Captains: When The Honeymoon Is Over

By Captain Jean Harper

PART 1

The day I upgraded to Captain at United was the proudest and happiest of my entire professional life. As I was handed that new size 6 3/4 hat with the shining gold leaves embroidered into the bill, the near-heavenly rush made all the work, preparation, 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 totally worthy of the responsibility for the safe operation of a multi-million dollar aircraft and the lives of the people inside it. I would be friendly and easy to work with, instilling confidence and demonstrating the same respect for subordinate crewmembers 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 both crew members learned something new and we all had fun in the process. I believed that I'd kept the best (and discarded the worst) of what I'd learned from other captains and first officers with whom I'd worked in my previous fourteen years with United.

Of course I wasn't so naive as to think that all flights and 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 that I would have little problem in dealing with conflicts. 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 in question 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 good-to-work-with, seasoned first officer, I was certain that I had found my perfect niche. As another female captain friend of mine said, in the glow of her own glorious beginnings, I was born to do this.

Trouble in Paradise

Then reality set in.

I was sincerely surprised to encounter some first officers who appeared to be lazy, complacent or sloppy about adhering to SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures). They didn't seem to be heeding my example or picking up 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 F/O's nonstandard or substandard techniques (which I made sure I backed up with appropriate flight manual references), I found that 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." Nevertheless, I began to dread occasions when I would have to "talk to" someone. Being on reserve and working with a different crewmember every flight didn't help. When I knew I was only going to spend one day with someone whose style was annoying to me or not conducive to smooth cockpit operation, I'd often fall back on old habits that had worked when I

was a first and second officer--I'd keep silent and endure the aggravation. I may have been the PIC, but the price of firing a verbal bullet (no matter how kindly worded) was high. And there were times, after a challenging few days at home with the kids or the stress of a 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 with crew members were satisfactory, there were some that caught me completely blind side, leaving me in openmouthed astonishment. The following are some of the unpleasant "surprises" I encountered in my first year in the left seat:

- The F/O who was so put out at having to work with me that he would not speak (except in one-word answers), and would do the absolute minimum, but only after verbal prodding.
- The F/O who reacted to every command statement I made as if it were a personal affront, and who refused to participate in an Irregular Procedure because he had "done the same one just last week."
- The former commuter airline captain whose obvious disdain for my choices, knowledge and even flying style 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 good-bye at the end of the trip by mocking my speech in a high-pitched, singsong chant.
- The F/O who wanted 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 F/O who, when told how I expected the segment to be conducted (his leg), said that he didn't feel such precautions were necessary, and proceeded to inform me as to how he planned to do it. (Truthfully, despite my annoyance, either one of our choices would have been safe enough.)
- The nonstop talker whose entire discourses with me sounded as if he were addressing his wife.
- The F/O whose unnecessary, anxiety-filled directions while I was taxiing ("Look out for that truck!" "Watch your wing tip!" "Careful of the engine clearance!" "Your brakes aren't set!") Conveyed a distrustful and contemptuous attitude which was further expressed in a critical "debriefing" of his idea of my performance as a captain.

But the last straw came with a first officer (soon to move up to a wide body F/O) who was arrogant, patronizing (he spoke to me like I was a student pilot receiving instruction) and pointedly insulting. Of course, all this was delivered with a friendly grin and jovial manner. No, I didn't sit and take it in complete silence, but he didn't lay off until it was obvious he had pushed me to the brink of 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 remaining crewmember to take over command? Never, in the entire time I'd been a subordinate crewmember, would I have dreamed of behaving towards a captain the way some of my first officers had been treating me.

Help!

I asked the advice of a captain whose command skills and opinion I respected. He stated that it was important to establish

leadership very early in the game, especially since I am barely five-foot-three and, to an older F/O, a kid-sisterly-looking female. He advised me to conduct a thorough preflight briefing stating clearly what my goals and expectations were, and if, at any time during the flight the F/O did not do exactly as I said, to A) remind him of what he had previously agreed to; or, if that approach failed, to B) have him removed from the flight. I winced at the thought of the latter, but decided to give it 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 this experiment (which only lasted for two flights) was that the first guy acted as if he was afraid of me, and the second one (after two friendly "reminders" and one 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 thus proving I was "right," but he remained angrily defiant.

The remaining leg together was the most tense and uncomfortable I ever want to experience as long as I live. I spent an unproductive hour on the phone that night with a duty flight manager, and was met by the Chief Pilot in the jetway the next day. After hearing my side of the story, he advised that I not run the cockpit in such a "domineering and controlling" way and that I "lighten up a little."

The end result of it was that I felt betrayed by a system I feared wouldn't support me at all. 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 striven to be patient with myself in the beginning, but by this time I was well 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 the situation well enough to count on the F/Os in minor matters, what might happen in a real emergency?

Why aren't we having fun yet?

By now, events had begun to take 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 denied that thought, as I'd observed a number of other women captains who seemed to be doing perfectly acceptable jobs, and, most of the time, so did I. Nonetheless, a destructive thought worked 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 as a captain, 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 entirely too high for my liking. 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 is embarrassing to admit that you're not doing a very effective job as a captain; or that

recognizing the beginning of a problem can be difficult, and confronting it can be as appealing as a multiple root canal without benefit of Novocaine. Unfortunately, that attitude must have been a self-fulfilling prophecy because my last trial was yet to come. My most miserable month, paired with an aggressive F/O who was my personality opposite, resulted in my feeling more like a punching bag than a captain. I made myself a solemn vow that this would never happen again.

Call in the Cavalry

United's required C/L/R (CRM) course for captains (which came a lot later than I would have liked) was somewhat helpful, but it did not seem to address any "how-to's" for actually getting from one's present less-than-ideal point to the described goal of being an Effective Captain. At last I decided to seek guidance from outside the confines of my peers, my company and even the aviation industry itself.

My husband Vic suggested an assertiveness training course run by the large business (US West) for which he was once a corporate pilot. It was a most enlightening class, and also an amusing one; the course was primarily designed to educate subordinate employees on methods of verbally and emotionally defending themselves from abusively aggressive superiors. But the problem I had was that I felt like an abused *boss*!

Ever so slowly, the light began to come on for me. I read books on assertiveness training, interpersonal communication in the business world and (most amusing and helpful of all) studies on the different ways that males and females traditionally communicate.

I began to look deeper into the everyday work experiences of other captain friends of mine--males and females alike. To both my pain and relief, it turned out that everyone had gone through the same kind of frustrating encounters that I'd had, and in about the same proportion. All blamed themselves for not having handled the situations better, and, not surprisingly, admitted that their own level of confidence had suffered as a result. The honest self-disclosures of these friends and fellow pilots helped me see that I wasn't alone in problems of this nature. They also felt relieved of some of the burdens they too had been silently and stoically carrying.

Ain't Equality Grand?

The most interesting aspect of my research was, for me, the issue of male/female communication differences. Every member of this organization is well aware of how male-dominated the airline piloting profession is. Despite significant gains made by women in this field in the past quarter century, the gender imbalance isn't likely to change drastically in our lifetimes. Female airline pilots, by virtue of having spent more than half our lives flying mostly with men, have long ago figured out how to overcome, ignore, work our way around and to with the flow of predominantly male communication styles. We all learned to adapt and blend in, each in her own way. From some extremely fine mentors we've all had, which statistically are more likely to have been men, we were indoctrinated in the communications groundwork of our chosen profession.

In the book *Communications Between the Sexes* by Stewart, Stewart, Friedley and Cooper, the authors state that the profound differences they discovered through their research are primarily taught and cultured

into boys and girls from the day they are born, and that it continues to the grave. In fact, the single most influential factor in the way humans communicate with one another is determined by their sex. The sadistic humor generated by the character "Pat" (of Saturday Night Live) parodies the discomfort people feel when attempting to communicate with a person of uncertain gender identity.

Part 2 of this article deals in greater detail with male/female communication differences as they apply to airline cockpit crews, and ways in which this knowledge can remove inadvertent roadblocks as well as improve professional effectiveness. Also to be discussed are elements of assertive behavior, effective communication styles for work situations and proven methods for resolving conflicts in a civilized manner.

The good news, throughout all of this professional advice offered by a variety of experts, is that the best style for you to adopt is your own style, enhanced to your best advantage. Any changes offered are sufficiently gradual so as to not cause anyone to feel as if she is "acting," as I so painfully learned the hard way.

Help is all around us

By the way, I was assigned a few months later to fly with the first officer with whom I had that nasty cockpit altercation. Although we both felt a little sick about the paring, we 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 to stop hiding from her problems and face them directly. So when I got to the cockpit, I did something for him that no captain ever had the courage to do for me, even when it was warranted: I apologized. He relaxed visibility, and the ice between us thawed in seconds. By the time we had relaxed around each other sufficiently for honest self-disclosure (three days later!), I told him about the problems I'd had as a new captain, and how I'd sought out advice from someone whose opinion I respected. I told him that I was angry at other people that I felt had treated me badly, and that I had "dumped" inappropriately on the wrong person--him. He was amazingly compassionate and understanding at that moment, then said that he admired my intelligence in asking for help with a problem. We've been on good terms ever since.

PART TWO

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 energy (especially in our early years) insisting that, as far as piloting skills were concerned, there was no difference; or at least none significant enough to prevent us from entering previously all-male cockpits as airline pilots.

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 traits is not to induce paranoia in any woman who recognizes such behavior in

herself, or to suggest that it is not 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 conflict is highest where the gap is greatest between males and females. Simply having an awareness of potential roadblocks to communication can help people get around them.

Of course, these traits may not apply to you at all, or anyone else with whom you associate, but they just might shed some light on a problem that has been around since the days of Adam and Eve.

The way it was

When I first started flying in 1966, I continually reminded myself that I was more than just an "ordinary woman." While some mistook this attitude for ego, it 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 identity 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 "outdo" 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 nontraditional career fields defy cultural norms and in doing so have helped break down stereotypical attitudes, updating our society's idea of what a woman ought to be. Nonetheless, it is a pretty tall order to rise completely above a gender-restrictive upbringing or to expect all members of society to behave towards women in an enlightened manner. Less obvious gender-

based contributors to females 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 in all situations, observed gender-based tendencies seem to bear out this contention.

Women wait to be chosen, while men actively promote themselves. This is not a problem in airlines with seniority systems, but probably contributes to the "glass ceiling" phenomenon in other work situations. When I was in general aviation, I was passed over more than once for jobs that were given to men with considerably less flying experience than I had. Although I fumed over what I considered to be blatant sexism, in retrospect I didn't always promote myself as persistently as some of the men did. I also assumed that I should mention my qualifications and willingness only once, so as not to be a pest.

Men boast, women don't. While bragging in itself is not an admirable quality in anyone, it is more likely to be tolerated in men and taken as a sign of confidence. Most women regard boasting as juvenile and distasteful, and refuse to participate in it. Also, such behavior is considered socially unacceptable for women. Unfortunately, such silence is often interpreted as weakness, or as having never 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 in this gender. 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 often go unnoticed. Unfortunately, when she doesn't mention her background and qualifications, no one assumes her to have the impressive wealth of experience that she has--even when she's wearing four stripes. Concealing a strength is not the same as refraining from boasting, but it can feel like the same thing to a socially sensitive woman--usually to her detriment.

Men must always appear certain--women aren't expected to. Some men have a real problem admitting to a mistake or a weakness, and are loath to admit a fault if they don't absolutely have to. Women, on the other hand, have less of an egocentric image to uphold, and therefore less hesitation about admitting to a shortcoming or lack of knowledge. Women downplay their certainty, while men downplay their doubts.

Women are afraid to complain--men aren't. No woman, especially one in as male-dominated a field as airline flying, wants to stand out as a whiner, complainer or someone who's "too delicate to handle the job." So, because it is considered bad form for a woman to speak up when someone or something negatively affects her, she rarely does, even when a complaint is warranted.

Men seek credit for their work--women avoid it. Women are willing to accept the responsibility when they make a poor choice (a good quality in a Captain) but seem to dodge accepting full credit, even when it is due. A woman supervisor will say "we" when accepting a compliment for a well-

done 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 not 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 with listening to and carefully 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 a response erodes her authority and in our line of work, that could have tragic consequences.

A "typical" female trait that is extremely beneficial in our profession is thoroughness and attention to detail. Women, on the whole, know their jobs much better than they usually let on. That knowledge must be readily referenced whenever she is challenged. A man's strong (if inappropriate) statement should be interpreted as "Can you substantiate your claim?" rather than "You're wrong, lady!"

Men can brawl verbally and still be friends--women can't. This "ritual fighting" can involve loud, angry talk, heated opinions, name-calling, and vulgarities, often over trivial issues. Men actually enjoy this; women find the practice abhorrent.

Most women take insults personally, and find it impossible to do their best in a contentious situation. It is important for a woman to recognize that such a challenge is not a personal attack, just an extremely divergent interactive 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 reveal "weakness" or a lack of self-sufficiency. Women, however, seem unaware that they can make a negative or weak impression by asking for information. It must be remembered, however, that one of the vital elements of effective CRM (C/L/R to United pilots) is resource management--and that often means asking questions.

Sometimes strong-willed men interpret a question from a woman captain as an invitation for them to take over and make the decision--something she never intended! Author Tannen suggests a better way of asking questions of such a person might be "I'm going to make the decision myself, but I'd like your opinion."

Small talk is only small if you're female. A man who talks about his home life is considered to be a responsible, mature family man. A woman who talks about her family on the job might be seen 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 that such pleasantries will not detract from her command authority.

Conversational inequalities

It's unfortunate that tiny 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 women's speaking styles*.

Small words that weaken. 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 words like "Well, you know..." "Kind of..." Disclaimers such as "Well, I don't know much about this, but..." are often used as a "conversation smoother," rather than an honest profession of ignorance.

A woman could be perfectly sure of what she is saying, but may habitually 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. It 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 means of "apologizing" for being successful. Another polite expression women commonly overuse is "Thank you." Often it is intended merely as a conversational "closer" instead of 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 word "please," as in "Flaps 1, please" (a statement, not a question) was not mentioned by any of the linguistic experts as a detraction from the strength of a command. 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! Vocal 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. Higher pitched, softer voices, usually female, sound less authoritative than louder, more deeply pitched ones.

The "Strong, Silent" myth. Men actually talk more than women 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 are also 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 can use it to talk their way out of extra work they don't feel like doing. The woman (even if she's captain) is perplexed by the lack of productivity. Weary of the verbal barrage and no action, she ends up doing the work herself.

Heard any good jokes lately? Men feel more comfortable working with women who have a free and easy sense of humor. Delightful as it is, even humor can be abused as a tool of control. It has been proven that men joke around more than women normally do. There's nothing wrong with that--it's fun to deliver a great punch line and have it roundly appreciated. Even for a short time, a storyteller who makes an audience laugh is in total control of the group.

But it is a clear erosion of command if a subordinate crewmember is the initiator of so much "cutting up" (including joking insults--a form of "ritual fighting") that he drags the captain into a conversational 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.

The woman as boss

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, and the experiences of many female pilots give credence to her advice. Women 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 nontraditional roles are more likely to adopt elements of males' styles, because if they don't, the women are ignored and walked upon. But few, if any, women want to become male clones. Most women find their own way without violating too many societal norms (which carries a high price) and without betraying their own sense of sexual identity.

Author Tannen emphatically says that imitating a totally male style doesn't work. "If you try to adopt a style that does not come naturally to you, 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, objectivity, forcefulness, consistency, self-confidence, emotional stability, desire for responsibility, perception, creativity, ambitiousness, helpfulness. Obviously, these qualities are a combination of traits normally encountered in both sexes.

Nonetheless, the typical idea of "boss" is that of a man--large, commanding and aggressive. A small, inconspicuous, deferential person (read: woman) would be just fine as a subordinate, but doesn't "look" the part of a leader. Therefore, she starts out her captaincy with the disadvantage of having to prove her competence, something a man never has to do. That could explain why a woman has no problems as a flight engineer or copilot, but later runs into unforeseen difficulties when she upgrades to captain.

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. From the time men were little boys, they have struggled to take center stage, and resent being "beaten to it" by a woman. Not all men feel this way, fortunately; but those who do find power threatening in a woman. These men see giving orders as a way of being "one up" but taking them equates to being "put down", an unacceptable and galling experience if the supervisor is a woman. Such a man would feel emasculated even if he had Amelia Earhart for a captain.

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 the only way of relating that he knows--he treats her like "a woman." This image could be Mother, Wife, Kid Sister, Daughter or Date, but most likely is not the "Final Authority" specified by FARs and airline company policy.

Historically, women are less likely to be listened to or taken seriously by a man. A man will guard 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 and are not normally attuned to expect this sort of power struggle. As a captain, she can be caught unaware when she is disrespected without warning, or her authority is suddenly 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 plotting to thwart her at the first opportunity possible.

Author Tannen states, "A woman who assumes a role that has previously been held by men will likely be met with an aura of suspicion about whether she is up to the job; 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 men undercut a female's authority is to speak to her in ways that imply she is ignorant, unprofessional or incompetent. Such suffixes as "...you follow?" "...you see?" "I guess I 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. It is highly unlikely that this is the case, but such comments can still fluster her and erode her confidence. The aggressor senses this, and will take full advantage for as long as he is allowed.

Excessive delay in following orders, pretending not to hear, unnecessary questioning of a captain's motives and demanding justifications instead of doing as directed 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." That means that the captain only has the power of her authority as long as the subordinate crewmembers accept and support it. In our line of work, that has never been a copilot's decision to make, unless he is prepared to mutiny...which is highly unlikely.

Female problems 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. Because of this cultural inequality, women are less accustomed to dealing with conflict and attack. Ironically, a woman in authority is more likely to be the target of hostility than a man.

Women don't rub in their authority. Women generally don't want 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 a team leader as opposed to a dictator, and wish to provide a sense of equality with coworkers as well as 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 asked.

Was that an order she just gave me? Women often utilize an indirect speaking style, which is usually more comfortable and natural to her. There is nothing wrong with that, as long as the copilot understands and shares the style as well. Problems occur when a man ignores a gently worded statement because he did not recognize it as a command. The worst case assumption is that directness equates to power, and indirectness is a sign of submission.

Let the guy feel important. Women are also concerned with allowing others, especially male subordinates, to "save face." In doing so, women sometimes temporarily adopt the role of novice or listener to allow a male subordinate to "feel smart" or more comfortable around her-- although this can backfire if he mistakes the charade for reality.

Women in supervisory positions often take more care to avoid offending when talking to subordinates than to superiors! This is another reason why a woman who once came across as a strong, assertive copilot can suddenly appear weak and ineffective after she dons the fourth stripe. Women sometimes negotiate poorly, preferring a solution that results in "making peace" with her coworkers rather than listening to the others' position for the purpose of arriving at the best solution.

I hate to be yelled at. Men are blunt about delivering criticism--women prefer to soften it. Women also have a harder time correcting a man's performance than a woman's. Unfortunately, a compliment-prefaced critique (which we have all been taught is the "best way" to deliver criticism) can go right over a man's head, leaving the point of the message unreceived.

While women pilots have toughened themselves to endure the sting of male style criticism and can "take it," they still experience difficulty delivering criticism of a subordinate's performance in an effective manner.

Reinforcement of performance also falls along gender lines. Men expect no feedback unless something has gone wrong. Women tend to want feedback as assurance that she's "doing fine." Silence from a superior assures a man, but demoralizes a woman.

When the stuff hits the fan. In irregular operations, emergencies or stressful situations, men often tend to become more dictatorial and directive. Women usually become calmer, more deliberate and more interactive. Both styles are equally effective.

Women, in general, take great care to prepare and lay the groundwork for a project so that all possibilities are covered in advance and mishaps are avoided. Men ten to dive right in, then deal with problems only if they arise. There are times when the more typically "female" approach (regardless of which gender utilizes it) is preferable in an abnormal situation, if it calms a nervous crewmember or assures him/her that the captain has a definite plan and that the situation is under control.

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

Expectation 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 have a right to expect subordinates to wait for them, but it is considered bad form to make the boss wait. Superiors have the right to initiate positive feedback (compliments), whereas a subordinate is not expected to, as it inappropriately implies the right to judge the captain's performance.

Those of higher rank are more likely to be listened to when they speak up. Therefore, an unusually reticent woman captain can be perceived as a "newcomer," even though she clearly is not. Superiors may initiate "small talk," whereas subordinates are not expected to. Taking on the role of "teacher" establishes the speaker as "one up," an element that is inherent and expected in a captain's role.

While some men resent these role behaviors in a woman captain, others will disrespect her for not observing them. Lower ranking crewmembers, for the most part, expect a captain to behave in a certain way, and if a woman deviates from these expectations, she is seen as unworthy of the command position.

The good news

Change is hard for people to accept, but it can and does happen. A business survey taken in 1971 showed that female executives were "not popular," according to mostly male respondents. But the same survey taken in 1981, after many of these same men had a decade of exposure to an influx of women executives, indicated a change of heart, and a rejection of the stereotypes. Clearly, it was the first experience that was hardest for both the men and the women. Men who have worked for female managers before are more accepting than those who have not.

It is important to remember that the statements made in this article are generalizations derived from research, and that they tend to paint "worst case" scenarios. It does not mean to imply that all men will behave in the ways described, nor will all women. The majority of pilots I have had the pleasure of working with are mature and disciplined professionals who have risen above negative societal stereotypes.

This information is intended to present reasons why the small percentage of gender induced miscommunications occur, and hopefully bring about greater awareness and mutual understanding 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." No

"answers" were presented here because each person must come up with her own, as appropriate to her unique communication and leadership style.

Part 3: 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 co-pilot of the widebody "glass" aircraft said with a scowl, loudly tapping his finger on the flight plan. The captain, a man in his late fifties, looked bewildered and a touch intimidated. 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?"

"Well, at the time of day we'll be getting in there, plus the weather the way it usually is this time of year, we won't have enough hold fuel for my liking 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 (plus the fact that I was relatively incognito in street clothes), 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 ultimate decision maker.

"Well..." he ventured, picking up his pen "...what do you want?"

The copilot leaped at the opportunity like a metal chip to a magnet.

"Make it twenty point nine."

The captain reluctantly changed the fuel figure on the release. His facial expression and body language showed evidence of his discomfort, but he seemed at a loss as to what to do about it. The copilot wore a grimace of stern disapproval, like an annoyed supervisor. The captain glanced up at him 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 appeared unsettled by the turn of events as well. A few minutes later, in what appeared to be an attempt to regain his professional self-respect, he growled at the copilot in an unnecessarily loud voice to "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 copilot, 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 many years, that the first officer didn't really want to be in charge of the operation, despite his strong-sounding talk. More likely, his motive (however abrasively worded) was to determine whether or not his opinion would even be heard or considered. Unfortunately, his aggressive style of

communicating resulted in him running roughshod over his passive captain.

Can we talk?

The power struggle between these two pilots was not caused by one or the other doing anything wrong or out of line, but resulted from their inability to communicate effectively. This failing, sadly, is a very common one. Dr. Robert Bolton, Ph.D., in his book *People Skills*, estimates that 80% of the population does not communicate well on a consistent basis. This isn't surprising, considering that human beings 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 are usually resolved quickly and in a civil manner. The more serious interpersonal challenges are the situations that get out of hand primarily because of a **disparity in individuals' interactive styles**.

The terms *aggressive*, *passive* and *assertive* describe general personality characteristics which are more dominant in some people than in others. These individual traits are clearly not exclusive to any gender or rank. Women, however, tend to be more passive and compliant as a population than men. This can create an awkward situation for a woman who chooses to be true to her own nature, rather than playact a "traditional" captain's role (previously defined by men) that may not fit her personality.

For this reason, the focus is on making the transition from passive to assertive. The less effective, as well as more effective, communication styles are discussed so that the reader may both recognize such behaviors in herself (if such is the case) and also in others. She will then, hopefully, be able to deal with these unavoidable 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 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" result. Such a person is like a steamroller, boldly insisting on getting his or her own way at the expense of others, and often using retaliation as coercive power. They can be domineering, controlling, rude, abusive and sarcastic. These people 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 counteraggression when used on the wrong person. (An astonishing 70% of job firings have been attributed to employees' aggressive behavior.) But in spite of such a person's pushiness, guilt feelings do 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 people's," a subtle "You win, I lose" attitude. This person is a doormat, but doesn't realize it. His or her lack of confidence and self-respect is confused with being "nice" or "considerate." Unfortunately, such people *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. They have difficulty making eye contact and withdraw 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. If an interpersonal problem does occur, such an individual isn't likely to think of an appropriate response until after the opportunity has passed.

The negative aspect of this mode of behavior is low self-esteem, as well as an accumulation of stifled resentment and anger, which often explodes upon an inappropriate person. Passive individuals may also sulk and withdraw, hoping others will notice and offer to take care of their problems for them.

Assertive behavior respects the rights of all people involved

Assertiveness is a term which 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 dominating, manipulating, abusing or controlling others. It is a mature outlook, in which an individual accepts full responsibility for his or her own feelings and actions, while declining to assume responsibility for another's. 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 to human interactions, emphasizing flexibility and mutual cooperation. This person speaks his or her own mind in a calm, nonthreatening and nonjudgmental way, increasing the chance that others will respond in a similar fashion. S/he does not react to others' anger or manipulation, nor does s/he utilize these tactics. The assertive person does not fear an engagement with others (even one involving conflict), as evidenced by her 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 and represent polar extremes. Most people fall into the middle areas (which would be described as "normal" behavior), with occasional forays into all three types of behavior.

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

Some attitudinal housecleaning, however, may need to be done before embarking upon the journey of becoming a more assertive person. Some common misconceptions (perhaps even some we value) are worthy of reexamination.

"He makes me so mad!"

This idea is contrary to almost everyone's upbringing and society's perceptions, but the truth is that nobody can take responsibility for or 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 that person's rights and feelings) and s/he still behaves in an angry or hurt manner, then that is their choice, not yours. We are only responsible for ourselves. Countless ulcers have been caused by people's time-honored misunderstanding of this basic concept.

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

We all have our weaknesses and make errors. But how our pride is bruised when caught in the act of committing them--especially when it happens in front of someone with whom we are not getting along! Women, who have a general tendency towards perfectionism anyway, seem to berate themselves most harshly over their own oversights, even insignificant ones. This undermining of self-confidence begins and prolongs a vicious cycle of dragging around one's own failings like a bag of bricks, distracting the pilot from the more important job at hand and making her prone to even more errors. (Ever felt that way in the simulator on a tough checkride?) Many people, especially captains, feel that we *must be perfect*. If we're not, we must have a very good reason why not.

This attitude is unhealthy. In the honest acceptance of one's own human fallibility, a person must forgive herself and others quickly and painlessly, and *move on*. This doesn't mean you can't talk about or critique whatever happened. In fact, this is the **best** way to deal with the aftermath of errors. The self-imposed burden of inadequacy, however, can be eventually left behind when the person learns to absolve herself of the habit of feeling guilty or humiliated about something that everybody does upon occasion. Then when an honest mistake occurs in the presence of a person with whom she is having a difficult 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 the right:

- To express your own thoughts and feelings. One sometimes inhibits her worthwhile input in the presence of an aggressively voluble speaker who rambles on and on without pause.
- To have your thoughts, feelings and rights respected. Lack of practice in speaking up may contribute to not feeling confident about insisting upon respectful treatment. Regardless of your rank, however, you are entitled to it, especially when you're the captain.
- To be listened to and taken seriously. This often requires an insistence that some people are uncomfortable attempting, because they haven't done it successfully before. It is more likely to be a problem for first and second

officers, although it's not unheard-of for captains.

- To ask for what you want. Not as hard as it sounds; and it gets easier with practice.
- To make mistakes. (But you know that!)
- To ask for information. Remember the "I've got to be perfect" albatross? Add in "I've got to know everything." Again, this misconception is most likely to reappear in the event of strained crewmember relationships. Keep in mind one of the most basic elements of CRM (or C/L/R) is *resource management*. This often *means* asking questions. In The Ginnett Study (United Airlines Captain C/L/R Course) one of the attributes of an "effective captain" is the term *disavowal of perfection*. What this means is that the captain finds some way of letting the crew know that A) she *doesn't* know everything, and B) she is dependent upon the other crewmembers' input and expertise as much as they are on hers. In other words, the captain conveys that "You are an important, needed, and essential member of this crew."
- To say "I don't know" or "I don't understand", (See above.) There is sometimes the apprehension that admitting such a thing will make the speaker appear stupid, lazy or (horrors!) *unprofessional*, especially when she's the captain. Actually, it's not as much of a risk as is feared, since nobody likes to work with a "know-it-all". Of course, this is easier to say in the presence of a crewmember with whom you are *not* engaged in a needlessly antagonistic relationship. On a more useful note, these "ignorant" responses can be quite handy in dealing with manipulative statements. Example: "What would the world be like if everyone believed the way you do?" When this happens, author Smith suggests that you express your lack of knowledge honestly until the manipulator sees that such ploys do not work on you.
- To say "no". In everyday life or in cockpit management, it is often harder to say than it is to hear. With practice, however, it can be stated decisively as well as respectfully, and without undue discomfort on your part.
- To make a decision on your own terms. As a captain, you have the right to make an operational decision based on your knowledge, past experience or personal preference, even if your crewmember would rather do it differently.
- To not feel guilty. Guilt is an appropriate sentiment only when you feel regret for having done something that is truly wrong, not because an operational decision you have made disappoints your crewmembers, passengers or anyone who was counting on the flight to turn out differently.
- To offer no excuses for justifying your decisions. This technique is useful when dealing with aggressive salespeople or unwanted phone solicitors (they don't need to know why you're not interested), but it is not always appropriate when dealing with coworkers. If your phase of flight precludes adequate time for discussion at the moment a difference of opinion arises, giving your reasons at the first available opportunity will improve crew climate and mutual understanding. It also passes on helpful information to your copilot, who will one day be a captain herself.
- To change your mind. Don't feel that a change of mind about anything indicates instability on your part, although some will try to make you feel that way. In the working world, very few plans are cast in granite. Flexibility in our rapidly

changing work environment is a necessity, not a frivolity.

- To choose not to be assertive. Sometimes you won't always have the energy, inclination or ambition to handle every situation in the best possible way. And this, too, is your assertive choice: simply to let a situation slide.

Basic ground rules of consistently effective communication

Speaking honestly is the art of presenting your viewpoint in the clearest possible language, devoid of exaggeration or understatement. It shows respect for both yourself and the listener, thereby insuring a minimum risk of misunderstanding or conflict. It sounds fairly straightforward; unfortunately, most people's everyday conversations are loaded with needless barriers to communication.

Common "spoilers" which trigger a listener's defensiveness, resistance and resentment include habitual criticizing, name-calling (such as stereotypical put-downs, even when done in jest), diagnosing the listener's problems, ordering around (whether the speaker is the boss or not), moralizing (preaching, using judgment-laden words like "should" or "ought to"), excessive or inappropriate questioning, giving unsought advice, dismissing the listener's concerns as irrelevant, insensitively changing a subject important to the listener, "talking down", using patronizing language or habitual arguing.

All these barriers spring from human beings' basic tendency to be judgmental towards one other. It's something almost everybody does at one time or another, but nobody likes having done to them. Fortunately, the pattern can be broken. At the same time a person is disciplining herself to stop using these communication roadblocks on others, she also recognizes the same when they are being used on her. This is the first step in personal reprogramming: not to react with old defensive habits.

Empathetic listening is the art of accepting others' opinions and feelings as valid from their point of view. This requires that a listener suspends judgment of the speaker and actively take in everything s/he is saying, allowing as much silence as necessary for him/her to complete their thoughts, without the listener composing or delivering a rebuttal. This has the twofold benefit of releasing the speaker's tension by allowing him/her to have his/her say without interruption, while simultaneously lowering his/her resistance to you when s/he sees that you are sincerely interested in his/her feelings and opinions. Later, after you have affirmed the validity of what s/he has to say, s/he will be much more willing to hear your (possibly) opposing viewpoint.

Although this is a technique which requires great personal discipline, the rewards of actively demonstrating this kind of respect are an increase in trust and dramatically improved communication. Remember, always having the last word is an aggressive trait.

The workable compromise. After the Empathic Listening stage comes the point where both people discuss a solution that is mutually acceptable. This alternative may not be appropriate in situations requiring quick decisions and command leadership by the captain, or where the end result is clearly stated by FARs or SOP. However, it can go a long way towards improving work relations in the areas of protocol or individual choice.

Timeliness of corrections..."Most of us verbally assert ourselves with other people only when we have had enough frustration to become irritated and angry," states author Manuel J. Smith, Ph.D. This is the reason why some captains and most first or second officers habitually hesitate to speak up in a timely manner about something a person is doing (probably unintentionally) that is annoying, offensive, unacceptable or nonstandard.

Unfortunately, a person's continual silence only reinforces the unwanted behavior. Under the mistaken pretense of not wanting to appear "nitpicky" or perhaps not knowing how to deliver the correction, the offended party repeatedly endures the aggravation until it becomes unbearable, then suddenly erupts with unnecessary force on the unsuspecting perpetrator.

This choice of response is disrespectful to oneself as well as to the coworker. If a captain's gut reaction to something a crewmember does is disapproval, regardless of whether or not it makes sense, then the sooner it is mentioned, the better.

...or, making a correction at all. It can be difficult for many sensitive captains to correct or admonish someone with whom they are trying to establish a good working relationship. 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, longsuffering sighs and exasperated headshaking--all of these nonassertive messages confuse and unsettle your coworker, and don't help him/her in the slightest.

Such behavior is a violation of the "honest communication" rule; and no coworker can be expected to be a mind reader. The first officer would be most willing to comply with the captain's wishes, if s/he only knew what they were. Remember, it is a trait of passive people to rarely state their own needs, *even when there is little possibility of refusal*. This includes brooding in silence, hoping others will notice the dilemma and approach her/him with an apology or a solution.

This bears repeating: *it is the captain's right to manage the cockpit on her own terms*, including respectfully requesting the subordinate crewmembers to refrain from doing things which annoy her. It is often the little irritants which provoke the biggest conflicts. Author Bolton points out that a person's habitual inhibition of this right actually projects disrespect of her coworker, as if the captain assumes s/he must be far too fragile to deal with a directive.

On the other hand, a lower ranking crewmember should never tolerate personally disrespectful treatment from a captain, just because s/he happens to be more senior. Be tactful to the boss of course, but definitely speak up if you feel mistreated.

Getting those difficult words out

Asking for a change in behavior or critiquing (asserting) can be made easier by following a format Dr. Bolton calls the "Three Part Message":

"When you..." [State objectionable behavior in plain language, without emotional loading (i.e. character assassinations, absolutes, profanity, judgmental words) 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: "John, *when you* initiate the Descent Checklist before I call for it, *I feel* rushed trying to catch up to you, *because* I'm not ready for the challenge items yet."

No matter how objectively such a statement is worded, the possibility always exists that the person to whom the statement was directed will react with offense, resistance, counterstatements or arguing. This is called the "Push-Push Back" phenomenon**. Expect it in all interactive dealings.** At this point, an aggressive person usually overpowers the listener by saying something similar to "Don't argue with me, do as I say!" while the passive person sits there in openmouthed astonishment, thinking "S/he just refused to do what I asked!... but what if s/he's *right*..." -- and the needs go unmet.

The assertive person hears out the listener's objections and answers with a "reflective listening response." This is a neutral statement which indicates that the other's viewpoint has been heard and has merit. This may require a few repetitions until the other person has had an opportunity to state all his or her feelings or objections. After this point, the speaker reasserts, and repeats the process as *many times as is necessary* until her needs have been satisfied. This method often requires patience and persistence, as some assertions require anywhere from two to six repetitions, depending upon the degree of the listener's resistance.

Would this work in a busy cockpit, especially during a critical phase of flight? Any technique needs to be modified to the environment. In this case a captain might have to say, "Do it this way for now--we'll talk more about it later." Then be sure to follow through at the first available opportunity.

Now I'm really angry!

If an individual should happen to react to an assertion with hostility, it becomes even more important to stick to the format; refuse to react to verbal arrows, and tenaciously adhere to the subject matter at hand without getting sidetracked into defending yourself from the listener's anger. Granted, such a situation can be very upsetting, and clear thought is often difficult.

Anger control is crucially important to assertive behavior. While it is a natural human reaction, it can also be highly destructive and damage inflicting. Psychologist Charles Allen, Ph.D. states quite succinctly "Anger makes a smart person stupid." Acknowledging "I am feeling very angry right now" can do a lot to begin the resolution process. If communication with the other person is impossible because of flaring tempers, it is important to disengage emotionally until such a time that the conflict can be talked through in a more rational manner. When doing so, it is important to *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 escalates anger, a passive person cowers at the emergence of it and the assertive person deals with it.

Is anger or aggression ever appropriate?

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

I heard of a story that allegedly happened at my own airline, in which a crew was involved in a ground collision with a vehicle

during pushback. The captain, fearing a fire hazard, ordered the tug driver to return the aircraft to the gate immediately for passenger deplaning. The driver said, "No, we can't move the airplane now. The FAA has to investigate." The captain restated his concern with greater urgency, saying that he was more worried about the safety aspect than protocol. The tug driver again refused, saying that he had experience with this kind of incident before and that he was leaving to call the FSDO office. At this point he unplugged his headset and began to walk away.

The captain ripped off his own minitel headset, opened his side window, leaned out and in a voice loud enough to be heard by everyone within two hundred yards of the airplane, bellowed, "You bring that ****ing tug back here and pull this ****ing airplane back to the ****ing gate **right now, you ****head!!!"**

Needless to say, the entire ground crew couldn't have moved any faster if they had been set on fire! (As it turned out, the FAA investigator had no problem with the captain's decision to move the aircraft.) While I personally might have deleted the "You ****head", such an extraordinarily aggressive response does have a place in emergency situations. It's something for captains to keep in their back pocket.

The Assertive Person's Toolbox

In the absence of such extenuating circumstances, however, the following techniques are very effective in the assertion process.

The "Broken Record" tool

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.** The technique he recommends is to persistently and calmly keep saying what you want over and over again, *without getting angry, irritated or loud*. It involves empathetically acknowledging others' objections or "reasons" why you can't have what you want, but persisting nonetheless.

When the resister has run out of reasons or energy, you may then enter into the "Workable Compromise" phase; or more likely you will simply get what you asked for in the first place. There may be times when the person with whom you are dealing becomes frustrated or abusive with you; but your refusal to react in anger or to be swayed by aggressive (read: manipulative) emotions, **and** avoid being sidetracked into verbal self-defense, will usually get you what you originally wanted.

The "Fogging" tool

A person's rational state of mind flies out the window when s/he becomes angry or flustered. Aggressive people commonly put themselves in control of situations by the intentional use of provocation. Typically, the person being attacked or criticized becomes defensive and denies the criticism. The closer the judgmental comments come to sounding true, however, the more nervous, upset and anxious the person becomes, and the more intensely s/he denies the accusations.

The technique of "fogging" means not denying any criticism, getting defensive, or counterattacking with criticism of our own. The name comes from figuratively using any kind of a weapon (gun, knife, baseball bat) on a bank of fog. The fog bank offers no resistance to penetration, does not fight back, and remains unaffected by whatever

damage happens to it. In using this response, the person responds by "fogging": *agreeing to the possible truth of such statements, while purposely not reacting emotionally to them.*

While this approach may sound too much like being pointlessly self-deprecating, it is actually a means of showing respect for both yourself as well as the person who is dealing with you in a very confrontational manner. You neutrally agree with their point of view, while remaining emotionally unthreatened yourself. Such a response is disarming to the attacker, and it considerably reduces the tension of the situation.

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

Well, that may very well be." (Fogging)

This technique requires honest self-evaluation to remember that we are not perfect, that people will not always think well of us, and most importantly of all, *that it doesn't really matter*.

The Negative Assertion and Negative Inquiry tools

These two concepts are helpful in both dealing with criticism yourself and in helping the person doing the criticizing to realize that you are not fighting him/her, but rather trying to get some benefit out of his/her comments. All the while, of course, you purposely remain unfazed by whatever you hear. These techniques require practice, as well as a fair amount of maturity and personal honesty to initiate.

Examples: "That was really a stupid thing you did!"

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

"...and that's why I'm uncomfortable about what you're doing."

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

So when do we start?

The systematic practice of assertion does not guarantee that you will always get your way, but it will certainly go far in promoting clear communication and mutual understanding, thereby making that outcome far more likely. It also doesn't ensure that everybody you deal with will like you--a tough concept for a lot of us to accept--but it usually inspires respect in the long run.

Assertiveness has sometimes been misunderstood to be an attitude a person suddenly puts on as the need arises, like a "Don't Tread on Me" flag that is publicly waved by the adoption of a strident or louder-than-necessary voice, or the abandonment of consideration and courtesy in work and business dealings. (This is an attitudinal trait, but it's the "other" A-word).

Every reader of this article either is or will be a captain. In spite of the challenges and problems of the captain upgrade, the left seat is still the finest one there is. I always want to be friendly and easy to work with and I try to instill confidence and demonstrate the same respect for subordinates that I expect from them. When the trip is done, I want each person's experience of flying with me to be one that is remembered positively: each crewmember learned something new, and we all had fun in the process.

Bibliography and Suggested Reading:

Communication between the Sexes by Stewart, Stewart, Friedley and Cooper, Ph.Ds, 1990
People Skills by Robert Bolton, Ph.D.
Talking from Nine to Five by Deborah Tannen, Ph.D., 1994
When I Say No, I Feel Guilty by Manuel J. Smith, Ph.D.

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