

Captains: When the Honeymoon is Over

By Capt. Jean E. Harper

The day I upgraded to Captain at United Airlines was the proudest and most thrilling high point of my entire professional life. As I was handed that new size 6¾ hat with the gold leaves on the bill, the near-heavenly rush made all the work, setbacks and sacrifices of the previous twenty-six years all worth it.

For a long time I had actively prepared myself, aiming for a standard that was my idea of what a captain ought to be—knowledgeable, professional and worthy of the responsibility for the safe operation of a multi-million dollar aircraft and the lives of all the people inside it. I would be friendly and easy to work with, instilling confidence and demonstrating the same respect for subordinate crew members that I expected of them. And when the trip was done, I wanted that person's experience of flying with me to be one that was remembered positively—that we both learned something new, and had fun in the process. I believed that I had retained the best, and discarded the worst, of what I'd observed from captains and first officers (copilots) with whom I'd worked in my previous fourteen years as a pilot crewmember with United.

Of course I wasn't so naïve as to expect that all crew relationships would be harmonious just for my intending them to be so. I knew there would be the occasional personality conflict, some of which might be aggravated by my 'non-standard' gender. But I believed I had the most difficult scenarios sufficiently pre-rehearsed so there would be few problems. I was also confident that my company would, as all captains have been promised, back me up and uphold my authority as long as any decision I made was both safe and legal.

After an exhilarating first flight as captain (with my own husband in the right seat!) followed by an Operating Experience line with an exceptionally skilled, good-to-work-with former Air Force pilot, I was certain I had found my perfect niche. As another female new captain said, in the glow of her own beginnings, "I was born to do this."

Trouble in paradise

And then reality set in.

I was sincerely surprised to encounter some first officers who appeared to be complacent or sloppy about adhering to Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), company policies and even some Federal Aviation Regulations (FARs). They didn't seem to be heeding my example or picking up on any of my leads as to how I expected the flight to be conducted. Well, I couldn't let that slide—after all, I was the captain. But I must admit that the first time I felt sufficiently compelled to speak up about a copilot's non- (or sub-) standard performance—which I made sure I backed up with the appropriate flight manual reference—my stomach was in knots and I had a difficult time getting the words out. His feelings were hurt, and the cockpit was tense and quiet for a long time. Somehow I didn't feel so wonderful when I saw the reflection of my four-stripe epaulet in the side window.

Get used to it, Jean I reminded myself. *It's part of your job.*

Nonetheless, I began to dread occasions when I would have to 'have a talk' with someone. Being on reserve and working with a different copilot every flight didn't help matters, either. When I knew I was only going to spend one day with someone whose manner was not conducive to smoother cockpit operation, I'd sometimes fall back on old habits that worked when I was a copilot and flight engineer—I'd keep silent and endure the aggravation. I may have been the Pilot In Command, but the price of firing a verbal bullet—no matter how tactfully worded—was high.

And there were times, after a busy few days at home with the kids or the stress of an unusually grueling trip, that I just didn't have the heart for a confrontation.

I love my job, but...

Although the majority of my working relationships were satisfactory, there were some that caught me completely blindsided. The following are some of the unpleasant surprises I encountered in my first year in the left seat:

- The first officer who was so put out at having to work with me that he would respond coldly in one-word answers, and would do the absolute minimum, but only after verbal prodding.
- The first officer who reacted to every command I made (including calls for checklists) as if it were a personal affront, and who refused to participate in an Irregular Procedure because he'd "...done the same one just last week."
- The former commuter airline captain whose obvious disdain for my choices, knowledge and even flying skill made it plain who he felt the "real" captain was.
- The older ex-Other Airline pilot who spoke to me in an inappropriately commanding manner and who said goodbye at the end of the trip by mocking my speech in a high-pitched, sing-song chant.
- The first officer who tried to control every aspect of the aircraft operation when it was his leg (not consistent with UAL procedures), including beating me to the radio whenever possible.
- The nonstop talker whose entire discourse with me sounded as if he was addressing his wife.
- The first officer whose unnecessary and startling exclamations while I was taxiing ("Look out for that truck!" "Watch your wing tip!" "Careful of the engine clearance!") conveyed a distrustful attitude that was further expressed in a critical 'debriefing' of his idea of my performance as a captain.

The last straw came when I was paired with a first officer whose dramatic double-take upon meeting me in flight operations was followed by cockpit discourse that was arrogant, patronizing and pointedly insulting—all delivered with a friendly grin and a jovial manner. No, I didn't sit and take it in silence, but he didn't lay off until it was obvious I was close to losing my temper.

Clearly I was doing something wrong. Was I radiating an aura of insecurity because I was a new captain, therefore inviting disrespectful bullying? Was I inadvertently implying some kind of 'authority void,' unconsciously inviting the junior crew member to take charge? Never, in the entire time I'd been a flight engineer or a copilot, would I have dreamed of behaving towards a captain the way some of my first officers had been treating me.

Help!

I sought the advice of a strong captain whose command and leadership skills I respected. He stated that it was important to establish authority early in the game, especially since I am barely five-foot-three; and—to an older copilot—a kid-sisterly-looking female. He advised me to conduct a thorough preflight briefing, clearly stating expectations—and if, at any time during the flight the copilot did not do exactly as I said, to: A) remind him of that to which he had agreed; and, if that approach failed: B) to have him removed from the flight. I winced at the thought of the latter, but decided to give his approach a try. I had always put getting along at a high priority, but maybe compatibility wasn't as important as maintaining control.

The sad result of that experiment, which only lasted for two flights, was that the first copilot acted like he was afraid of me, and the second one (after two reminders, then a more strongly-worded one) blew up and almost walked off the airplane. Although horrified at his reaction, I

retained my composure and pointed out the flight manual reference to the procedure he'd violated (thus proving I was 'right'), which only insulted him further.

The remaining leg together was the most tense and uncomfortable I'd ever experienced. I spent an unproductive half-hour on the phone that night with a duty flight manager, and was met by a chief pilot in the terminal the next day. After hearing my side of the story, he said I needed to deal with interpersonal conflicts through our union's Professional Standards committee—which, admittedly, I'd forgotten all about in the heat of the moment. He also advised me not to run the cockpit in such a "domineering and controlling" manner and that I "lighten up."

The end result was that I felt betrayed by a system I feared wouldn't support me at all, and that everything I tried to do right had failed. No, I wasn't disappointed with the friend whose well-intentioned advice had backfired—but what worked for him clearly didn't work for me. I had strived to be patient with myself in the beginning, but by this time I was out of the rookie stage and things still weren't much better. It was more than frustrating, it was frightening. If I couldn't manage everyday situations in minor matters, what might happen in a real emergency?

Why aren't we having fun yet?

By this point, the preceding events had taken a noticeable toll on my confidence. Here I was, supposedly at the high point of my career, and I had never so consistently enjoyed my job less. I recalled having nowhere near as high a proportion of pointlessly negative experiences when I was in the right and side seats. Was it because I was better at *taking* orders than I was at giving them...and could that possibly be because I was...female? I strenuously rejected that thought, as I'd observed other women captains who seemed to be doing a perfectly acceptable job—and, most of the time, so did I. Nonetheless, a destructive thought crept its way into my consciousness: *Maybe I'm not cut out to be a captain after all.*

Out of curiosity, I tabulated from my logbook a two-year overview of my experiences in the left seat, with sixty-three crew pairings represented. Although the majority—a substantial 82%—fell into the Acceptable category (Excellent 9%, Good 56% and Okay 17%), the remaining 18% (Uncomfortable 9% and Unacceptable 9%) was way too high...and those incidents seemed to be poisoning the rest of my work experience.

For a time I slogged along, hoping to figure out my problems by myself. After all, it's embarrassing to admit that you're not doing a very effective job as a captain, or that recognizing subtle early clues of trouble can be as difficult as settling a full-blown conflict later on. Acting 'powerful' never felt natural to me—I preferred to lead by example. That approach worked until the month I flew with an abrasive female ex-military new-hire who was confrontational and resistant to direction. I could see she was young and had a number of things to learn about civilian aviation, so I did my best to be a patient and tolerant mentor. By the end of that month, however, I felt more like a punching bag than a captain.

Call in the cavalry

United's required Command/Leadership/Resource (C/L/R—CRM as an industry term) training course for captains came a lot later than I would have liked. Even then, it still did not adequately address specific behavioral changes for how to get from one's present less-than-ideal point to the described goal of being an Effective Captain. I decided to seek guidance from outside the confines of my airline, and even the aviation industry itself. My husband suggested an assertiveness training course run by the company for which he had once been a corporate pilot. It was a most enlightening and amusing class, designed to educate subordinate employees on methods of

verbally and emotionally defending themselves from abusive superiors. But my problem was, I felt like an abused *boss!*

Slowly the light began to come on. I read books on assertiveness training, interpersonal communication in the business world and—most helpful of all—studies on the divergence of traditionally male and female communication styles.

I began to look more deeply into the everyday work experiences of my peers, both men and women. To my dismay and relief, it turned out that all of them had gone through similar upgrade transition pains, and in about the same 'good-to-not-good' ratios. All blamed themselves for not having handled their situations better—and, not surprisingly, admitted that their self-confidence had suffered as a result.

The honesty of these friends and fellow pilots helped me see that I wasn't alone in problems of this nature—and, in the process, they too felt relieved of some of the burdens they had been stoically carrying.

Ain't equality grand?

The most interesting aspect of my research was the issue of male/female communication differences. Airline piloting has always been a totally or strongly male-dominated profession—and despite significant gains made by women in this field in the past few decades, the gender imbalance isn't likely to change drastically in our lifetimes.

Women pilots, having spent a large part their lives flying mostly with men, have figured out how to effectively blend in, learn from, take with a grain of salt when necessary and go with the flow of male communication styles. And, from some fine mentors we've all had (who statistically are more likely to have been men) female aviators have been indoctrinated in the predominant communication style of this profession.

The other significant area of study addressed generalized personality traits that can be found throughout the entire population. Suggestions included ways to recognize, incorporate and consistently practice the best of these qualities in one's personal and working relationships. The good news gleaned from all this professional advice is that the best style for each person to adopt is *his or her own*—enhanced to best advantage—and any changes offered are sufficiently gradual so as not to cause individuals to feel as if they are 'acting', as I so painfully learned the hard way.

Help is all around us

A few months later I was assigned to fly with the first officer with whom I'd had that nasty cockpit altercation. We both felt a little sick about the pairing, but were civil to one another in the crew room. Actually, I'd been hoping I could work with him again. I figured that by the time a person becomes a captain, it's time for her to grow up and face her fears directly. Flight safety, above all else, was the bottom line. So when I got to the cockpit, I did something for him that no past captain ever had the courage to do for me, even when it was warranted—I apologized.

He relaxed visibly, and the ice between us thawed in seconds. We both understood I had the right and responsibility to correct a crewmember's performance, but I went about it the wrong way. He was remarkably understanding, and appreciated what I said. He confessed that he too had been approached by the chief pilot, who gave him a sharp talking-to about following captain's orders. I never knew about that...but in clearing the air, a nagging concern was also put to rest. Apparently the company had backed me up after all.

For the rest of the trip his cockpit discipline and standard of performance could not have been better. We've been on good terms ever since.

Captains: When the Honeymoon is Over—Part II

"Why can't a woman be more like a man?"

--Doctor Doolittle

"Sexism in our society hurts both men and women."

--Communication Between the Sexes

Researching the subject of gender differences caused me a few twinges of discomfort. After all, my sister pilots and I have expended a lot of time and energy (especially in the early years) insisting that, as far as piloting skills were concerned, there was **no** difference; or at least none valid enough to deny us entry into previously all-male cockpits.

Furthermore, the generalizations presented in these books seemed to portray both sexes in the lowest common denominators possible, apparently reinforcing the same damaging stereotypes that professional people have worked so hard to eliminate.

The next disconcerting moment came when I realized just how closely I resembled the 'typical woman' in those pages.

Yes, Virginia, there is a difference

The purpose of summarizing 'traditional' gender differences is not to induce paranoia in any person who recognizes such behaviors in him or herself. It's also not meant to suggest that such differences aren't appropriate in a cockpit environment; on the contrary, being true to the *person you are* is crucial to honest and effective communication. Deborah Tannen, Ph.D. states in her book *Talking from Nine to Five*: "Women's and men's styles are equally valid, and each has its own logic. If problems occur, it is because of a difference of style."

While it is true that divergent styles are not necessarily gender-exclusive, the probability of miscommunication is highest where the gap is greatest—between males and females. An awareness of potential roadblocks to communication can help people find a way around them.

The way it was

When I took my first flying lessons as a teenager, I continually reminded myself that I was more than just an 'ordinary woman'. What may have seemed like conceit was actually an attempt to distance myself from the prevailing feminine legacy of helplessness, incompetence and deference to men. It was not womankind or my gender I had a problem with, it was the stereotype.

The book *Communication Between the Sexes* by Stewart, Stewart, Friedley and Cooper explains that gender expectations cause boys and girls to be raised quite differently. Infant girls tend to be held and nurtured more than boys, and mothers communicate more and better with a daughter than with a son. Almost from birth, gender-appropriate behavior is rewarded, while the opposite is discouraged—most harshly in boys.

A child's gender identity is firmly established by the age of three, after which it becomes self-sustaining. At this point, girls become other-directed and nurturing while boys behave in an aggressive and self-assertive manner. Girls' relationships are based on reciprocity and cooperation,

while boys struggle and compete to establish themselves as the dominant member of the playground hierarchy.

By high school age, boys want to attract an audience and constantly try to out-do each other; however, showing off or even speaking assertively is discouraged in girls as 'unladylike' or 'bossy'. Boys' aggression is mostly physical, and girls' tends to be verbal. Boys excel in the visual-spatial, while girls show superiority in fine motor skills. Boys' greatest fear is retaliation from an authority figure, while girls fear the loss of acceptance and love. On the whole, each gender supports and sustains the other's style.

So what kind of adults does that make us?

Women want to be liked, men want power; women are 'permitted' to show their emotions, men are expected to hide them; assertiveness is seen as unfeminine, while aggressiveness is praised in men.

Women in non-traditional career fields defy cultural norms. In doing so, they have helped break down stereotypical attitudes, updating society's idea of what women could be. Nonetheless, it can be a pretty tall order to rise above a gender-restrictive upbringing, and to expect the general populace to accept unconventional females. Some less obvious gender-based factors to women taking a back seat—even when she's in the left seat—continue to influence our professional lives.

Women are passive, men are aggressive

While this statement is certainly not true for all people, observed gender-based tendencies seem to bear out this contention.

•Women wait to be chosen, men actively promote themselves

This is not a problem in airlines with seniority systems, but is partly to blame for the 'glass ceiling' phenomenon in other work environments. When I was in general aviation, I was passed over on several occasions for flying jobs that were given to men, some with considerably less flying experience than I had. Although I fumed over what I considered to be blatant sexism, in retrospect I didn't promote myself as persistently as the men did. I assumed that I should mention my qualifications and willingness to work only once, so as not to be a pest.

•Men boast, women don't

While bragging is not an admirable quality in anyone, it is more likely to be tolerated in men and taken as a sign of confidence. Women tend to regard boasting as juvenile and distasteful, and most refuse to participate in it; besides, such behavior in women is considered socially unacceptable.

Unfortunately, that kind of reticence can be interpreted as never having accomplished anything worth mentioning. In truth, refraining from boasting doesn't necessarily indicate a woman's lack of confidence, but rather a reluctance to reveal the level of confidence she really feels.

•Men conceal their weaknesses, women conceal their strengths

This attitude goes hand-in-hand with the prevalent idea that women shouldn't 'blow their own horn,' a socially unacceptable trait. Females tend to be facilitators in a conversation, saying and doing things to make the other person feel good about him or herself; but in the process, her own value can sometimes go unnoticed. Unfortunately, when she doesn't mention her background and

qualifications, few people assume she has the impressive wealth of experience that she does—even when she's wearing four stripes. Concealing a strength is not the same as refraining from boasting, but it can feel like that to a socially-sensitive woman...usually to her detriment.

•Men must always appear certain—women aren't expected to

Some men have a problem admitting to a mistake or an uncertainty, and would rather not reveal a fault if they don't absolutely have to. Women, on the other hand, have less emotional investment in that area. Their lack of hesitation about admitting to a shortcoming or gap in knowledge is honest communication, but reflects poorly on her. Women downplay their certainty, while men downplay their doubts.

•Women are hesitant to complain—men aren't

No woman, especially in as male-dominated a field as airline flying, wants to stand out as a whiner, complainer or someone who's "...too sensitive and delicate to handle the job." So, because it is considered bad form for her to speak up when someone or something negatively affects her, she rarely does—even when a complaint is warranted. The silence of an unfairly-treated employee implies 'business as usual' when superiors are unaware of legitimate objections.

•Men seek credit for their work—women avoid it

Women are usually quick to admit to a poor decision, but seem to dodge accepting full credit, even when it is due. A woman supervisor would say "we" when accepting a compliment for a well-done group project, whereas a man in a similar situation is more likely to say "I". Clearly the woman's choice of words is more appropriate, but the man's portrays him in a more positive light. Women, as a whole, are less comfortable standing out, and prefer to be team players rather than solo performers.

•Men stick to their guns—women cave in too quickly

One of the more negative aspects of a 'typical' male personality is that he might speak loudly and with great conviction, regardless of anyone else's input, even when he is wrong. Women have less problem listening to and considering another's opinion or suggestions—a positive quality in a captain. What is **not** good is that even a woman who is sure of herself will sometimes, when challenged forcefully enough, back down—*even when she is right!* Such capitulation erodes authority—and in our line of work, that could have catastrophic consequences.

Another 'typical' female trait is thoroughness and attention to detail. Women know their jobs much better than they usually let on—and that knowledge must be readily referenced whenever her judgment is questioned. A man's forceful challenge should be interpreted as "Can you substantiate your claim?" rather than "You're wrong, lady!"

•Men can brawl verbally and still get along—women can't

"Ritual fighting" is the term for a disagreement that escalates into loud, angry argument, heated opinions, name-calling, vulgarities—often over trivial issues. Some men actually enjoy this; women find the practice abhorrent. Women take insults personally, and find it impossible to do their best in a contentious situation.

It's important to recognize such disturbing behavior for nothing more than what it is—a divergent conversational style in which she has every right to refuse to participate.

•***Real men don't ask for help***

'Typical' men are hesitant to ask for someone else's input because it might imply weakness or a lack of self-sufficiency. Women, on the other hand, seem unaware that they can make a negative impression by asking for information. It must be remembered that one of the vital elements of effective CRM (Crew Resource Management) is the timely gathering of relevant information, which *means* asking questions.

Sometimes a strong-willed man interprets an inquiry from a female captain as an invitation for him to take over and make the decision—something she never intended! Author Tannen suggests a better way of soliciting information from such a person might be "I'll make the decision, but I'd like your opinion."

•***Small talk is only small if you're female***

A man whose conversation includes his home life is considered to be a responsible, mature family man. A woman who talks about her family on the job risks being judged not as the Pilot in Command, but as 'Little Mother'. While friendly conversation shouldn't be avoided out of fear of misinterpretation, it can sometimes be helpful to keep the non-work-related talk to a minimum until the captain is sure such pleasantries will not be a detraction from her command authority.

Conversational inequalities

Small elements of typical women's conversation give the impression of uncertainty or insecurity (therefore, incompetence) when they are being received by someone who is *not tuned in to her speaking style*.

•***Small words that weaken***

Habitually prefacing statements with words such as "Perhaps..." or "I think..." is often interpreted as indecisiveness in a woman, but politeness in a man. Other detrimental expressions are 'tags'—statements that end in "...isn't it?" "...don't you think?" or weakening phrases such as "Well, you know..." "Kind of..." Disclaimers such as "Well, I don't know much about this, but..." are often used as conversational smoothers rather than an honest profession of ignorance.

A woman could be perfectly sure of what she is saying, but may unconsciously use such expressions without realizing their negative impact on the listener. This includes self-deprecating comments that might not be taken in jest, even if they were intended that way.

•***Whoever said I was apologizing?***

Women, far more than men, say "I'm sorry" as a correction to a statement. Though not intended as an apology, it comes across that way when the expression is overused, and can backfire (putting her in the 'one down' position) when used to excess. Women also tend to make more self-deprecating comments, which is hypothesized to be a form of 'apologizing' for being successful.

Another polite but commonly overused expression is "Thank you", if it is intended merely as a conversational closer rather than a sincere expression of gratitude. Some men think "Why does she keep thanking me just for doing my job?"

It is interesting to note, however, that the occasional use of the word "Please"—as in "Flaps One, please" (a command, not a request) was not mentioned by any of the linguistic experts as a detraction from the strength of an order. This is probably because it is used by both genders and is understood to be courtesy, or just an individual's style.

•***What a voice!***

Voice inflections can betray a speaker's confidence in herself, or send a message she never intended. Men's typical downward inflection (even if they're not really sure) indicates certainty; women's typical upward inflection implies she is seeking approval. And higher-pitched, softer voices—usually female—sound less authoritative than louder, more deeply-pitched ones.

•***The 'Strong, silent' myth***

Men in business situations talk more than women do (despite the popular misconception), and dominating a conversation is a common way of controlling it. Men also interrupt more, for the same reason. When women interrupt, it is to add to, sustain or facilitate the conversation. Of course, for an interruption to succeed, the other party must cooperate by being the first one to back off.

Women are more inclined to relinquish center stage, and men are more willing to claim it. Men's topic shifts can be more abrupt—as if he is saying "Okay, I'm done with this subject." A woman generally has more sensitivity to the person with whom she is speaking, and will make her topic shifts in a more gradual, polite manner.

Men are more adept at 'banter', and some use it to talk their way out of work they don't feel like doing, or directions they don't care to follow. The woman—even if she's in charge—is perplexed by the lack of productivity; and, weary of the verbal barrage and no action, just does the work herself.

•***Heard any good jokes lately?***

Men feel more comfortable working with women who have a relaxed and easy sense of humor. Delightful as it can be, even humor can be misused as a tool of control. It has been observed that men joke around more than women normally do. There's nothing wrong with that—it's fun to deliver a great punchline and have it roundly appreciated.

It is an erosion of authority, however, if a subordinate crewmember is the initiator of so much 'cutting-up' (including joking insults—a form of ritual fighting) that the captain finds herself drawn into an overly jocular atmosphere in which she never intended to participate. Later, when it's time to get down to work, she is surprised to not be taken seriously when she has something meaningful to say.

Female issues of another kind

Women have been accused of having 'thin skin', thus implying their unsuitability for command positions. But columnist Meg Greenfield noted "It's the only kind of skin human beings come with." Men can be just as emotionally sensitive, but are generally more adept at concealing it.

•***Women don't rub in their authority***

Women generally don't feel the need to throw their weight around or pull rank, and may downplay their authority so as not to appear bossy. They prefer to think of themselves as team leaders, establishing a sense of equality with coworkers and a comfortable working environment. In order to avoid appearing pushy (which is socially unacceptable) she may rephrase orders as suggestions, and give reasons even when none were needed.

•***Was that an order she just gave me?***

Women often prefer to utilize an indirect speaking style, which is more comfortable and natural to her. There is nothing wrong with that either, as long as her crewmember understands the meaning. Where problems occur is when a man ignores a gently-worded statement because he did not recognize it to be a command. The assumption is that directness means business; indirectness does not carry the same weight or urgency, and can be confusing or unclear.

•Let the other person feel important

Some women in positions of authority are concerned about allowing others, especially male subordinates, to 'save face'. In doing so, a female captain may temporarily adopt the role of novice or listener to allow a male crewmember to feel more comfortable around her—although this can backfire, if he mistakes the charade for reality.

Female supervisors sometimes take more care to avoid offending when talking to subordinates than to superiors! This could be why a woman who once came across as a strong copilot could later appear less effective after she dons the fourth stripe.

•I hate to be yelled at

Men are blunt about delivering criticism—women prefer to soften it. Unfortunately, a compliment-prefaced critique (once thought the best way to correct someone) can go right over a man's head, leaving the point of the message unreceived. While female pilots have toughened themselves to endure the sting of male directness and can 'take it', they may experience difficulty as captains initiating timely corrections in an effective manner.

Reinforcement of performance also falls along gender lines. Men expect no feedback unless something goes wrong, but a woman wants assurance that she's 'doing fine'. Silence from a superior assures a man, but demoralizes a woman.

The woman as boss

Despite significant progress in recent decades, society's gender presumption is still that of male pilots and female flight attendants. And while rampant sexism may occasionally be encountered on the job, author Tannen urges patience; she contends that it is better to influence than to offend. Female captains, especially, "...live in the unexpected role, and must struggle against others' assumptions that do not apply to them."

•I never said I wanted to be a man!

Research shows that females in non-traditional roles are more likely to adopt *elements* of men's styles, because if they don't, they are ignored and walked upon. But few, if any, want to become male clones. Most women find their own way without violating too many societal norms, which carries a high price, and without abandoning their own gender identity.

Author Tannen emphatically states that imitating a totally male style doesn't work. "If you try to adopt a style that does not come naturally, you leave behind your intuitions and may well behave in ways inappropriate to any style, or betray the discomfort you actually feel."

•The stereotypical boss

Employees polled on their ideas of what qualities a leader should possess included the following: command ability, competitiveness, decisiveness, strength of character, directness, honesty, consistency, self-confidence, emotional stability, desire for responsibility, perception, creativity, helpfulness. These are traits found in both sexes; nonetheless, the typical image of a

boss is that of a man—large and commanding. A smaller, more inobtrusive person (read: woman) would be fine as a subordinate, but doesn't look the part of a leader. Therefore, a woman starts out her captaincy with the disadvantage of having to prove her competence, something a man doesn't have to do.

Authority has been traditionally equated with maleness. Because women's natural styles are perceived as lacking authority, there will be some men who can't fathom the idea of a woman in a command position. It is too great a violation of their cultural conditioning; and female bosses violate the norm. Not all men feel this way, fortunately; but those who do find leadership from a woman to be emasculating.

•*A woman in authority is still a woman*

The man who finds working with a female captain to be too great of a culture shock will fall back on ways of relating that he knows. This image could be of sister, wife or daughter—but most likely not as the final authority as specified by FARs.

Historically, a woman is less likely to be listened to or taken seriously by such a man. He guards himself against being put in the 'one down' position, and will actively seek to establish himself as 'one up'. Women generally have less ego investment in this regard and are not normally attuned to expect this sort of power struggle. As a captain, she can be caught unaware when she is suddenly disrespected without warning, or her authority challenged after a period of time. The man only knows that he feels distinctly uncomfortable, and may not even be consciously aware that he is looking to thwart her at the first opportunity.

Author Tannen states "A woman who assumes a role that has previously been held by men will likely begin work with an aura of suspicion about whether she is up to the job; and this may well lead at least some of her coworkers to press her to justify her decisions. This very questioning then becomes 'evidence' that she lacks competence, regardless of her real abilities."

•*Subtle insubordination*

It is harder for a woman to influence a man in the work environment, even if she is his superior. One way lower-ranking crewmembers try to undercut a captain's authority is to speak to her in ways that imply she is ignorant or incompetent. Such suffixes as "...you follow?" "...you see?" "I guess it threw you when I said..." give clear indications of a person's attitude.

In situations like this, some women—even if they feel unfairly judged—are initially inclined to take the comment at face value and momentarily question whether or not they really are as inadequate as he is suggesting. However unlikely the case, such comments can still fluster a new captain and erode her confidence. The challenging crewmember senses this, and will take full advantage for as long as he is allowed.

Excessive delay in following orders, pretending not to hear and unnecessary questioning of motives are problems male captains encounter as well, but are more commonly used on women. According to author Tannen, "The effect of their (subordinates') reluctance illustrates the necessity of everyone in a group cooperating to establish the authority of an individual in the group." This means that the captain only has the power of his or her authority as long as the subordinate crewmember(s) accept and support it. In our line of work, that has never been the junior crewmembers' decision to make, unless they are prepared to mutiny...which is highly unlikely.

When the stuff hits the fan

In irregular operations, emergencies or stressful situations, men tend to become more commanding and directive; women usually adopt a calmer, more deliberate and more interactive approach. Both styles are equally effective.

Women generally take extra care to prepare and lay the groundwork for a project so that all possibilities are anticipated in advance and mishaps are avoided. Men tend to dive right in, then deal with problems only if they arise.

There are times when the more typically 'female' approach—regardless of who utilizes it—is preferable in an abnormal situation, if it calms a nervous crewmember and assures him or her that the captain has a plan and the situation is under control.

It is interesting to note that nowhere in the experts' research was any mention made of the stereotypical assumption that females are more likely to panic in an emergency. If anything, the opposite reaction was consistently observed.

Expectations of leaders

- The boss has the right to choose his or her own command style, and the subordinate is expected to conform to it.
- Superiors expect subordinates to wait for them, but it is considered bad form to make the boss wait.
- Superiors have the right and responsibility to initiate correction of a subordinate's performance.
- The superior is expected to guide, advise and mentor junior employees.

These leadership elements are inherent in a captain's role. While some men may resent such behaviors in a woman, others will disrespect her for *not* observing them. Crewmembers expect a captain to behave in certain ways—and if a person falls short in this area, he or she is seen as unworthy of command.

The good news

Change is hard for people to accept, but it does happen. A business survey conducted in the early 1970s showed that female executives were 'not popular', according to mostly male respondents. But that same survey retaken ten years later, after many of these same business people had a decade of exposure to female executives, indicated a change of heart. Clearly, it was the first experiences that were hardest for both genders. Men who had worked for female managers before were more accepting than those who had not.

As uncomfortable or insulting as some of these observations may have appeared to present-day professionals, remember they are generalizations derived from broad-based research of a much larger population, and tend to present worst-case scenarios. This information is intended to offer reasons why gender-induced miscommunications could occur, and hopefully bring about greater awareness and mutual cooperation between the sexes.

Author Tannen summarizes "Understanding what goes on when people talk to each other is the best way to improve communication. You have to look at things from two points of view to really understand it."

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Honeymoon's Over—But the Marriage is Going to Make It

I watched as a captain was stripped of his authority before my very eyes, and it wasn't a pretty sight.

"I'm not happy with that fuel" the copilot of the widebody aircraft said with a scowl, tapping his finger on the flight plan. The captain, a man in his late fifties, looked a bit shocked. He had just sat down to plan the flight after meeting the younger crewmember, and had not yet read the weather briefing.

"Uhh..." he mumbled, "what about it don't you like?"

"At the time of day we'll be getting in there, with the bank traffic, plus the weather the way it usually goes, we won't have enough hold fuel, and there's no alternate, so I don't want to go with that." He ended his emphatic statement by shoving the flight plan towards the captain, crossing his arms and glaring at him.

Being the interested observer of human interaction that I am, I discreetly eavesdropped to hear how the captain would deal with his first officer's strongly-worded concerns and still retain his role as the final decision maker.

"Well..." he ventured, picking up his pen, "what do you want?" The copilot leaped at the opportunity.

"Make it twenty point nine." The captain reluctantly changed the fuel figure on the release. His facial expression and body language showed evidence of discomfort, but he seemed at a loss as to what to do about it. The copilot wore a grimace like an annoyed supervisor. The captain glanced up tentatively when he arrived at the fuel figure for the next leg.

"No, nineteen seven" the copilot ordered, pointing where to make the change. The captain complied without comment.

"And don't forget to transfer the fuel increase to the flight plans."

I was shocked. *Who's calling the shots here?* I wondered.

The captain was clearly unsettled by the turn of events as well. A few minutes later, in what seemed like an attempt to regain his self-respect, he growled at the copilot in an unnecessarily loud voice "Find out what gate we're going out of." The copilot ignored him.

By that time, of course, it was too late. The captain had unwittingly abdicated his position of leadership, and had lost the respect of his crewmember right from the start. I knew only too well what an uphill battle it was going to be for him to regain it with this individual, if he ever did. I also suspected, from having been a copilot myself for several years, that the first officer didn't really want to be in charge of the operation, despite his strong talk. More likely, his motive—however abrasively worded—was to determine whether or not his opinion would even be considered. Unfortunately, his aggressive style of communication resulted in him running roughshod over his passive captain.

Can we talk?

The power struggle between the two pilots was not caused by one or the other doing anything inherently wrong, but in their mutual inability to communicate effectively. This failing, sadly, is a common one. Dr. Robert Bolton Ph.D., in his book *People Skills*, estimates that as much as 80% of the population communicates poorly on a consistent basis. This isn't surprising, considering that people were raised by previous generations of equally poor communicators.

In our everyday conversations, and in the majority of our working relationships, we all manage to interact fairly well; our differences of opinion are minor, and usually resolved quickly and civilly. The more serious interpersonal challenges arise because of a *disparity of interactive styles*. The terms **Aggressive**, **Passive** and **Assertive** describe personality characteristics that are not gender exclusive. Women, however, tend to be more passive and compliant than men. This can create awkward situations for female captains who choose to be true to their own natures rather than play-acting a 'traditional' role previously defined by men.

For this reason, the focus is on bridging the transition from *passive* to *assertive*. The less effective communication styles are defined so that readers may recognize unhelpful elements; they can then, hopefully, deal with challenges more capably and confidently when they arise in the future.

Aggressive behavior violates the basic human rights of others

The word 'aggressive' has been used so many times (usually in motion pictures) as a compliment when referring to pilots, that it is necessary to redefine it in a sociological context.

An aggressive person's philosophy is "My needs/wants/ideas take priority over everyone else's", aiming for an "I win, you lose" end result. Such a person is like a steamroller, boldly insisting on getting his or her own way at the expense of others, often using retaliation as coercive power. They can be domineering, rude, abusive, blunt and sarcastic. In conversation they will interrupt and cut people off. These individuals deal with conflict by blaming and accusing others—a 'Get them before they get me' approach. Their manner is supported by threatening body language—thrusting fingers, pointed staring, loud or angry vocalization and physically invading others' space. It is important for them to appear right at all costs. They would rather argue than negotiate.

The negative payoff of aggression is that it can also provoke counter-aggression when used on the wrong people. An astonishing 70% of job firings have been attributed to employees' belligerent behavior. Nonetheless, guilt feelings can arise from consistent abuse of others. Unfortunately, the aggressor feels it is an insurmountable task to make amends for the scores of deeply negative impressions he or she has made in the past. The ultimate result is alienation from people.

Passive behavior fails to respect one's own basic rights

The passive person believes "My needs aren't as important as other peoples'"; a subtle "You win, I lose" attitude. This person is a doormat, but doesn't realize it. They allow others to dominate them, and rarely state their own needs or desires even when there is little possibility of a refusal. They speak tentatively, using qualifiers, and apologize even when no pardon is required. Standing up for themselves is intimidating, so they rarely do. They can have difficulty making eye contact, and cringe if a person appears to challenge them in any way.

Passive people fear conflict, as well as responsibility in case anything should go wrong. They would rather run than fight. When they feel ill-used, these individuals sulk and withdraw, hoping others will notice and offer to take care of their problems for them. After a conflict, the passive individual stew in silence and isn't likely to think of an appropriate response until long after the opportunity has passed.

The negative aspects of this mode of behavior are lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem, as well as an accumulation of stifled resentment that sometimes explodes on the wrong person.

Assertive behavior respects the rights of all people involved

Assertiveness is a term that describes the most effective, desirable and ideal level of human interaction. It enables you to maintain respect, satisfy your needs and defend your rights without manipulating others or encroaching upon their rights. It is a mature outlook, in which individuals accept full responsibility for their own feelings and actions, while declining to assume responsibility for others'. As defined by the AT&T School of Business course *Assert Yourself!*, it is "Direct, open, honest communication whereby respect for self as well as respect for others is demonstrated."

The assertive person practices a "Win/Win" approach, emphasizing flexibility and mutual cooperation. These people speak their minds in a calm, non-judgmental way, increasing the chance that others will respond in a similar fashion. They listen with full attention, taking the speaker's opinion seriously before formulating a response. They do not react to another's anger or manipulation, nor do they utilize these tactics. Assertive people don't fear an engagement with others, even one of potential conflict, as evidenced by their relaxed composure, direct gaze, varied voice inflections and balanced posture.

Assertive people have a justifiably high sense of self-worth and very little people-induced anxiety or tension in their lives, either at home or at work.

So—how do we reach this lofty goal?

These personality models are research-derived generalizations that represent a somewhat exaggerated extreme. Most people fall into the in-between areas, with occasional forays into all three types of behavior.

The good news is that poor interpersonal habits can, with awareness and practice, be replaced by more effective responses. Good communication—regardless of one's personality—is as much a **learned skill** as playing a musical instrument or flying an airplane. No one is doomed to remain a victim or his or her own aggression or passivity, or that of anyone else's.

Some attitudinal housecleaning, however, may need to be done first.

"He makes me so mad!"

This concept seems contrary to human nature and society's perceptions; but the truth is that nobody can control your emotional response to any situation except yourself. Conversely, you are not responsible for how any other individual chooses to respond to something you say or do. If you have behaved assertively—have shown respect for another's rights and feelings—and they still behave in an angry or hurt manner, then that is *their* choice.

"I'm not supposed to make mistakes—I'm the Captain."

Every human being has weaknesses and makes errors—there are no exceptions. But how our pride is bruised when caught in the act of committing a blunder, especially when it happens in front of someone with whom we are not getting along very well!

Women, who have a general tendency towards perfectionism, tend to berate themselves harshly over their own mistakes, even insignificant ones. This self-undermining starts a vicious cycle of dragging around one's own failings like a bag of bricks, distracting her from the important job at hand. Captains may feel the need to appear invincible—and if that isn't happening, there had better be a very good reason why not.

This attitude is unhealthy. It's also a violation of one of the basic concepts of CRM, *disavowal of perfection*—meaning, 'Nobody's perfect.'

In the honest recognition of their own fallibility, crewmembers must quickly admit to an error and forgive themselves—and each other—without embarrassment or judgment, and *move on*. Of course they should discuss and critique whatever happened at an opportune time—in fact, that's the best way to deal with the aftermath of errors. The burden of self-punishment, however, should be discarded. Then, if an honest mistake occurs in the presence of a crewmember with whom one is having a challenging time, there is less chance of emotional snowballing and subsequent degradation of performance.

The Assertiveness 'Bill of Rights'

(From AT&T School of Business and *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty* by Manuel J. Smith, Ph.D.)

You have a right:

- ***To express your own thoughts and feelings.***

This is a cornerstone tenet of CRM, expected to be practiced by all crewmembers regardless of job description or rank. Don't dismiss intuitions as unimportant, either—nagging feelings that 'Something just isn't right' or 'I think we're overlooking something' are often the final safety net that could prevent a disaster.

- ***To have your thoughts, feelings and rights respected.***

Besides basic decency in the workplace, this concept is essential to flight safety. Crewmembers' valid contributions are not to be disregarded or trivialized, regardless of which seat they occupy.

- ***To be listened to and taken seriously.***

The operational input of required crewmembers is always important, especially in abnormal situations.

- ***To ask for what you want.***

Not as hard as it sounds, especially when the request is reasonable and necessary to maintain comfort and alertness, legality or safety.

- ***To make mistakes.***

A better rephrasing might be "To not be criticized for making mistakes." Occasional errors are inevitable; it's the *problem*, not the person, that needs to be corrected. Much can be learned from operational errors that are recognized and resolved together, with flight safety as the overriding priority.

- ***To ask for information.***

This is another one of the basic elements of CRM—that no one can remember everything or have all the answers, nor are they expected to. Effective crews cooperate in gathering, retrieving and sharing information.

- ***To admit "I don't know" or "I don't understand".***

There can be apprehension that saying such a thing would make a crewmember appear stupid or unprofessional, especially if coming from the captain. Of course, this is easier to admit in the presence of a person with whom one is not engaged in a needlessly antagonistic relationship. Honesty is usually respected, even if begrudgingly.

- ***To say "No."***

In everyday life or in cockpit management, this can be harder to say than it is to hear. Remember that not every request carries emotional loading—often the questioner just needs to know the other's preference.

- ***To make a decision on your own terms.***

This is a privilege of command, earned by the captain's training, experience and sound judgment. Crewmembers' ideas and opinions are to be heard and considered, time permitting, with the understanding that the captain is the final decision-maker.

•**To not feel guilty.**

Guilt is an appropriate sentiment only when a person feels remorse for having done something that is truly wrong—but not because an operational decision he or she has made disappoints fellow crewmembers, passengers or anyone who was counting on the flight to turn out differently.

•**To offer no reasons or excuses for justifying your actions.**

This is a useful tactic when dealing with unwanted solicitors, but is not a good way to treat fellow crewmembers. If the phase of flight precludes adequate time for discussion, communicating your operational reasons later will improve crew climate and understanding. Sharing the rationale for choices is an important element of mentorship.

•**To change your mind.**

An adjustment to the plan—even a significant one—is the captain's prerogative and operational responsibility.

•**To choose not to deal with a situation.**

There are times when you won't have the energy or inclination to handle every challenge, especially interpersonal ones, in the best possible way. And this, too, is an assertive choice—to simply let a situation slide.

Basic ground rules of consistently effective communication

Speaking honestly

This is the art of presenting your viewpoint in the clearest possible language, devoid of emotional bias, and showing respect for both yourself and the listener. This minimizes the risk of misunderstanding or conflict. It sounds fairly straightforward; unfortunately, many people's everyday conversations are loaded with needless barriers to communication.

Common 'spoilers' that trigger a listener's defensiveness and resentment include habitual criticizing, name-calling (even when done in jest), arguing, diagnosing the listener's problems, moralizing, inappropriate questioning, giving unasked-for advice, dismissing concerns as irrelevant, insensitively changing a subject important to the listener, patronizing language or habitual interrupting.

All these conversational annoyances spring from the human tendency to be judgmental towards one another. It's something almost everyone has done at one time or another, but nobody likes having done to them.

Fortunately, these patterns can be changed. The first step in personal reprogramming is to choose *not* to repeat past failings, or to react with old defensive habits.

Empathetic listening

This is the art of accepting others' opinions and feelings as *valid from their point of view*. This requires that a listener suspend judgment of the speaker and actively take in everything she is saying, allowing as much silence as necessary for her to complete her thoughts, without the listener 'tuning out' to compose a rebuttal.

Empathetic listening has the twofold benefit of releasing the speaker's tension by allowing him to have his say without interruption, while simultaneously lowering his resistance to you when he sees that you are sincerely interested in his feelings and opinions. This technique requires

commitment and personal discipline to adopt, because it is such a departure from typical speech! However, the rewards are an increase in trust and significantly improved communication.

Reflective response and the workable compromise

Empathetic listening is followed by a 'reflective response', a neutral statement acknowledging the other's viewpoint has been heard and has merit. The listener then presents his or her opinions, with supporting reasons. Continued dialogue would then lead to the 'workable compromise', where both parties agree to a mutually acceptable course of action.

These recommendations were developed from the framework of business meetings involving groups, so not all of them are appropriate to cockpit interactions. 'Compromise' isn't applicable in flight situations where the end result is clearly defined by procedure, nor is the captain's decision-making dependent upon a democratic vote. In everyday operations, however, these communication habits can go a long way towards satisfactorily resolving differences of opinion.

Timeliness of corrections

"Most of us verbally assert ourselves with other people only when we have had enough frustration to be come irritated and angry" states author Manuel J. Smith, Ph.D. This is why some captains and most lower-ranking crewmembers hesitate to speak up in a timely manner about something the other person is doing—probably unintentionally—that is annoying, offensive, unacceptable or nonstandard.

Unfortunately, silence implies tolerance of the unwanted behavior. Under the mistaken pretense of not wanting to appear 'nitpicky' (or not knowing how to state an objection) the offended party endures repeated aggravation until it becomes unbearable, then suddenly erupts.

This behavior is disrespectful to one's self as well as to the other person. If a captain, for instance, has an initial gut reaction of disapproval to anything the other crewmember is doing, then *the sooner it is mentioned, the better*. Corrections can be stated briefly and positively with no disruption to cockpit teamwork.

Say, don't show

It can be difficult for sensitive captains to correct or admonish someone with whom they are in an otherwise good working relationship. And strange as it might sound that a captain would ever hesitate to correct a copilot, it does happen—we've all seen it! Annoyed glances, looks of disappointment, long-suffering sighs and exasperated head-shaking—all these non-verbal messages confuse and unsettle a co-worker, and don't help her in the slightest.

Such behavior is a violation of the 'honest communication' rule, and no one can be expected to be a mind reader. A first officer would be willing to comply with the captain's wishes, if he only knew what they were. Remember, it is a trait of *passive* people to rarely state their own needs or desires, even when there is little possibility of a refusal.

It bears repeating—it is the captain's right to manage the cockpit on her own terms, including respectfully requesting a crewmember to refrain from doing things that bother her. (One example would be smoking in the cockpit in the days before it was prohibited.) It's often the accumulation of little irritants that provoke the biggest conflicts.

Author Bolton points out that a person's habitual inhibition of this right actually projects disrespect of one's co-worker, as if the captain assumes he or she must be too fragile to deal with a reasonable request. Conversely, a lower-ranking crewmember should not have to tolerate

disrespectful or inconsiderate treatment from a captain just because that person is more senior. Be respectful to the boss, of course, but don't be afraid to speak up.

Getting those difficult words out

Asking for a change in behavior or critiquing can be made easier by following a format Dr. Bolton calls the 'Three Part Message.'

"When you..." Calmly state objection in plain language, without emotional loading (annoyance, coarse language, judgement), and make it as brief as possible.

...I feel..." State your feelings honestly, without exaggeration or understatement.

...because..." Give your viewpoint of how such behavior affects you.

Example: (From the captain) "John, *when you* initiate a checklist before I call for it, *I feel* rushed trying to catch up, *because* I'm not ready for the challenge items yet."

Regardless of how objectively a statement is worded, however, the possibility always exists that the person to whom it was directed could react with resistance, counter-statements or arguments. This is called the "Push-Push Back" phenomenon; be prepared for it in all interactions.

An aggressive captain would counter with impatience ("Don't argue with me, do as I say!") while a passive one might be shocked into astonished silence (*He just refused to do what I asked! What am I supposed to do now?*) and the needs go unmet.

The assertive captain hears out the crewmember's objection and answers with a reflective response, a neutrally acknowledging statement. He or she then re-asserts, calmly repeating the process *as many times as necessary* until the needs have been met. For most people, this does not take more than a few repetitions. At some point the resistance peters out, the captain's request is satisfied, no harm is done and command authority is retained.

This approach, however, would not work in a critical phase of flight. Any technique needs to be modified to the environment; in this case a captain could say "Do it this way for now—we'll talk more about it later."

Now I'm really angry!

If an individual reacts to a reasonable assertion with hostility, it becomes even more important to stick to the format. Refuse to react to verbal arrows, and adhere to the subject at hand without getting sidetracked into defending yourself from the other person's anger. Granted, such a situation can be upsetting, and clear thought can be difficult.

Anger control is crucially important to assertive behavior. While it is a natural human reaction, anger can also be quite destructive and damage-inflicting. Psychologist Charles Allen, Ph.D., states succinctly "Anger makes a smart person stupid." If communication is impossible because of flaring tempers, it is important to disengage until such a time that the conflict can be talked through in a more rational manner. When doing so, *acknowledge both your own and the other person's strong feelings*, which has the effect of decelerating the spiral of negative emotion.

An aggressive person provokes and escalates anger, a passive person cowers at the emergence of it and an assertive person deals with it.

Is anger or aggression ever appropriate?

Even the experts agree there are times when the use of assertion must be abandoned.

I once heard a story that allegedly happened at my own airline, in which a fully-loaded airplane collided with a vehicle during pushback. The captain, fearing a fire hazard, ordered the tug driver to return the aircraft to the gate for immediate passenger deplaning. The driver said no, claiming

it could not be moved until the FAA arrived to investigate. The captain restated his concern with greater urgency, saying he was more worried about safety than protocol. The driver again refused, saying he had experience with this kind of incident and that he was leaving to call the proper authorities. He unplugged his headset and began to walk away.

The captain ripped off his own headset, opened his side window, leaned out and—in a voice loud enough to be heard by everyone on the ramp—bellowed his command in an enraged, obscenity-filled tirade. Needless to say, he got the attention of everyone on the ramp, and they could not have scrambled faster! (As it turned out, the investigator had no problem with the captain's decision to move the aircraft.)

While I personally might have omitted the vulgarities, such an extraordinarily aggressive response was appropriate in that situation.

Sometimes a person's first reaction is the right one.

The assertive person's toolbox

Under less urgent circumstances, the following anger mitigation techniques have been proven effective.

A person's rational state of mind flies out the window whenever he or she becomes angry or flustered. Aggressive people control situations with the intentional use of provocation. Typically, the person being criticized becomes defensive and argues back. The closer the judgmental comments come to sounding true, however, the more upset and anxious the person becomes and the more intensely the accusation is denied. By then the aggressor has succeeded in striking a nerve.

The Broken Record

Author Smith contends that most people give up far too quickly when faced with manipulative resistance to getting their needs met, *even when they are well within their rights*. Examples of reasonable expectations would be returning defective merchandise to a store, or insisting a crewmember follow standard operating procedures.

The technique he recommends is to *persistently and calmly keep stating what you need without getting angry, irritated or loud*. This includes acknowledging the responder's 'reasons' why you can't have what you are asking for, but persisting nonetheless. When the person has run out of excuses, or is tired of arguing and sees that you're not going away, you then enter into the 'Workable Compromise' phase; or, more likely, you will simply get what you asked for in the first place.

Fogging, Negative Assertion and Negative Inquiry

The following techniques are useful in defusing antagonistic interactions that could quickly spiral out of control if not neutralized promptly. They involve **not** denying criticism, getting defensive or counter-attacking.

The term 'fogging' comes from figuratively using any kind of a weapon—gun, knife or baseball bat—on a bank of fog. It offers no resistance to attack, and remains unaffected by whatever violence happens to it. In utilizing this concept, the subject of the criticism responds by acknowledging the possible truth of the statement, *while consciously not reacting to it emotionally*. The Negative Assertion/Negative Inquiry responses follow the same logic.

At first glance, these techniques appear to be counter-intuitive to human nature and falsely self-disparaging. The point, however, is not to win a verbal battle, but to figuratively take the 'weapon' out of the aggressor's hand by rendering it harmless.

Example: "You are the worst pilot I've ever seen!"

(Pause to consider) "Well, that very well may be." (**Fogging**)

"That was a really stupid thing you did."

"Yes, it certainly was." (**Negative assertion**)

"And that's why I'm uncomfortable about what you did."

"Okay...is there anything else I'm doing that you don't like?" (**Negative inquiry**)

Admittedly, such calm and controlled responses—devoid of sarcasm or insincerity—require courage to successfully accomplish. As with all assertiveness techniques (no matter how unnatural the process may feel), the individual continually shows respect for the other's point of view by listening without argument and remaining open to the benefit of correction.

Such non-resistance is both unexpected and disarming, and quickly deflates the tension of a potentially harsh interaction.

Starting now

The systematic practice of assertion does not guarantee you will always get your way, nor does it ensure that everyone you deal with will like you—but it usually inspires respect in the long run.

Assertiveness has sometimes been mistaken for an attitude a person suddenly puts on when challenges arise, like a 'Don't Tread On Me' flag that is waved by the adoption of a strident, louder-than-necessary voice or the abandonment of consideration and courtesy in the workplace. (This *is* an attitudinal trait, but it's the wrong 'A' word.)

Every reader of this article is a captain already, or will be one day. The role of leadership, thankfully, gets easier and more natural with practice and experience. My inexpert handling of situations at the beginning of my captaincy declined significantly, and the positive resolutions soon well outnumbered the less-than-ideal ones. A good airline pilot understands that leadership can go both ways, and that every person hired for a cockpit position brings intelligence, skill and positive qualities to the job.

Regardless of the challenges that could accompany an upgrade, the left seat is still the finest one of all. I always want to be friendly and easy to work with, and I try to instill confidence and demonstrate the same respect for subordinate crewmembers that I expect of them. And when the trip is done, I want that person's experience of flying with me to be one that is remembered positively—that both of us learned something new, and we had fun in the process.

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