the Federal Aviation Administration is planning a significant change in air-traffic policy. The plan is to create a war room in its Herndon, Va., command center from which conference calls will originate every two hours.

The plan sounds reasonable. FAA officials will establish plans for the entire nation. By factorizing in the weather, equipment and congestion contributing to delays, personnel will respond, hopefully, with uniformity and efficiency.

Now this may sound like a new plot for the airline industry, but it will be old news for anyone with a background in railroad operations, where the conference call used to be an integral part of one's day. A cultural anthropologist could probably make a career out of studying these calls.

The morning call was a source of terror. Every faux-pas of the past 24 hours was brought up for public review.

Every error had a miscreant who needed to be punished. The punishment could range from humiliation to literal banishment. Many in the industry could tell of the multiple times they were “fired by speakerphone.”

The problem was that most local officials soon passed down decision-making to their superiors on the conference call. As Woody Hayes once remarked about the forward pass, “three things can happen — and two of them are bad.”

The risk/reward tradeoff for making a good decision was not great enough to risk making a CED (career-ending decision).

Not only did this stifle initiative, it created a climate of stomach-wrenching fear. I recall colleagues literally getting sick before the call. While in retrospect it seems laughable, the question, “How much seniority do you have — not counting tomorrow?” was serious.

And time was wasted. To avoid being accused of withholding information, some would insist on telling their superiors everything. No detail was too minuscule. For the other participants on the call, it was truly tedious.

This micro-discussion was not limited to the railroads. During steamship-line calls, I listened as participants regaled each other with a comprehensive list of sales calls performed or shift-by-shift plans for discharging a vessel — complete with the number of gangs the terminal operator would use.

It was a waste of time. But despite weekly suggestions to concentrate on major issues, the full explanation was still forthcoming.

In fact, the conference call has been affected by technical revisions. The speaker-phone gave rise to the closed-circuit television conference. Unfortunately, some companies found that the faces and gestures made during the conference — which could now be seen by all participants — were a distraction. Many cameras were turned off.

At times of crisis, the conference call is an immediate remedy. Hours-long conference calls held during the Union Pacific-Southern Pacific service crisis became legendary. Several apparently went on all day.

The upshot was that the calls didn’t work. Union Pacific determined that it had centralized too much control for a railroad that had become too large to manage in the traditional fashion.

More local and regional control was necessary to improve service. Functions that had been laboriously consolidated at the UP’s flagship Harriman Center (also known as “The Bunker”) were now transferred out.

CSXT under the (former) leadership of Ron Conway determined that the local-area management (LAM) begun at Conrail had similar benefits. Other railroads are following similar paths to improved operating efficiency.

While conference calls look like a good idea, they can very quickly become counterproductive. There appears to be significant risk when the business culture is overly introspective or prone to command and control. That is when they should be discontinued.

Duane Woerth, president of the Air Line Pilots Association, recently summed up the issue. He hopes the FAA’s approach works, but said it is no substitute for the long-delayed $13 billion modernization of the air traffic control system. In addition, it cannot compensate for a lack of discipline resulting from planes leaving gates out-of-turn.

Perhaps the FAA should seek some pointers from the Federal Railroad Administration on what — and what not — to do during industry conference calls.

In the meantime, let’s hope for a smoother flying season this spring and summer.

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