



FLIGHT SAFETY FOUNDATION

# CABIN CREW SAFETY

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*For Everyone Concerned with the Safety of Flight*

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## **Flight Attendants: Aviation's Under-recognized Safety Resource**

*Meeting the motivational needs of an airline's number one contact with its passengers can make great contributions to passenger safety and corporate goals.*

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by

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Flight attendants have a greater opportunity to influence passengers than any other group in commercial aviation. Marketing executives, sales managers, ticket agents, pilots and telephone reservations people do not have a comparable opportunity to interact with and to positively influence the passengers at the "point of service."

Flight attendants can and do accept the premise that passenger safety, comfort and economics are intertwined with their own career enhancement and job satisfaction. When they accept these goals, customer exposure opportunities become positive for everyone. However, when the flight attendant group looks on either the passengers or on the airline's corporate goals with an adversarial perspective, then a corporate tragedy is in the making. The long-term exposure opportunities will be counterproductive when the flight attendants are at odds with passenger and corporate goals.

One of the most cost effective corporate strategies to gain a customer-perceived advantage over the competition is to invest in improved performance on the part of the flight attendants. An effective investment in improved flight attendant performance is well spent money by an airline. The primary return of improved flight attendant performance will take place in flight during long exposure times. The secondary benefit is that flight attendants are generally the largest single employee group in an airline; they make an effective army of good will ambassadors

for those airlines which have made them proud of their companies and of their personal contributions to corporate success. This good will army can have as much positive impact on the customers as millions of dollars spent on advertising and promotion.

Mark Twain, the well-known American writer and philosopher, had a constructive idea that could be invaluable to present-day airline operations. He put forth a basic common sense principle that is being used as a powerful concept in modern business management practices. Twain said very simply, "Get people in the same boat with you. They will not drill any holes in it. They might even pull an oar, if you will take them where they want to go." When an airline makes a concerted effort to get the flight attendants in the same boat with the stockholders, passengers and management, an astounding edge will be gained over those airlines that treat their flight attendants as if they are in a different boat.

### **Counterproductive Attitudes Were Overcome**

When airlines started hiring flight attendants in the 1930s, a professional nursing background was required to provide for the safety and comfort of the passengers. In less than a decade, some counterproductive policies invaded airline corporate attitudes. The first negative was to

limit the maximum working age to 32 years. This philosophy then extended to restricting the profession to unmarried women. There have been restrictions on weight and the wearing of corrective glasses on the job.

In the 1970s and 1980s, competitive economics and deregulation caused some airlines to focus their economic cost-cutting on flight attendant labor costs. In the process of collective bargaining, the perceived value of the flight attendant as a corporate resource has been reduced. In some instances, this has led to labor disputes and the loss of experienced flight attendants.

Several decades ago, when the 32-year-old age limit was first challenged in the United States as being discriminatory and not related to good business practice, U.S. Senator Margaret Chase Smith joined the flight attendants in their campaign to change the policy. A prominent airline president replied to Senator Smith by writing that young and attractive women were essential to his airline's success. He stated that most of the passengers were male businessmen who entertained sexual fantasies about these young, beautiful flight attendants. He further maintained that business would suffer if the airlines were forced to retain flight attendants into middle age. Senator Smith sent reproduced copies of his letter along with her response and sent them to all of the news services. Her response was "My Dear Mr. Airline President: Are you running an airline or a whorehouse?" Corporate policies banning marriage, motherhood, maturity, males and myopia now have all but disappeared. The only restriction that remains is the physical weight standard, related to safety, job performance or health maintenance, rather than to physical appearance.

## Broader Contributions by Attendants

Most flight attendants are highly motivated to provide safe and excellent services to their passengers. When you walk on an airplane staffed by flight attendants who truly enjoy their jobs, they are easy to spot. This climate of hospitality may be found on small commuters, large airlines and international flag carriers.

A senior flight attendant can be to an airline what a master sergeant is to the army. Like master sergeants, senior flight attendants have had the opportunity to observe everything that is right and wrong in the entire organization. The master sergeants are rumored to be able to run the army better than the generals. In the same vein, it is quite possible that a select group of senior flight attendants could provide airline management with invaluable

suggestions on improving safety, customer service, growth, profitability and management policies.

Another unique contribution that flight attendants could make would be to collect opinions and suggestions from passengers. Flight attendants, with a modest amount of survey interview training, could put the time spent in the air with passengers to invaluable use in gathering passenger opinions and suggestions.

## Attendants Require Motivation Too

Flight attendants have the normal range of human motivations. Most of them want to be productive at meaningful tasks that provide them with a high sense of achievement and contribution, (Besco 1988a and 1989; Chaney, 1987; and Peters & Waterman, 1982). When these motivational needs are recognized and satisfied by an airline, flight attendants make an enormous contribution to improving passenger safety. In addition, significant increases in passenger service, long term growth and profitability are more likely to result.

The airline that treats its flight attendants with a high regard for their professional value will reinforce the feelings of self respect and professional pride that are invaluable in a high performance organization. Airlines may benefit by training their flight attendant supervisors in the techniques on the one-minute reprimand as suggested by Blanchard (1982).

Some persons argue that wages for new flight attendants are not keeping pace with the wages of new hires in other defined groups in the airline industry. Some airlines do not compensate flight attendants during their two- to six-week initial training periods. The first year salaries of some airlines are not competitive with entry level wages paid by many less responsible jobs. The industry will benefit by reevaluating the contribution of the flight attendants and making provisions for attracting the level of applicants that will insure long term corporate needs will be met.

## Positive Leadership Worth the Cost

The benefits of providing top-level leadership to flight attendants have been underestimated. Consequently, there have been many supervisors who perceive their function as one of ensuring compliance with dress codes and procedural details. The supervisors are given limited authority to support the flight attendants when problems arise with passenger boarding, catering, cabin service, maintenance and crew scheduling. As a result, supervisors may be

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perceived by some flight attendants as those who administer discipline and punishment for rule violations but who cannot provide organizational support when inter-departmental problems arise.

The negative effects of limiting the role of the supervisor to procedures and rules monitor have been discussed by Bennis and Nanus (1985), Besco (1989), Blanchard (1982), Chaney (1987) and Peters & Waterman (1982). They all emphasize the potential long-term corporate benefits of providing positive leadership. The Professional Performance Analysis Checklist (Besco, 1988b and 1990) lists the following eight factors to consider and analyze when dysfunctional leadership becomes a negative influence on corporate success.

1. Does an individual have to make sacrifices to accept a position of leadership?
2. Are leaders attracted to the supervisory position to escape some factors perceived as undesirable in their current situations or positions?
3. Do potential new leaders seek the supervisory position primarily to enhance their feelings of self-respect or to compensate for low self-esteem?
4. Does disrespect for the profession play a role in attracting new leaders who view the supervisory position as a status symbol?
5. Are supervisors and leaders expected to be upper management yea-sayers?
6. Do supervisory practices become dysfunctional by serving the goals of specific organizations ahead of the overall objectives of the entire enterprise?
7. Are personal biases, prejudices and subjective practices by supervisors stifling the work group performance?
8. Are there any indications that leaders are on power trips in dealing with their work groups.

This checklist can be used to identify the organizationally pathogenic influences that contribute to degrading the performance of flight attendants. Reason (1988) identifies the concept of pathogens and negative organizational factors which undermine safety and add to the general risk levels present in flight operations. The same concept of pathogens is applicable to the flight attendant's working environment.

Training programs for flight attendants are frequently viewed as fulfillment of a government-mandated pro-

gram. Airline flight attendant training programs may not be adequately perceived as an investment that will have economic returns; flight attendant training may be viewed as an economic burden.

Flight attendants as a group have performed with admirable success in inflight emergencies, hijackings and ground evacuations. The evacuation performances of flight attendants have undoubtedly saved many lives and reduced injuries. This fact alone has probably more than paid for the cost of flight attendant evacuation training.

## Emphasize Flight Attendant Value

A reemphasis of the safety contribution and economic value of the flight attendant function is recommended. Now is an opportune time to revitalize this employee group's contribution to corporate success. Such an investment in corporate resources would help ensure that full value will be received from the improved performance of the flight attendants — the entire industry will benefit by attracting well-qualified applicants. An investment in training programs will reflect proven business and common sense customer relations principles that can contribute to improved safety margins, reap competitive advantages and provide economic returns.

There is a need to establish communications links between upper management and the wisdom of the experienced flight attendants; allied to that is the need to develop and utilize the interviewing skills of the flight attendants to gather customer opinions and suggestions.

First-line supervisors could be given the responsibility of identifying high-performing individuals. The identification of more effective procedures and techniques would be welcomed by most supervisors and flight attendants. This is the process that Blanchard

(1982) identifies as "catching them doing something right." These high performers could be surveyed to see what special knowledge, skills and attitudes they bring to their jobs. Specific techniques and procedures which have been particularly effective could be incorporated into the training programs for all flight attendants. Recognition and rewards could be implemented for those individuals and their supervisors to encourage future improvements.

For those airlines that respond to this opportunity, they will need to prepare themselves for growth in safety margins, efficiency, market share, passenger miles, competitive advantage and profitability.

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*The evacuation performances of flight attendants have undoubtedly saved many lives ...*

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