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Dave
Valenta

Director of Maintenance for **Banyan Air Service**



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Valenta

PROFILE

Dave Valenta is the director of maintenance for Banyan Air Service, an FBO and repair station in Fort Lauderdale, FL. Valenta and his maintenance team support the company's credo of "Done right... On Time... As Quoted." This month, *D.O.M.* interviewed Valenta to learn about the career path that has led him to where he is today and some of the things he and his team are doing to help ensure Banyan's continued success.

THE MILITARY

Valenta shares that like many of his high school peers, he didn't know what career path he wanted to take after graduation. He graduated from High School in 1974. After graduation, he decided to join the Air Force. He scored high in his tests for mechanical aptitude and chose to go into aviation. His hopes were to work on helicopters. "I was intrigued with helicopters," shares Valenta. "I didn't have any knowledge of or experience with helicopters, but I wanted to work on them."

To Valenta's disappointment, no helicopter maintenance slots were available at the time, so he chose to be a jet mechanic instead. After basic training, Valenta went to technical school where he was trained on jet aircraft maintenance. After completion of his technical training, he was stationed at Minot Air Force Base, ND where he worked on F106s for five years.

CIVILIAN LIFE

Valenta left the Air Force after five years. Although he left the Air Force, he was hooked on aviation and decided to go to school to get his A&P certificate. He attended Winona Technical Institute in Winona, MN. "Even though I had experience working on aircraft in the Air Force and could have probably gotten a job in aviation, I wanted to get my A&P certificate," shares Valenta. "I felt it was necessary if I wanted to advance in an aircraft maintenance career."

WORKING ON HELICOPTERS

After graduating from Winona Technical Institute, Valenta landed a job with Imperial International in St. Paul, MN where he finally got his chance to work on helicopters. He started off as a mechanic at Imperial working on Sikorsky S58-Ts that were used for long line work. The helicopters

place to start," shares Valenta. "I was able to work on and learn a wide variety of aircraft."

Valenta was able to take his A&P, his "license to learn," and take advantage of the opportunity he had at Imperial to learn as much as he could about how to maintain and repair many different types of aircraft.

One year after starting at Imperial, the company purchased several Agusta 109s to support North Memorial Hospital's air ambulance operations. Valenta was the first mechanic to work at North Memorial, and was responsible for all the maintenance for the hospital's Agusta 109s.

D.O.M. asked Valenta what the biggest difference was between working at Imperial (his first civilian aircraft maintenance job) and working as a mechanic in the Air Force. "I don't think the military expects you to know a lot," Valenta says. "There is always somebody there to help you or tell you how to do it. In general aviation, you've got to figure it out yourself. I remember my first job. I was supposed to change a tire on a Cherokee Six. I remember thinking, 'I don't even know how to jack this aircraft up!'"

EARLY MENTOR

Most aircraft maintenance professionals had mentors who helped them early on in their aircraft maintenance careers. Valenta tells *D.O.M.* that he is grateful for one of his early mentors — Al Marx. "Al was a great mentor to me," says Valenta. "He was one of the company's owners and hired me at Imperial. Al was a mechanic and a pilot. He pretty much took me under his wing in those early years. He was very patient with me. He gave me the opportunity to learn and helped to build confidence in myself. If I ever had a question, he was quick to help me out. Al really stuck with me and helped me."

Valenta shares that Marx didn't stop at teaching him the technical skills he needed to be a good aircraft mechanic, he did more — he taught Valenta through example the dedication needed to be a successful mechanic. Valenta says, "Al taught me how to stay up until midnight to get the job done."

ELLIOTT AVIATION

Dave was at Imperial for six years. In 1990, he went to work for Elliott Aviation in Eden Prairie (Minneapolis, MN).

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were used for installing air conditioning units on buildings, pipeline work, fire fighting and other utility uses. The company also operated Hughes 500s and Bell Jet Rangers. Imperial also had fixed-wing aircraft including Twin Commanders, Cessna 400 series aircraft and some Cessna 210s to support their freight and passenger work. "It was a good

Elliott worked on a lot of Beechcraft products, and Dave started off working on piston aircraft because of his prior experience at Imperial. After two years, Valenta was promoted to crew leader. "I worked as a crew leader at Elliott for six years," Valenta tells *D.O.M.* "We had a small crew. We would follow aircraft through the entire maintenance pro-

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cess and do the sign-offs at the end. That was the first time I had worked as a crew leader in general aviation.”

We asked Valenta if the leadership experience he received from the military helped him in his first supervisory job in general aviation. “Not really,” he tells *D.O.M.* “It was a different situation. Everybody has to follow orders in the military — there are no questions asked. But in general aviation, you bring your personality with you.”

OTHER CHALLENGES

As a crew leader at Elliott, Valenta was faced with several challenges. “Trying to get everybody on the same page as mine was challenging,” says Valenta. “The crew leaders at Elliott didn’t do performance reviews, but we were responsible for our maintenance projects. I consider myself a self-motivated person — I just keep moving and keep motivated until I have a question. Then I go find out the answer and then get back on the task at hand. Trying to get the people on my crew to be that same way and to realize that we had a due out date and we needed to get the job done was challenging at times.”

It was an awkward position to be in. Valenta wasn’t in charge of employee evaluations or reviews, nor did he have input in incentive pay raises. Yet he was responsible for directing and motivating his crew and getting projects out in time.

Another big challenge was that he didn’t always have the same crew. He would be working with different mechanics on just about every project, each of them bringing their own experience, knowledge and personality to the team.

THE MOVE TO BUSINESS AVIATION

Dave was with Elliott for eight years before landing a job as the director of maintenance for Greentree Financial’s corporate flight department in 1998. He was the sole mechanic working for Greentree and was responsible for the maintenance of the company’s Hawker 800XP and King Air 350.

“I learned what it takes to be a director of maintenance on the corporate side,” says Valenta. “I learned what it takes to keep the books, keep the airplanes running and keeping them airworthy. Finding maintenance shops was learning experience for me. I would do some maintenance in the shop, but any large inspections would be done elsewhere. I was more than a mechanic — I was managing the airplanes.”

Valenta also learned about the flexible work hours associated with working in a corporate flight department. He needed to be there for all departures and arrivals. Sometimes it would mean being there early in the morning or late at night. “It takes a special breed of person to want to do that,” Valenta says. “I think the money is a little better in corporate aviation, but it takes a special person — one that is self-motivated. You don’t have a boss in that situation — you are your own boss. You wear a whole lot of different hats and don’t have any real set hours.”

Valenta tells *D.O.M.* the most challenging thing for him at Greentree was dealing with idle time. “I consider myself a self-motivated person, and I didn’t expect the idle time at Greentree. It was tough for me going from the busy atmosphere of a repair station to the idle time associated with a corporate flight department.”

Valenta’s stint as DOM for Greentree wouldn’t last long. The company was bought by Conseco, and changes were made in the flight department. Greentree’s president told Dave, “If you get a chance for another job, take it.”

So Dave decided to go back to the “busy.”



RELOCATING TO FLORIDA

By 1999, Valenta and his wife were ready to move from Minnesota to a warmer climate. They had decided to move to Florida. Valenta’s wife worked as a property manager, and they both decided that when one of them got a job in Florida, they would pack the bags and move.

As luck would have it, Valenta came across a job posting for Banyan. The Fort Lauderdale-based FBO and repair station was looking for mechanics and inspectors. Dave and his wife were vacationing in Florida and stopped by Banyan for a job interview.

Things fell in place after that. Dave’s wife got a job, and her company moved them to Florida. Dave accepted a job offer from Banyan and began working there on March 1, 1999. “I had enjoyed the sense of urgency when working on aircraft in the Air Force. That’s what I like about working in an FBO environment like Banyan. There is a similar sense of urgency — that feeling of, ‘Let’s get it done!’”

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KEEP THEM COMMUNICATE

WORKING AT BANYAN

Valenta's first job at Banyan was as an inspector/researcher in the inspection department. He did logbook signoffs, service bulletin research and similar duties. He would also fill in for the chief inspector when needed. It was pretty much a sit-down job, and Valenta found that job "somewhat boring."

He was then moved to the hangar floor as a quality control floor inspector. He was responsible for inspecting Required Inspection Items (RII), performing inspections during critical inspection points of maintenance processes and other inspections as necessary. He also found himself helping with troubleshooting tasks and anywhere else the guys could use a hand.

Valenta was a floor inspector for about three months before he was promoted to a shop supervisor. He was in charge of all the mechanics that worked for him. He would assign work tasks and monitor the work flow.

Those were responsibilities he was already accustomed to. But one new responsibility he wasn't used to was performing employee reviews. "I had to start doing reviews of the technicians that worked for me — something I had never done before," Valenta shares. "It was difficult at first because I realized that what I said, or didn't say, in a performance review could significantly affect that employee's morale. I didn't know how to fill out a review."

Performance reviews were just one challenge Valenta faced as a shop supervisor. Another challenge was the fact that he was fairly new to the company. "I was the 'new guy' at Banyan and there were all these guys that had been here ten years, and all of a sudden I was the shop supervisor and they were reporting to me. And I can't say that I got total buy in at first. It was difficult."

Another challenging situation Valenta encountered was the fact he was not actually in charge of the maintenance department — the DOM was. So although Valenta was responsible for maintenance scheduling and employee reviews, he was not in charge of the hiring or firing, nor did he have any say in pay increases.

But things would soon change. When Banyan's DOM left in 2002, Valenta was promoted to DOM.

IMPLEMENTING CHANGES

Valenta has taken several lessons he has learned over the years and implemented them at Banyan. One of the first things he did as DOM was to empower his crew leaders. "We had crew leaders, but nobody reported to them," Valenta tells *D.O.M.* "It was similar to when I was at Elliot — our crew leaders had a different crew every single time. I wanted to change that to get more consistency between crews, so I assigned four to six people to each of our five crew leaders and I let the crew leaders run their crew."

Valenta allowed the crew leaders to get used to the new crew structure for about six months. Then he turned over more responsibility to them. He informed them that they would now be doing reviews of their team. "You guys are the leaders," Valenta tells his crew leaders. "If there is a problem, you guys need to correct it. I am here to help. I'll sit with you and teach you how to do performance reviews. I'll sit with you during the reviews. But you guys are in charge."

"Basically, I delegated some of the tasks that the crew leaders should have been doing in the first place because they are closer to the people they supervise," Valenta says. "I now assign tasks to the crew leaders, and they spread it out to their people making specific job assignments. The crew leaders quickly bought in to this new concept, and productivity, efficiency and morale increased."

MENTORING

Valenta understands the importance his early mentor Al Marx had in giving him a jump start in his aircraft maintenance career. Likewise, he relies on his crew leaders to mentor new hires at Banyan. "When we get a junior mechanic here or an apprentice, we'll put him with one crew leader for at least 90 days until he gets the feel. And many times he continues on that same crew after the 90-day period is over. But at least he has one person he can go approach to ask questions when he starts working here. He is comfortable with that crew leader and how to talk to him. And it really helps that person to grow as a mechanic."

INVOLVED CHALLENGE

KEEPING EMPLOYEES MOTIVATED

Valenta shares the three things he does to keep his employees motivated:

Keep them involved. “As far as the crew leaders and their seconds in command, I like to keep them involved. I involve them in day-to-day assignments and scheduling. I also have crew leader meetings at least quarterly if not more frequently. We discuss ways we can improve things in the shop and I solicit their input.”

Communicate. “We have a morning huddle every morning at 8:00. It’s for the crew leaders, but everybody tends to show up. We discuss the assignments for the day. We also communicate any new service bulletins or airworthiness directives or any other issue that has come up that can help improve everybody’s knowledge.”

Challenge. “You can give a mechanic the same job of removing that interior every time an inspection comes in, and he going to walk out that door and find another job. We don’t do that. This time he may get the interior, next time he could be pulling an engine and the time after that he may be troubleshooting a pressurization problem. I stress that to the crew leaders, and I make it their goals at review time to do that -- to challenge their people and keep them interested. This helps keep the morale high and keeps them positive about Banyan.”

NEW HIRES

Banyan looks for a positive attitude in new hires. “Attitude is number one around here,” Valenta shares. “We hire for attitude and train for skill. It’s like a family here. So when I bring somebody in, I want somebody with a positive attitude, with an initiative that will fit in so there are no rough edges. Sometimes you don’t make the right selection. You can interview all day long and think you are making the right choice, but you may end up with a bad employee. You have to mold and train that person to where they fit in. If they aren’t a good fit, then there is always that 90-day probation period, and you just need to let them go and bring in somebody else. You need to make that decision at that point instead of just holding on to them hoping they will eventually fit.”

Valenta also shared another tip for hiring new employees. “I think the biggest thing as far as hiring goes is to let the person know what your expectations are. Let him know your views and what your goals are with the company. Our president Don Champion shares his vision to all new hires. I basically do the same thing and stress to all new employees that attitude is a big deal and that initiative is very important to me. Then they know right out of the starting gate what is expected. Every once in a while we need to tweak somebody, but overall it’s worked well. We’ve got some great people here. Of all the places I’ve worked, this is my favorite place.” «

EMPLOYEE EVALUATION

To help Banyan make informed decisions when hiring new employees, the company has implemented a test for all potential new hires with less than three years in aviation. “We went to a company called Industrial Psychology International,” says Kathy Knowles, People Relations Director at Banyan. “They were able to put together a test based on our specific evaluation needs. It is a 2 ½ hour timed test where the potential employee is evaluated for his or her mechanical skills and aptitude.”

“A new hire right out of A&P school could put anything down on a resume, and you wouldn’t know how good he or she really is as a mechanic,” says Valenta. “But with our aptitude test, the people that have scored well and we ended up hiring have excelled as technicians. Now we have the opportunity to evaluate a person’s mechanical aptitude, not just the fact that he or she has an A&P”

“The test has worked so well for us that we are looking at expanding our testing,” shares Knowles. “For example, we are developing a customer service test that we hope to be implementing in the near future.”

For more information on psychological testing visit www.testpublishers.org.