Airline pilots, as evidenced by the requirements of their chosen profession, are exceptional planners. Before every departure, the flight crew must calculate a number of variables that could affect their flight—reviewing their route, checking weight and balance, assessing weather, etc. Before every pushback, airline pilots must compute fuel requirements, consider NOTAMs, and evaluate air traffic delays.

ALPA leaders can rely on this same pilot discipline—the strict adherence to careful planning balanced by operational flexibility—to advance the interests of their pilot groups. With daily news reports detailing a seemingly never-ending barrage of threats to the airline piloting profession, ALPA members must determine the best course of action for prepar-
have been quite successful in advancing the interests of pilots at various airlines. Pilots of Alaska, America West, Continental, Delta, Hawaiian, United, and US Airways have all been through the strategic planning process. Before merging with ALPA, the FedEx pilot group also went through a similar process that they called Vision 2004 to outline their pilot group goals and to identify the resources they needed. This exercise clarified for them what resources they would need to successfully negotiate their next contract and, in part, formed the basis for their decision to reaffiliate with ALPA.

“After the challenges we faced in achieving our first contract, we realized that to succeed in our next round of negotiations we would need to identify our goals and develop a comprehensive strategic plan to reach them well before exchanging openers with FedEx management,” says Capt. David Webb, FedEx Master Executive Council chairman. “By formalizing milestones and understanding the resources needed to achieve them, we have been better prepared to handle changing circumstances and not lose sight of our primary goals that we outlined in Vision 2004.”

A team of senior ALPA staff members in the Communications, Representation, and Economic and Financial Departments has been working closely with the various pilot groups to help them develop their strategic plans. They have been providing resources, guidance, and support to help the pilot groups through this process. The strategic planning process has helped the pilot groups identify their current environment and visualize the future to determine the most effective strategies for reaching their goals.

Ideally, pilot groups should not wait until faced with a crisis before engaging in strategic planning. Assessing long-term prospects is more difficult when immediate concerns require attention. Strategic planning earlier, rather than later, ensures that a pilot group will be able to function proactively when a crisis occurs instead of simply reacting to events.

“It’s obviously easier to plan when things are calm,” says York, “so that when you’re faced with adverse circumstances, you’ve already anticipated the source of possible problems—merger, bankruptcy, defined-benefit–plan termination—or opportunities that provide bargaining leverage.

“Because the time line for analyzing problems, getting direction from the pilot group, and building consensus is long, the most difficult time for dealing with unresolved issues and a lack of common vision within a pilot group is when you’re looking at a crisis.”

A number of ALPA pilot groups have formulated strategic plans in recent years. Many of these efforts
requires a shift from the daily firefighting to managing fairly complicated democratic organizations, but that must be done so that over time they can accomplish their goals.”

While having a strategic plan is always important, charting their own course has never been more crucial for ALPA members as they try to navigate the often-treacherous waters of the present-day airline industry. Just as ALPA has had to reassess its own long-term strategy, individual pilot groups should consider the challenges, resources, and opportunities that will affect their futures as they persevere during this difficult period.

“We are at a critical time in the history of our union,” says ALPA’s president, Capt. Duane Woerth. “Our profession is assailed on a daily basis by those who would take away much of what this Association has spent the last 75 years fighting for. If we hope to protect the interests of our members, it is essential that we plan beyond our present moment. Strategic planning is the key to securing our future.”

“We’d really like to see broader use of this resource,” says York. “We’d like to find out which pilot groups would really benefit from this process over the next five years or so and get them to take advantage of it. It’s one of the tools in the ALPA toolbox, and it’s available to any pilot group that is interested in it.”

The airline industry is different today from what it was a decade ago, and it requires new and different strategies to effectively plan for the future. Association officers and staff are working hard to make sure that ALPA remains viable and relevant to its members and a decisive force in the future of the airline industry. Committing to long-term strategic planning will help pilot groups deal with the new realities of their industry.

“If we’re going to be successful, we have to be smart,” says Capt. Woerth. “The way to be smart is to develop and implement strategic plans that will help us to achieve our long-term objectives.”

Pilot group leaders interested in drafting a strategic plan should contact ALPA’s Representation Department. More information is available on the web at Crewroom.alpa.org.