

# Course correction

At this Boeing program, a key to success has been building a stronger relationship with the customer—and employees **By Alison Sheridan**



“I wanted to see the shine return to their eyes, the excitement of coming to work each day and knowing they make a difference.”

— Kay Grabanski, program manager for the F-15E Mission Training Centers

PHOTO: RICHARD RAU/BOEING

**PHOTO:** A pilot trains in an F-15E simulator. The Training Systems & Services F-15E Mission Training Centers team took on a struggling program and effected positive change. **RON BOOKOUT/BOEING**

**F**or aircrews flying Boeing's F-15 Eagle, a twin-engine, all-weather tactical fighter designed to gain and maintain air superiority in combat, what happens out of the sky is also critical.

From the novice pilot and weapons system officer to the U.S. Air Force's equivalent of "Top Gun" aircrews, Mission Training Centers provide the most realistic training available—without aircrews ever having to leave the ground. The centers are located at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, North Carolina; Mountain Home AFB, Idaho; and at the Royal Air Force Base Lakenheath in the United Kingdom.

Three years ago, Boeing's F-15E Mission Training Centers program was receiving positive feedback from the aircrews who use the trainers for mission

rehearsal—but the program had problems.

"Everyone was working on individual issues, but we were scrambling, not doing what the customer needed, and it just wasn't working," recalled Darla Yoakum, with the program's configuration management.

The situation, along with low employee morale, was something that couldn't be ignored and had to be fixed—fast.

Kay Grabanski, no stranger to turning around troubled programs, took over the F-15E Mission Training Centers—and took on the challenge.

To boost performance and employee morale, Grabanski started with small, realistic goals.

"We chose three things to focus on and celebrated every success along the

way," she said. "We used cash awards, Pride@Boeing points and formal recognition from upper management to show in concrete ways that we appreciated the team's commitment."

That recognition was important, according to Yoakum.

"When you get recognized by leadership, you feel like you're not just another pencil in the cup; it feels good to know they appreciate that we went the extra mile," Yoakum said.

Grabanski also made it her highest priority to improve the program's relationship with the U.S. Air Force customer.

The results?

- The Mission Training Centers have recently passed the 12,000 successful

missions mark, totaling more than 18,000 hours of ground-based training time that offsets the millions of dollars, aircraft wear and tear, and fuel costs associated with flight training.

- The Air Force requires 95 percent availability, but the team boasts greater than 100 percent availability for aircrews, by being available not only for all scheduled training but also for unscheduled training missions.
- The team has delivered 10 trainers to three locations, including five in five months, a significant task considering the four cockpits, instructor stations, hundreds of computers and other equipment that have to be assembled, tested, packed and shipped for each site.

- The customer has awarded Boeing \$17.8 million in new work since Grabanski came on board, with additional funding and more work planned for 2011.

"We have definitely tightened our focus," said Martin Hassett, manned combat station integrated product team lead.

"Before, our objective seemed open-ended, but now we're more precise."

When asked what she is most proud of, Grabanski doesn't cite the growing list of accomplishments. Instead, she talks about the team.

"I am most proud of my team! Period!" she said. "The morale of the team was pretty low, and I wanted to see the shine return to their eyes, the excitement of coming to work each day and knowing

they make a difference. The shine—and the excitement—are back! They trust one another; they trust leadership, and I believe they feel engaged."

Lana Deinhart, configuration management engineer and a former U.S. Marine lieutenant, said she takes pride in being part of a team that makes the best trainers in the world.

"We're not bogged down or spinning our wheels anymore," she said. "We certainly got things turned around."

Yoakum added she felt like she was on her own before Grabanski came on the program. "She established teams, brought in people of purpose and met with us individually," she said. "She kept us on track and said, 'We can do this!'" ■

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