How to prevent hazardous emotions in the cockpit.

Angry Birds

BY HEATHER BALDWIN

In May 2011, a European regional airline captain, in what he thought was jovial banter, called his first officer (FO) a derogatory name during preflight preparations. Later, he ignored the FO's advice to avoid dark storm clouds. The FO, still seething from the preflight put-down and now furious about the heavy turbulence they were encountering, called the captain a "control freak," and a heated argument ensued. They flew the return trip in virtual silence, and both pilots subsequently were fired for their unprofessional and unsafe conduct. [1]

While the situation falls at the extreme of pilot anger and miscommunication, it highlights the complexities of cockpit communication. Pilots often fly with crewmembers they barely know — or have never met — and with whom they may well have innate personality conflicts. If they are former military, they may have firm notions about rank and hierarchy that are not shared by their flying partner. They may be dealing with marital or financial difficulties that make them more irritable than usual. They might have slept poorly in an unfamiliar hotel in a far-flung time

zone. Add to all that the high-pressure environment of commercial flight — and the inability of pilots to "step out of the office" and walk off anger — and it's easy to see how a brusque, unthinking comment can bruise an ego, fuel a temper and become the source of a multi-day standoff.

"Negative interactions between cockpit crewmembers can contribute to an environment where people feel unsafe or unsure about saying what's on their mind," said Ron Nielsen, a retired US Airways captain, professional counselor and founder of FearlessFlight. "I have been in many crew situations where 'elephants' in the cockpit were as much a part of the crew as either of the pilots." Nielsen and other behavioral specialists say that eliminating these elephants and maintaining a congenial, professional relationship in the cockpit is a matter of learning good relationship-building and conflict-resolution skills. Here are five steps for becoming better at both:

Know Your Style

Better understanding your flying partner starts with better understanding yourself, said Nielsen, who recommends that all pilots take the DISC personality assessment.[2] When Nielsen used to counsel with "difficult" pilots, one of his first moves was to administer a DISC assessment, which helps people better understand their own behavioral style and what other behavioral styles are likely to cause conflict or tension. This knowledge minimizes personality clashes by helping pilots understand the "why" behind their differences.

Nielsen once counseled a captain whose DISC assessment revealed that he highly valued both adherence to standards and not imposing his will on others. These values would often clash when an FO wasn't exactly following procedures but the captain was reluctant to force the issue. "The captain would just sit there and wait," Nielsen recalled. "It took the FO about three seconds to get steamed, and then there was a war in the cockpit." Once the captain understood these aspects of his personality and became conscious of how they were affecting his

FOs, he made some changes and his workplace relationships improved dramatically.

Seek to Understand

When you first meet the person with whom you'll be flying on a trip, be careful not to judge too quickly, advised Michael Crom, executive vice president and chief learning officer at Dale Carnegie & Associates. "Check your assumptions; they may not be accurate," said Crom.

If someone initially comes across as cold, it may simply mean they are slow to warm up to unfamiliar people, not that they are difficult. Or if you make a joke and the other pilot doesn't react, it doesn't mean that person is a jerk, Crom said. It could mean that he or she has heard the joke 10 times before, or is a serious person, or is thinking hard about something else and not able to process the joke while processing the other information. Be open to other possibilities. Too-quick judgments lead to misunderstanding and miscommunication.

Be Slow to Anger

Pilots can head off personal conflict before it ever gets started by making a conscious decision to keep their anger in check. "The things that start arguments seem important in the moment, but when you think about it later, you realize they were really petty," said Doug Staneart, chief executive officer of The Leaders Institute, an organization focused on next-generation leadership development.

For instance, the captain who called his FO a derogatory name was certainly unprofessional, but had the FO not allowed it to light the flames of anger, both pilots might still be employed. "The natural human reaction when we feel insulted or offended is to get angry and respond in kind," said Staneart. "But generally people aren't intentionally trying to make the other person mad."

"You've got to be able to distinguish between what was said and your interpretation of what was said," added Larry Barkan, an expert in conflict resolution and associate of The Pivotal Factor, a consulting firm. The vast majority of the time people are not aware that they have caused offense and did not mean to do so. "Hold onto

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your anger until you understand the other person's intent," said Barkan. "Be willing to give up being right and making the other person wrong."

Question Mistakes

Occasionally, one pilot needs to point out another's mistake. To bring attention to an error without creating hostility, use a question, said Staneart. Questions feel less threatening than direct orders or factual statements, so they are more likely to keep the atmosphere congenial.

For instance, if an FO shows no sign of initiating the descent at the right time, the captain could say, "Hey, would you mind beginning the descent in the next five to ten miles?" Or if a pilot misses an item on a checklist, the other could say, "Could you double check those last three items?" This approach will elicit cooperation and appreciation for cool handling of a lapse, whereas an admonition or biting remark will create animosity.

Unfortunately, the latter approach is all too common. Nielsen once flew with a captain who painstakingly adhered to standard operating procedures. One day after about three legs, the captain called for a checklist, and Nielsen started calling the items. "I'd done it about 50,000 times

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and even though it [the checklist] was in front of me, he could tell I was doing it from memory," he said. "He let me get about two-thirds of the way down the list and then he said, 'Read the [expletive] checklist!' I'd been doing this all trip, so obviously his ire had been gradually rising until he finally blew."

Had the captain said, "Hey, Ron, could you reference the checklist more accurately?" Nielsen said he'd have been happy to comply. Instead, with just a few heated words, the captain destroyed their working relationship for the remainder of the trip.

Speak Up

No matter how well someone manages cockpit relationships, there will be times when a flying partner causes feelings of anger, frustration, offense or other negative emotions. When that happens, speak up as soon as it is feasible, because silence gives tacit approval to the action, fosters misunderstanding and is unfair to the offender, who likely has no idea he or she caused bad feelings.

Start by asking permission. Questions such as "Can I give you feedback on something?" or "Can I tell you how your last comment landed with me?" are good openers and will prepare the person to receive input. Barkan likens the "permission" question to letting someone know you are going to throw a ball. "If I throw you a ball without telling you it's coming, you might not catch it because you aren't ready," said Barkan. "It's the same thing in resolving conflict."

Next, describe how their words or behavior impacted you and what you'd like the person to do instead. For example,

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"When you swear at me, it feels demeaning. When you'd like me to do something differently, my request is that you point out the problem without using profanity." Then leave it there. Many people make the mistake of going on to explain themselves, but that's a trap.

"Use as few words as possible because the more you explain yourself, the weaker your argument becomes," said Barkan. "If you get into the reasons you feel insulted or offended, you'll wind up in a discussion of whether your reasons are valid."

Last, gain commitment by asking, "Will you do that?" Don't ask "Can you?" or "Could you?" or "Will you try?" And make sure your tone of voice is neutral so the other person doesn't feel threatened or challenged. Most of the time, you'll get a "yes" and the conflict will be resolved, paving the way for a positive working relationship. If you get a "no," seek to understand the other pilot's point of view with genuine curiosity, not judgment.

In an emergency, safety must take precedence over worries about interpersonal relationships. If the left engine is on fire, the captain shouldn't be fretting about how to best communicate this. But those situations are rare. The rest of the time, it's worth paying attention to the critical skills of relationship building and conflict resolution in order to create a more

cooperative, more enjoyable and ultimately safer working environment.

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Notes

1. *Daily Mail Online*. April 19, 2012.

2. DISC, or DiSC, is a behavioral model developed by William Moulton Marston, a psychologist. As described in Marston's 1928 book *Emotions of Normal People*, the model comprises four primary behavioral styles: dominance, inducement, submission and compliance. DISC self-assessments are available via the Internet.

'Innerview' Conversation Starters

Cockpit conversations can be tricky. What do you talk about with a person you've never met and with whom, based on initial impressions, it seems you have little in common? The age-old advice about avoiding conversational minefields such as politics and religion still holds true today, and smart pilots will sidestep these topics. So how do you start a good conversation that builds a positive relationship?

Ask your flying partner about himself or herself, says Michael Crom, executive vice president and chief learning officer, Dale Carnegie & Associates. "Most people like to talk about themselves, and if you're interested in *me*, that's a pretty interesting topic," said Crom. Furthermore, by getting co-workers to open up about their backgrounds, their hobbies, their families and more, you will better understand them, decreasing the likelihood of conflict.

The key to doing this well is to plan ahead. Crom and his team arm clients with a list of "innerview" questions so they are always prepared to build relationships and gain insights into others. The questions, he said, should not feel like an interrogation but should be sprinkled naturally into conversations. When delivered with an attitude of genuine interest and nonjudgment, they help to open the lines of communication so pilots better understand and appreciate their flying partners and foster a positive atmosphere in the cockpit. Here are some examples:

Factual Questions

Where did you grow up?

What kind of activities were you involved with as a child?

What was your first job?

Where did you go to school?

How long have you worked here?

What is your family situation?

What do you do outside of work?

Causative Questions

Why did you pick that particular school?

How did you happen to work for this company?

How did you get involved with that particular hobby?

Value-Based Questions

Tell me about a person who had a major impact on your life.

Tell me about a turning point in your life.

Tell me about a high point in your life.

What was a particularly low point for you? What got you through it?

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