What business executives can learn from air-crash investigation

**The air-crash investigation model has some powerful, yet simple, lessons for senior business executives on crisis management.**

[](http://www.theceomagazine.com/business/business-executives-can-learn-air-crash-investigation/)

CEO Magazine October 2017

<http://www.theceomagazine.com/business/business-executives-can-learn-air-crash-investigation/>

Dr Tony Jaques

Dr Tony Jaques is MD of the Melbourne-based issue and crisis consultancy, [Issue Outcomes P/L](http://www.issueoutcomes.com.au/).

When your organisation is recovering from a crisis it’s very tempting to look for an excuse not to review what just happened, especially if management was at fault.

It’s a pretty human response, which is sometimes justified by convenient phrases such as ‘Let’s not dwell on the past’ or ‘Let’s keep focused on the future’ or ‘Let’s renew our commitment to our core values’. But unwillingness to learn from what went wrong is a serious mistake which blocks the opportunity to improve.

Any executive who goes down this track to avoid short-term embarrassment should think again next time they walk through the airport to jump on a plane. Because the safety of today’s air travel is largely built on improvements resulting from an honest investigation of past failures.

As you sit in the aircraft waiting for take-off, be aware that the modern standard of communication between pilots and air traffic control was massively overhauled following investigation into the Tenerife airport disaster in 1977. Two jumbo jets collided on the runway, killing 583 people – the worst-ever loss of life in an aviation accident.

When you listen to that standard boring announcement about no smoking in the toilets, be reminded that smoke detectors and automatic fire extinguishers became mandatory after an investigation into the fatal fire on an Air Canada plane in 1983 revealed the fire started in the toilet and went undetected. Only half the people aboard survived the crash-landing of the burning plane.

And as you lean back to enjoy the in-flight entertainment, think about Swissair flight 111 which crashed into the sea after taking off from New York in 1998, killing all 229 aboard. The investigation that followed took five years and involved reassembling a reported two million pieces of debris, before experts discovered that a fire had started in the in-flight entertainment system and ignited flammable insulation. That finding led to the introduction of new fire-resistant materials in aircraft construction.

Obviously, a five-year investigation is not warranted for a typical corporate crisis. But the air-crash investigation model has some powerful, yet simple, lessons for senior business executives on crisis management:

**Lessons for senior business executives on crisis management**

* Find out what really happened.
* Avoid setting out to assign blame.
* Bring in experts if needed.
* Learn from the event and make changes to avoid it happening again.

The reality is that the emerging integrated approach to crisis management recognises that preventing a crisis before it happens – as well as learning from the crisis after it happens – are just as much part of the process as responding to the crisis itself.

Every company should undertake a review after a crisis and have a formal process for doing so. Of course, the post-crisis review will very much depend on the nature of the organisation and the scale of the event.

For example, the review might be a small management team assessment; or a technical root-cause analysis; or a forensic accounting exercise; or a root and branch review. It might even involve cooperating with an external review, such as a coroner’s inquest or an official investigation.

Whatever the process, the essential element is that it must be reflect a genuine attempt to honestly determine the facts, not to hide or obfuscate. As the American educator and philosopher John Dewey said: “We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience.”

Another important facet of the air-crash model is the need to learn not only from your own crises but also from the crises of others. Lessons from an air-crash investigation are typically shared with other airlines, aircraft manufacturers and regulators throughout the world. The findings may lead to mandatory changes in design, maintenance or operation, which are communicated through a formal process of notifications to improve the safety of air travel for all.

In a business context, learning from crises suffered by others is less formal and less frequent, but no less important. When a crisis strikes another organisation it’s all too common to conclude: ‘Thank goodness it wasn’t us’ and move on with business as usual. But it’s much more productive to ask: ‘Could it have been us?’, ‘Would we have made the same mistakes?’, ‘Would we have handled it any better?’ and ‘What can we learn from this?’.

Crisis research consistently shows that corporate denial – ‘It won’t happen to us’ – is one of the commonest barriers to learning, closely followed by a litany of excuses to actively resist such learning.

Every company needs a practical process, such as a case study simulation, to consider a real-life crisis which has happened to another organisation, perhaps in the same area or the same industry. And it has to be focused not on what the other people did wrong but on how you can improve your own organisation.

Only by genuinely leaning from post-crisis review and making necessary changes to planning and preparedness can you work towards crisis-proofing your organisation. That way, evaluation and modification become an integral part of the process, not just bolted on as an afterthought.