Amtrak #501 Wreck Revelations: New Evidence that Crew was “Set up to Fail”

As we in the industry are well aware, at the first sign of trouble the employees are first on the list to be scrutinized. In my 35 years investigating these accidents it is far too common that those assumptions are incorrect. For example, disaster struck many years ago at Kelso, Washington and a BNSF train met head on with a UPRR train horrifically taking the lives of 5 men. The headlines in the local papers the following morning were, “Train crew missed a signal.” We thoroughly investigated this matter as legal representatives for the Union Pacific Conductor and in fact we were the only firm to push the matter all the way to the courtroom. Information emerged regarding the state of the signal system in depositions, and when faced with "bad facts" the railroad settled the case during trial. In my heart I know that these 5 men died in vain.

Fast forward to the tragic day of December 18th, 2017 and the crash of Amtrak 501. This horrific accident took three lives and left many other's in shambles. Once again, the headlines were alarming ... and false as we now know. As in past Amtrak accidents the Engineer immediately came under fire. His train speed appeared to be excessive. What very few knew at the time is that the training/qualifying of these employees was not only lacking but in some instances, nonexistent. Of course, we know now of these conditions, training conditions that the NTSB has described as engineers and conductors being "set up for failure". Despite cries from some employees that they were not ready for this new route known as the Point Defiance by-pass, the company apparently felt it had spent all the money it was going to spend on training, so in the reported words of one supervisor to a concerned employee, "Just go do your job".

Now, new information has come forward that indicates that not only was the training inept and severely lacking, but the operating conditions that these crews were being trained under failed to accurately reflect the actual conditions that they would be faced with in actual operations. For example, it is now under question as to whether the training taking place may have ever been under “clear” block signal indications, thereby failing to properly train the crews at actual track speed conditions. Combined with nighttime training only, which impedes employees' familiarity with landmarks and signage, these employees were ill-prepared.

To expect the best out of the workforce you must put your best forward as a CEO. This was lacking in this observer's opinion, when it came to former Amtrak CEO Richard Anderson. Just prior to the horrendous 501 crash, some 500 managers - many of them highly experienced employees - were "bought out" or retired early systemwide in an effort to improve the bottom line. What is to be expected when you take hundreds of years' experience out of a workforce and then mismanage the remaining employees.

These problems can be added to the long list of other systemic failures present in the training of these unfortunate employees, tasked with the safe and efficient operations of our passenger trains. While these employees twist in the wind, vilified by the press and public opinion, they are in fact the victims of an employer who is failing not only its greatest asset – its employees - but also failing the folks - the passengers and the public - who trusted the company with their lives.

John Hiatt, former BNSF Engineer, who now works as an investigator with Bremseth Law Firm, submitted this article to The Highball.