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## Responding To Crisis

*Cabin crew members need to be aware not only of their own role in responding to aviation emergencies, but also of the involvement by many others. An aviation crisis touches everyone from the aircraft crew and passengers to the general public — and to everyone in-between, says the author.*

—  
by

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The most common perception of an aviation crisis is an aircraft accident involving injuries, if not fatalities. But there are many other types of aviation emergencies that can have a significant and widespread impact on many groups of people. Events such as violent weather incidents, near midair collisions, evacuations and hijacking all require appropriate crisis response.

As an aviation psychologist, I know all too well that human nature often prevails over common sense in crisis situations. My area of specialization, termed "Aviation Crisis Responder™," is designed to bridge the gap between the instinctive behavior of human nature on the one hand, and a common sense, conditioned response on the other.

### Responding To Aviation Crisis

The key to aviation crisis response is preparation that goes far beyond emergency training for flight crews, passenger safety announcements and disaster drills for rescue teams. All too often, training is limited to those within the fuselage of the aircraft, and occasionally within the perimeter of the airport. Very little preparation is made by or for the other groups of people that are affected by an aviation crisis.

For common sense to prevail when common sense is

needed most, aviation crisis response must be comprehensive and proactive, rather than spontaneous or after-the-fact.

The current focus of crisis response is much too narrow, and for many reasons our industry must expand its awareness, knowledge and utilization of aviation crisis response techniques. Those individuals in leadership roles in air safety need to become more involved with its broader aspects.

### Range of Impact

To prove this point, let's list most of the many groups of people that can be adversely affected by an aviation crisis. Each of these groups has a range of crisis responses available. First, we will look at their instinctive behavior, which we will call human nature, and then at a conditioned response which we will call common sense.

### Cockpit and Cabin Crew

Of all the groups that we will discuss, the cockpit and cabin crew are the best conditioned to deal with an aviation crisis. This is accomplished through the complex selection process and extensive training.

Crew members have a greater understanding and appre-

ciation of what can go wrong. They know the capabilities and limitations of the aircraft and the operating systems.

Even so, it is human nature to experience high levels of anxiety and stress at times when split-second decisions could make the difference between life and death. Emotional reactions range from fear of losing control, to the frustration of dealing with problems beyond one's control, to a heightened sense of responsibility for the well-being of others. These reactions all affect how crew members will respond to emergencies.

Human nature being what it is, an understanding of individual differences in cognitive and physical abilities, attitudes, perceptions, confidence, training and skill levels are vital to the development of a conditioned response to any crisis.

Education and training enhance the ability of cockpit and cabin crew members to survive and effectively cope with any crisis in a calm, rational and systematic manner.

### **The Needs Of Passengers**

It is sad but true that some passengers have contributed to their own injuries because they were not prepared to respond appropriately to an aviation accident.

Passenger reactions to aircraft emergencies depend on such factors as the nature and severity of the incident, prior crisis experience, and the individual's life situation at the time.

Passengers need more training in order to respond appropriately in case of an emergency. Only then can they take individual responsibility for their safety on board the aircraft.

### **Family and Friends of Crew and Passengers**

Another group seriously affected by an airplane accident is the family and friends of the crew members and passengers. These people generally experience shock, denial, anger, and sometimes guilt after learning of an accident involving someone they know or love. All too often, they become preoccupied with every aspect of the incident. Frustration compounds grief because it can be weeks or months before any definitive answers are known.

Recovery from losing a loved one, just as being a survivor of a plane crash, can take a long time. Sometimes, complete recovery never occurs. Crisis response can vary from development of a phobia to acceptance of the

circumstances surrounding the tragedy.

A conditioned crisis response can be achieved through recognition of normal stress reactions, development of support systems, and the availability of debriefing sessions. General awareness of grief reactions, post-traumatic stress disorders and coping strategies can aid in the adaptation and stress response process.

### **Emergency Workers Are Also Affected**

The negative effect of an airplane crash on rescue teams and other emergency workers is easily overlooked. Although most of these people are trained to deal with serious injuries and severe damage, they are most vulnerable to emotional side effects from their work. Rescue efforts tend to be judged in hindsight, even by the workers themselves.

In recent years, post-crisis interventions have become increasingly utilized. Although some rescue workers deal with loss of life on a daily basis, the magnitude of an aviation accident can still be shocking. As a practical matter, mass casualties are rarely encountered by police, fire and medical personnel.

Conditioned crisis response for rescue workers involves an awareness of human factors, desensitization to magnitude of distraction, and critical incident debriefings.

### **What Airlines Should Do**

It's understandable that the affected airline's objectives are to maintain normal operations and keep the public from developing a negative image of the company.

To achieve these objectives requires the development of emergency plans that are comprehensive enough to include pre-crisis planning, during-crisis procedures, and post-crisis follow-up. For any emergency preparedness program to be effective, it must address the human factors of aviation crisis response.

And like it or not, all airlines are impacted by an aviation accident. Too often, airlines think of themselves as independent from one another, when in fact, more cooperation between airlines is necessary, because they are often looked upon by outsiders as an "industry", not as individual companies.

### **Aircraft Manufacturers Are Affected, Too**

The natural reaction of aircraft manufacturers to an

aviation accident most frequently is self-defense.

Aircraft manufacturers' first concern is their product liability and reputation in the industry and among the flying public. Human nature is to pass-the-buck or stone-wall as much as possible.

A conditioned response is for manufacturers as a group to work closely with the airlines to promote the positive aspects of their safety efforts and results on an on-going basis; rather than just in the wake of an accident.

### **Role of Government Agencies**

Government agencies are sometimes perceived as only wanting and needing to place blame for the cause of an accident. Since their real objective is to determine probable cause and prevent a recurrence, they need to work as hard on their image as they do on their investigations.

Common sense also dictates that government agencies develop a better understanding of the human factors pertaining to aviation safety in general, and to aviation crisis response in particular. To be effective, aviation safety must be treated as a "partnership" between airlines, airframe manufacturers, and their respective governments.

### **Unions Have An Interest**

Unions that represent pilots, flight attendants and mechanics also have a vested interest in aviation crisis response, as well as in protecting the jobs and reputation of their membership.

If unions are to make meaningful contributions to the accident investigation process, they must focus on "e facts. There are technical experts, expertise and experience among union leadership and investigators that can and should be helpful to an impartial evaluation.

### **Legal Profession — Opportunity For Fairness**

There is a public perception that some lawyers exploit aviation tragedies for more than they're worth, without regard for the facts, the aviation industry or the flying public.

Common sense is to be cautious, careful, and to treat every victim of an aviation crisis fairly. In this regard, airlines and airframe manufacturers are also victims of almost every aviation accident.

### **Dealing With The Media**

Another group to be reckoned with is the media. After all, they are going to convey all that is known or suspected about an accident to the general public.

The tendency of the media is to "sensationalize" a plane crash. For them, a dramatic picture is worth more than a thousand words. Unfortunately, there are times when pictures don't tell the whole story, or may even distort the facts.

The natural reaction of the media is to attract viewers or readers, who always seem to be fascinated by aircraft accidents. The media can do a much better job responding to an aviation crisis by assigning knowledgeable reporters who stick to the facts, so that the general public is not unduly alarmed or misled. Gossip and other speculation do a great injustice to their readers and listeners, as well as to the aviation industry.

So airlines need to communicate with the media, making facts available as soon as possible. A relationship must be developed between the airlines and the media before an accident occurs, not afterwards.

### **The Flying Public**

With more than 450 million people flying annually, any aviation crisis will affect many people. These psychological effects will extend from those directly affected to people who were physically distant from the crisis. All of us can readily identify with passengers on board an aircraft during an in-flight emergency. Perhaps that's why the news media, and so many books and movies, feature stories on this subject.

It is human nature for the flying public to become overly concerned with airline safety in the wake of a crash. Changing reservations from one airline to another is common, as is requesting seats near an emergency exit.

Common sense calls for an objective approach to the risks of air travel. The flying public needs to know more about the extraordinary safety record of commercial airlines, and about the many "new and improved" safety measures that are being implemented on a continuing basis.

### **The General Public**

There are many members of the general public who, for one reason or another, have never flown. These are the potential and future customers of the airline industry. Indications are that this group, perhaps from fear of the unknown, is more impacted by an aviation accident than the flying public.

The airline industry needs to convince non-flyers that flying is just as safe as it is convenient and comfortable.

## All In It Together

Now that we've thought about it, it's plain to see that an aviation crisis touches just about everybody.

We've also seen that aviation crisis response is as much of a "system" as an airplane itself. It goes without

saying that a conditioned response to an aviation emergency requires education, training and a better understanding of human behavior. Remember that the key to aviation crisis response is preparation, not just for those aboard the aircraft or at the airport, but for everyone. ♦

*[Adapted from a presentation to the Flight Safety Foundation's 41st Annual International Air Safety Seminar in Sydney, Australia, December 1988 — Ed.]*

# Chasing Money Out The Door

*When researchers wanted a method to encourage test evaluation subjects to realistically simulate the urgency of escape, they appealed to one of modern man's basic instincts.*

Researchers at the Cranfield Institute of Technology in England have developed a way of simulating realistic passenger behavior in an evacuation — giving a bonus to test subjects who get out first. Previous evacuation tests were hampered by an inability to reproduce the panic of a fire station.

During a series of new tests, passengers worked so hard to get a five-pound bonus payment for being

among the first half of the occupants out of a plane that, on three occasions, "it became necessary to halt the evacuation because the number of volunteers attempting to pass through an exit led to a situation in which individuals were physically stuck in the aperture," according to the researchers. ♦

*[From Cabin Safety News, Association of Flight Attendants.]*

### What's Your Input?

Flight Safety Foundation welcomes articles and papers for publication. If you have an article proposal, a completed manuscript or a technical paper that may be appropriate for *Cabin Crew Safety*, please contact the Editor. Submitted materials are evaluated for suitability and a cash stipend is paid upon publication. Request a copy of "Editorial Guidelines for FSF Writers."

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