

# WHO'S IN CHARGE HERE, ANYWAY?

How pilot culture has affected ALPA's governance structure.

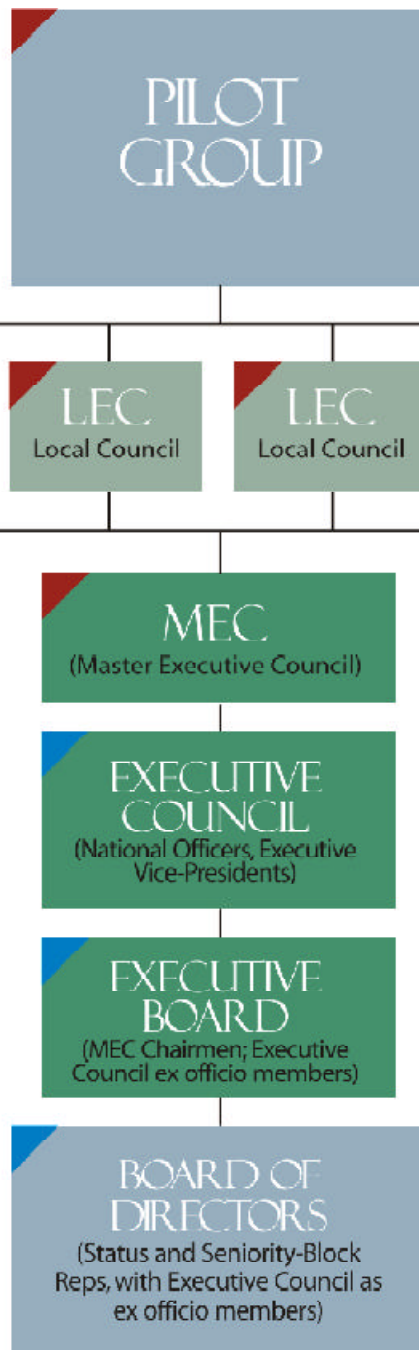
By John Mazor, Senior Communications Specialist

FOR MANY ALPA MEMBERS, trying to follow the proceedings and actions of the Association is like trying to watch a game of cricket. At first glance, cricket looks familiar because of the parallels with baseball. But (unless you happen to have roots in the various lands of Greater Britannia) the more you watch, the more you realize that you have only a hazy idea of what is happening and why. The same can be said of how ALPA is governed and conducts its business. While that has many parallels with what we all learned in classes on civics and government, the differences are as important as the similarities.

To understand the architecture of the Association's governance structure and why it was formed that way, a little history is in order. When ALPA's founder, Capt. David Behncke, first proposed the then-radical concept of a union for airline pilots, he quickly realized that as workers, pilots were a breed apart. Of necessity, they were better educated and more self-reliant than typical laborers, and they typically had a more-than-average distrust of higher authority.

This was quite understandable when "higher authority" was an owner or manager who insisted that pilots fly into questionable weather with a questionable aircraft without asking any questions, let alone trying to assert captain's authority. Not surprisingly, this constant battle to preserve captain's authority had important spillover consequences for how pilots would distribute power within their union structure.

Many unions that have risen to prominence have found that the key to power in their workplaces depended on their ability to motivate large masses of workers to act in unison against not just a single factory or mill, but across regions or even across



entire industries. Pay rates and seniority lists frequently were set uniformly across corporate boundaries, especially for the highly skilled occupations.

However, what soon became apparent to Behncke was that the pilot culture would not be receptive to lock-

step, top-down, industrywide governance, either in their collective bargaining agreements or within any association that represented them. (Even the term "union" was enough to scare off potential members, hence the word "Association" in ALPA's name.)

So the system and processes of governance that have evolved over ALPA's 75 years reflect a preference for independence, self-determination, and the desire of pilots of each airline to set their own terms, both at the bargaining table and in the union hall. In many ways, ALPA's philosophy of governance is captain's authority writ large.

## ALPA's governing bodies

The basic ALPA building block is the "pilot group." With a few exceptions in which several airlines have "single carrier status" for purposes of labor relations, a pilot group is all the pilots on the seniority list of one airline. The basic unit of each pilot group is the local council, i.e., all the pilots of that pilot group based in a specific area, usually one of the airline's domiciles. Local councils meet and conduct business under the leadership of the local executive council (LEC), composed of the status or seniority-block representatives (captain, first officer, and where applicable, second officer) who are elected by members of the local council. These representatives fill the positions of chairman, vice-chairman, and secretary/treasurer. (If their LEC has only two status representatives, the local council elects the secretary/treasurer at large.)

Status or seniority-block representatives also serve as the members of the pilot group's master executive council (MEC), which is the highest governing body for that pilot group. The MEC, in



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turn, elects its own chairman, vice-chairman, and secretary/treasurer. All the status and seniority-block representatives of all of ALPA's pilot groups collectively serve as the union's Board of Directors, plus the Executive Council (see below) as ex officio members.

The Board of Directors meets every 2 years and is ALPA's highest governing body. The BOD sets the Association's policies and elects its national officers (ALPA's Constitution and By-Laws still refers to "national officers" even though the union represents pilots of two nations).

The Executive Council, made up of the four national officers and 10 executive vice-presidents, meets at least six times per year to act in consultation and cooperation with the president in furthering objectives and policies set by the Board of Directors and Executive Board.

To help govern ALPA between meetings of the Board of Directors, the Executive Board, composed of the MEC chairmen from all the pilot groups, plus the Executive Council as ex officio members, meets twice a year and has the authority to control ALPA, its general management, and its business affairs, subject to the Association's policies and Constitution and By-Laws.

## National officers

As the Association's chief executive and administrative head, the president supervises ALPA's affairs and functions, and coordinates its activities. The first vice-president functions under the

jurisdiction of the president in carrying out ALPA policies and other duties as assigned by the president. The vice-president-administration/secretary and vice-president-finance/treasurer both function under the jurisdiction of the president to carry out membership/record-keeping and financial responsibilities, respectively.

The 10 executive vice-presidents are elected by caucuses from each of the ALPA airline groupings. All the national officers hold office for 4 years, while each of the executive vice-presidents serves a 2-year term. The president is the only officer in ALPA who is an employee of the Association. All other officers serve as volunteers, although they are compensated for expenses and flight pay loss in the performance of their duties.

## Putting it all together

ALPA's governing structure has evolved over the years to maintain its leading role as an efficient and effective organization that is responsive to the wide variety of industrial and safety interests of its members. But throughout these evolutionary changes, the basic characteristics of the union structure that Behncke and his co-founders hammered out in the 1930s are still clearly apparent.

Power, both constitutional and political, is decentralized in ALPA. Pilots, through their MECs and the ratification ballot, have almost absolute authority in determining what they will or will not accept in collective bargaining. So long as they remain within the relatively modest limitations set by ALPA policy and the ALPA Constitution and By-Laws, "ALPA National" has very little say in the internal affairs of any pilot group.

Furthermore, the BOD member status and seniority-block representatives, at the BOD meetings, elect the national officers and the executive vice-presidents. This gives the pilot groups extraordinary political power over ALPA's national office and its resources. While

that power is not absolute, unless the request is impractical or violates ALPA's Constitution and By-Laws, MEC requests to "ALPA National" generally are honored to the greatest degree possible.

## And now the 'nots'

Read carefully the Association's Constitution and By-Laws, and you will *not* see any language giving any officer the power to set, change, or ignore official Association policies. You will *not* see any provision for expending ALPA resources to pursue policies contrary to those set by the Board of Directors. You will *not* see any clauses that declare ALPA policies automatically null and void just because some members (even a majority!) might not agree with them.

That's because Behncke and his fellow pilots deliberately concentrated most of the union's governing power in the hands of the local governing bodies, the members of which are directly accountable to their constituent members. ALPA officers are not mere figureheads. They do exercise considerable authority; but that authority can be used only in pursuit of the policies set by the governing bodies.

If you examine the size, powers, and relationships among the various governing units of ALPA, the union's architecture is a pyramid—but *not* the usual representation in which the highest levels of power are at the pointy top end. The accurate representation is an inverted pyramid. The ultimate power and authority reside in the broadest part, which is the rank-and-file members. Believe it or not, the pointy end (whether you want to call it "ALPA National" or "the national officers" or even narrow it down to the office of the president) holds the least amount of overall governing and political power.

So, to answer the question posed in the title of this article: Who's in charge here? The answer, dear member, is you. 🌐