BECOME A STRATEGIC PARTNER
This five-step plan can strengthen your flight department’s relationship with ‘downtown.’

Traditionally, the flight department was considered separate from the company headquarters. However, that concept has changed considerably over the past few years, as flight departments strive to bridge the gap between the hangar and headquarters. The May/June 2015 edition of Business Aviation Insider launched a four-part series looking at how flight department managers and personnel can help ensure a positive, effective relationship with the company’s headquarters. The second installment gave thoughtful advice on how to choose or become a strong aviation director.

The following third article in the series outlines five steps that flight department personnel can take to become a strategic partner with the executive team and headquarters personnel.
1. COMMUNICATE WELL AND OFTEN
Effective and frequent communication is the first element of becoming a strategic partner with headquarters. David Wyndham, president of Conklin & de Decker, suggests that aviation managers spend time with the aircraft users – and not just while en route – as well as other headquarters staff.

“A flight department might be vulnerable if the aircraft is considered the chairman or president’s private aircraft and no one else in the company understands what the flight department does or what benefit it provides the organization,” said Wyndham. “Aviation managers should spend some time ‘downtown’ and attend headquarters staff meetings and other events just to take the pulse of the company and be a part of the company’s success planning.”

For Doug Duggan, chief pilot of Southwestern Energy, being co-located at company headquarters was important, so seven years ago he chose to establish his office downtown instead of at the hangar. The company used to operate a corporate shuttle and flew headquarters personnel regularly. “Then, our pilots had an opportunity to meet a lot of the headquarters staff,” said Duggan. “But once the shuttle slowed down, I knew it would be important to be at headquarters. Proximity is key.”

Other flight department managers, like Keith Shelburn, who manages a Fortune 500 company’s flight operations, don’t think proximity to the executive team is necessary if the aviation director communicates in a manner and with a frequency expected by the executive team. Shelburn has a monthly meeting with his supervisor to report on and discuss the flight department’s operational and financial performance, as well as long-term company strategic needs. Alternatively, some aviation directors find benefit in attending weekly or monthly management meetings at headquarters to keep their finger on the pulse of the company.

“Effective and timely communication is a key element to building strong business relationships. It’s critical to how and when people want to be communicated with – by cell phone, texts, emails or one-on-one face-to-face,” said Shelburn. “Communication in the method preferred relative to the situation is important. It shows you are responsible to the business and also that you respect the value of the executive’s time.”

2. BUILD TRUST WITH THE EXECUTIVE TEAM
How does an aviation director build trust with the executive team or even get time with busy executives in the first place? Shelburn points to three key elements of a strong relationship between the aviation director and executive team.

“An effective aviation director needs to have an executive presence,” said Shelburn. “He or she needs to be seen as a good fit with the executive team and should be knowledgeable of both the aviation world and business concepts, including basic capital and expense accounting terms and procedures.”

Being a good communicator – able to speak and write well at the executive team’s level – is the next step.

Finally, Shelburn says precise preparation, accurate reporting and sound analysis is another way to earn respect and trust. “Be in touch with your business,” said Shelburn. “Senior executives know their business inside and out. You need to know your flight department and our industry [business aviation] just as well.” Effective, judicious use of an executive’s time will help ensure that future requests for face-to-face meetings with the executive are granted.

In other words, successful leadership, which includes these three elements, is essential to building trust with the executive team. Demonstrating consistent excellence in your position will help you earn the trust and respect of the executive team.

More characteristics of a great aviation director were discussed in an earlier article in this series: “The New-Generation Aviation Director” (Business Aviation Insider, July/August 2015, page 18).

3. ANTICIPATE NEEDS
An aviation director who demonstrates a strong partnership with headquarters is able to anticipate the needs of the company. These can be long- or short-term requirements of the organization. For long-term needs, Shelburn recommends that flight department managers become knowledgeable about aircraft asset management. This involves establishing an aircraft ownership and operational strategy.

How long will you intend to operate the aircraft? Should you buy new or used? Is aircraft availability critical, or can you accept long periods of down time? Are flat maintenance costs desirable? The list goes on.

The next step is aircraft selection. What range is required? What are the runway performance requirements? How many passengers...
are typically carried? Within the selection of aircraft models that suit your needs and budget, how does their average annual market depreciation compare? All these factors make up the life-cycle cost of an aircraft within your planned ownership period.

Aviation managers should help their senior leadership create the aircraft strategy that suits their needs, recommend a best choice, support your decision, seek their agreement and then execute the plan. Revisit your plan annually to make adjustments for changes in the needs of the business and market conditions, said Shelburn.

Wyndham says that when aviation managers and other flight department personnel are actively engaged in the company’s planning and development, they often see ways the aircraft could be used more productively to meet company goals. For example, knowing the organization’s plans for future growth or movement can enable the flight department to prepare for possible trips to new company facilities.

4. COORDINATE RESOURCES

Many organizations struggle with maximizing coordination between the company’s corporate travel department and the flight department. Some flight departments give the travel department read-only access to the aircraft scheduling software. When an employee makes a travel request, the travel department checks the flight department’s schedule before securing airline tickets. Typically, the lead passenger is given the option of allowing extra passengers on the aircraft.

Other flight departments email a daily or weekly schedule of anticipated flight department trips to the administrative assistants of the company’s most frequent travelers. This enables other travelers with flexible needs to arrange trips to coordinate with the flight department trips, if possible.

Wyndham stresses the value of coordinating resources, not just in travel logistics, but also in administrative and financial matters. He recommends that flight department managers harmonize with the headquarters personnel who work with the flight department’s financials. A coordinated approach between the finance department and the flight department can alleviate many concerns by providing an easy avenue for the finance department staff – often unfamiliar with aviation – to seek answers.

5. ENGAGE YOUR ENTIRE TEAM

Jo Damato, CAM – NBAA’s staff liaison for the Schedulers & Dispatchers Committee – encourages flight department managers to include non-flying professionals such as schedulers and flight coordinators in their relationship with headquarters.

“Schedulers and others in the flight department typically have the most frequent interaction with headquarters personnel,” noted Damato. “From day-to-day scheduling to – in the worst case – emergency response, people in these flight department roles benefit from in-person relationships with their headquarters counterparts.”

Personal rapport with headquarters personnel and their general understanding of aviation is critical, especially when dealing with potentially difficult conversations, like why a flight now requires a fuel stop when it previously didn’t. Educating headquarters staff and establishing a personal relationship with executives and their support staff can make these discussions less stressful for all involved.

For example, the flight operation managed by Shelburn hosts a luncheon once a year for the executive team’s administrative assistants. This event enables all the key players who typically work via email and phone to get better acquainted.

Building close relationships between the schedulers of one Northeast flight department and the company’s headquarters staff has paid dividends when flights don’t go as planned.

“Sometimes, when we have to mitigate conflicts for [aircraft] use or deal with delays due to weather or other circumstances [the message] is not properly relayed to the lead passenger or stakeholder of the flight schedule,” said that flight department’s scheduling manager. “Building relationships with the executives and their assistants is critical for building trust in our communication. When the flight department says that we can make the trip work but not quite as requested, the executives and their assistants trust that we have their best interest, the best interest of the company and safety in mind at all times.”

Learn more about this topic at the NBAA Leadership Conference, Feb. 22 to 24, 2016, San Antonio, TX. Register at www.nbaa.org/leadership/insider. Watch for the final article in this “Hangar to Headquarters” series in the November/December issue of Business Aviation Insider.