

The Boeing 737 Max 9 is flying again. But the company's reputation isn't

Warm-Up Questions:

1. Have you ever experienced a situation where a company or organization you trusted faced a major challenge or controversy? How did it affect your perception of them?

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ARI SHAPIRO, HOST:

The Boeing 737 MAX 9 is flying again. More than 170 planes have been **grounded** since a fuselage panel blew off an Alaska Airlines flight in midair three weeks ago. Now, the first batch of those jets is returning to service after a mandated safety inspection, but Boeing's reputation will take a lot longer to repair, as NPR's Joel Rose reports.

JOEL ROSE, BYLINE: It's been three weeks to the day since Flight 1282 took off from Portland International Airport and came right back again, missing a door plug panel. Now, some of the first Boeing 737 MAX 9 flights since are taking off from this same airport, and Alaska Airlines customers know it.

CORRIE SAVIO: I never paid any attention until this happened as to what I was flying in.

ROSE: But Corrie Savio says she will now. Her traveling companion, James Van Arsdale, says the incident changed his opinion of Boeing.

JAMES VAN ARSDALE: It certainly **gave me pause**. It made me feel less confident about Boeing...

ROSE: Van Arsdale said he would not feel comfortable flying on a MAX 9 today.

VAN ARSDALE: ...Of course, until I am confident that the problem has been fixed. And I still don't think it has.

ROSE: No one was seriously injured, but the latest incident on a Boeing MAX jet has renewed big questions about the company's quality control. Industry analysts say Boeing has even bigger problems as it struggles to hold onto its share of the market for commercial planes.

RICHARD ABOULAFIA: People are focused on one incident, which is embarrassing. But it's actually been a series of incidents, and it's worse than that.

ROSE: Richard Aboulafia is an aviation analyst. He thinks Boeing has failed to learn some basic lessons from two deadly crashes of 737 MAX 8 jets in 2018 and 2019 that killed 346 people.

Aboulafia says Boeing's management is so focused on cutting costs and speeding up production that it's **lost sight of** the basics, like safety and quality control.

ABOULAFIA: It's a broader company problem - a management culture that under resources and **misunderstands** what the people who build the planes actually need to do their job.

ROSE: This week, Boeing's CEO, Dave Calhoun, was doing damage control with lawmakers on Capitol Hill.

DAVE CALHOUN: We believe in our airplanes. We have confidence in the safety of our airplanes. And that's what all of this is about.

ROSE: Yesterday, Boeing held what it called a quality stand-down at its 737 factory in Renton, Wash., part of an effort to show that the company is committed to improving quality. But it will take more than that to satisfy its customers.

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE")

HEIDI GARDNER: (As Mary) That's why our new slogan is, Alaska Airlines - you didn't die, and you got a cool story.

ROSE: Alaska Airlines was the **butt of the joke** on "Saturday Night Live" last weekend.

(SOUNDBITE OF TV SHOW, "SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE")

KENAN THOMPSON: (As Rowland) We're starting to make some changes.

JACOB ELORDI: (As Joshua) You know those bolts that, like, hold the plane together? We're going to go ahead and tighten some of those.

ROSE: Alaska CEO Ben Minicucci was not laughing when he talked to investors this week. He says the company lost \$150 million because of the grounding. Minicucci says the airline will try to **recoup** that money from Boeing, and it will push the company to improve quality control.

BEN MINICUCCI: We're going to **hold Boeing's feet to the fire** to make sure that we get good airplanes out of that factory.

ROSE: Regulators at the Federal Aviation Administration want to do the same. They've taken the highly unusual step of setting production caps, both on the MAX 9 and 8 and two other 737 models that are awaiting approval from regulators, including the smaller MAX 7 and the larger MAX 10. Kathleen Bangs is an aviation safety analyst and a former commercial pilot who spoke to NPR's Morning Edition.

KATHLEEN BANGS: Basically, what the FAA has said is slow down. You're not going to expand the production line right now. And obviously, that's going to hurt Boeing's **bottom line**.

ROSE: It gets even worse for Boeing. The company had been seeking an exemption from federal safety rules so that it could begin delivering the MAX 7 this spring, but **opposition to that is mounting** in the wake of the door plug incident. This comes as Boeing is steadily losing market share to its main rival, Airbus. Analyst Richard Aboulafia says Boeing management doesn't have a new plane on the drawing board to compete.

ABOULAFIA: They're not investing in the future. If you're not investing in the workforce, it stands to reason you're also cutting costs in terms of product development, and that is seriously weighing against their market share with Airbus.

ROSE: If there is a **silver lining** for Boeing, it's that most airlines can't easily switch over to buy from Airbus because the **backlog** for new orders is massive. That means airlines have no choice but to stick with Boeing if they want new planes before the end of the decade. And ultimately, travelers may not have much choice either.

Vocabulary and Phrases:

1. **Grounded:** Prevented from flying, typically due to safety issues.
2. **Gave pause:** Caused someone to stop and think; to hesitate because of concern or uncertainty.
3. **Lost sight of:** Failed to consider, forgot, or overlooked an important aspect.
4. **Misunderstands:** Fails to interpret or comprehend correctly.
5. **Butt of the joke:** The person or thing that is the target of a joke; being made fun of.
6. **Recoup:** Recover or regain (something lost or expended).
7. **Hold (someone's) feet to the fire:** To pressure someone to do something or to keep a promise.
8. **Opposition is mounting:** Increasing disagreement or resistance against something.
9. **Silver lining:** A positive or hopeful aspect in an otherwise negative situation.
10. **Backlog:** An accumulation of uncompleted work or matters that need to be dealt with.

Comprehension Questions:

1. What incident led to the grounding of the Boeing 737 MAX 9 planes?
2. What changed James Van Arsedale's opinion about Boeing, and what is his current stance on flying a MAX 9?
3. According to Richard Aboulafia, what broader company problem does Boeing face?

4. What steps are being taken by Boeing and regulators like the Federal Aviation Administration in response to the recent incident?
5. What challenges is Boeing facing in the market, and why is their situation with Airbus described as a 'silver lining'?

Discussion Questions:

1. How important do you think quality control and safety are for companies like Boeing, and why?
2. Discuss a time when a product or service you used had a major flaw. How did the company handle it, and how did it affect your trust in them?
3. In your opinion, what should be the priorities for a company facing a reputation crisis like Boeing?
4. How do you think the competition between companies like Boeing and Airbus impacts the aviation industry and consumers?
5. Do you believe stricter regulations and oversight are needed for airline manufacturers? Why or why not?