

SKY RAGE II



Our second feature on skyrage looks at how mediation techniques can be used to counter the continuing increase in aggressive behaviour by passengers.

DOES SKY RAGE BEHAVIOUR POSE a significant threat to aircraft safety? Captain Stephen Luckey, the Chairman of the National Security Committee of the Air Line Pilots Association, which represents 49,000 pilots in the United States and Canada, thinks so.

In his address to the US House of Representatives Aviation Committee in June last year, he said, "Passenger interference is the singularly most pervasive security problem facing the airline industry, not only in the US, but around the globe. This problem, while not constituting the type of dire threat to life posed by a bomb or a hijacker, still poses demonstrably real hazards to the safety of passengers, crews and, ultimately, the flight."

While there have always been disruptive passengers on board commercial passenger flights, there has been a marked world-wide increase in aggressive behaviour. Australian experience mirrors that of the overseas airlines. Both Qantas and Ansett, which monitor reports of onboard disturbances, last year recorded a significant increase in the number of inflight incidents.

Their figures include all types of disruptions, assaults and rude and offensive behaviour, breaches of Australian aviation laws and

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regulations. The most serious offenses are reported to Federal authorities. Last year 16 people were prosecuted under the Crimes (Aviation) Act, double the number in any previous year over the last five years.

The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) statistics show a similar trend of legal enforcement actions had been initiated against individuals accused of interfering with crew members.

US Federal Aviation Regulation 91.11 (Prohibition against interference with crew members) provides that: "No person may assault, threaten, intimidate, or interfere with a crew member in the performance of the crew member's duties aboard an aircraft being operated."

The FAA's regulatory enforcement database records the number of legal enforcement actions that have been initiated against individuals accused of interfering with crew members. As the table on the following page shows, the last 3 years have seen the rate of violations double.

It must be noted in relation to these numbers, that there has probably been some increase in the level of reporting over this

time. With increased publicity given to these incidents and actions taken by airlines to identify and deal with them as a safety matter, flight attendants have been encouraged to report and recommend action against offenders.

But it is the increasing intensity of some of these incidents that has caused alarm and led to a call for greater preventative measures to curb the violence. Recently, for example, a British Airways stewardess, on a flight to Spain, was struck and stabbed by a bottle wielding tourist. She required 40 stitches to heal the cuts in the arm she raised to protect herself.

In its response to assaults on flight attendants, the US FAA issued a guideline (Advisory Circular 120-65) in October 1996, that urged airlines to develop a strong "no tolerance" policy against assaults.

As laudable as a zero tolerance approach is in trying to support the safety of airline flight crew, unless it is implemented properly and backed up by appropriate training it can actually expose them to greater harm.

Service, security and safety: Airlines need to focus on the service, security and safety continuum and the different models of operational behaviour and responsiveness they entail.



| Year | Violations * | Passengers (millions) | Violation rate / million passengers |
|------|--------------|-----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1992 | 151 | 511.0 | 0.30 |
| 1993 | 129 | 520.4 | 0.25 |
| 1994 | 162 | 562.3 | 0.29 |
| 1995 | 133 | 582.2 | 0.23 |
| 1996 | 180 | 613.6 | 0.29 |
| 1997 | 297 | 635.2 | 0.47 |
| 1998 | 246 | 659.7 | 0.37 |

*FAA data. *Violation count reflects cases that were initiated for that year.*

Increasing levels of customer service and customer satisfaction are a feature of modern air travel and the basis of airline competition. The travelling public generally assumes (and is encouraged in that view by airline advertising) that flight attendants are on board aircraft to provide hospitality services and serve meals.

However, the major activity of cabin crew is to care for the safety of passengers and the evacuation of the aircraft in an emergency. Advances in aircraft design and systems have increased aircraft survivability. Safety is less of an issue to many passengers these days than frequent flyer points. But it has not diminished the need for airline operators to train their staff in emergency procedures. The prevailing model is directional, with staff trained to provide clear commands and control the behaviour of passengers.

The need for greater security is a recent phenomenon. It mirrors the greater occurrence of violence in our society. As one Delta Air Lines commentator has noted, "the cabin environment is a microcosm of society and we should not expect that society's good or bad is not brought on board the aircraft."

The key consideration must therefore be: Which operational method better ensures the security of passengers and manages disruptive and aggressive behaviour on board a fragile aircraft with a limited complement of crew – customer services model or

an emergency procedures one?

People involved in rule breaking in our society are generally regarded as criminal and anti-social. We react by trying to force their adherence to standards of conduct and if they refuse to comply by withdrawing privileges and ultimately their freedom by restraining them.

There is a problem in attempting to categorise passenger behaviour as criminal and using command and control methods (based on emergency procedure training) to control security breaches while in flight. Threatening to use punishment sanctions against passengers as a way of enforcing adherence to codes of conduct and maintaining control misunderstands the fundamental principles of human reaction in situations of stress.

Why people act the way they do: Although factors as diverse as alcohol, fatigue, crowding, stress, lack of sleep, drugs and non-smoking policies have all been nominated, the reasons some passengers are creating these sorts of disturbances are still inconclusive. But they are the same as the reasons

behind the major airline accidents that occur every year – they are due to human factors. Humans are capable of amazing feats of technological innovation and logical decision making, but they also suffer from emotional frailties and irrationalities.

For example, we have achieved the seemingly impossible and technically demanding feat of flying men to the moon and landing the first man, Neil Armstrong on the surface. But the Apollo 11 mission returned without a single close-up still picture of Neil Armstrong on the moon. What was the reason for this? Simple, human emotion. As Richard Underwood, the NASA official responsible for training the astronauts in photography explained: "Buzz Aldrin was mad at Armstrong for seizing the honour of being the first to walk on the moon, so he decided to get even with him by not taking his picture."

While not a case of skyrage, the circumstances of Flight 1771, a BAE-146 which crashed in southern California in 1987 killing 43 people, are sobering. The perpetrator was an employee of Pacific Southwest Airlines who had stolen \$42. The company, adhering to its policy, promptly sacked him. When the employee's pleas for the reinstatement of his job were refused, he bought a ticket on board his boss's flight back to San Francisco and used his employee ID to smuggle a borrowed 44-calibre hand gun onto the plane. After take-off, he confronted his boss and shot and killed him, entered the cockpit and shot both pilots then took the controls and put the plane into a steep dive. Just before impact he

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shot himself. The CVR tape revealed that the time between the first shot and the impact was less than 1 minute. As the FBI investigator put it "how do you tell the families of the passengers that they died over \$42?"

The point is that desperate people will do desperate things. When they feel that they are trapped and

there is no way out – a likely response when they are physically contained in an aircraft for a lengthy period – they will do something seemingly irrational. For this reason modern police methods avoid the, "we have you surrounded, come out with your hands up or we will shoot" approach to dealing with a hostage crisis, preferring to wait and send in a mediator to talk to the perpetrator to deal with their affective responses and emotional distress to provide the opportunity to work out the perceived problems another way.

Eastern exponents of warfare understood

this situation very well. Sun Tsu, the legendary Chinese general and military commentator, cautioned that: "To a surrounded enemy you must leave a way of escape". This advice was followed by the Mongols. When surrounding an enemy or laying siege to a city they were careful not to put their enemy into a position where there was no way out. Knowing that an enemy which felt that they were trapped would fight to their death, they always carefully allowed an escape route.

Traditional solutions for dealing with an altercation on board a flight had the cabin crew refer problems upwards to the captain who is vested with the authority to deal with them. In a recent incident on board a US domestic carrier, the captain sent the first officer into the cabin to resolve a dispute with a passenger. In the resulting scuffle the first officer was punched by the passenger, had his nose broken and was thereby incapacitated. With 2-pilot aircraft in widespread use today, there are real dangers in a pilot trying to resolve a dispute.

With no cavalry to call in, or support that can readily be obtained at 33,000ft, an authoritarian reaction by flight crew to the enforcement of regulations can lead to a desperate reaction to a simple irritant. In contrast, the use of modern mediation principles and techniques of affective response can provide a safer and more harmonious process for handling these situations.

Better ways: A recent study by the US Federal Aviation Administration of interference with crew members in the performance of their duties conducted over an eighteen month period ending in June 1998, looked at the incidence of category 3 misconduct, the most serious type of interference. The study covered all major US airlines and several non-US carriers that operate scheduled routes into the United States.

Although it is often assumed that alcohol is the largest factor in sky rage behaviour, the study found that it was involved in only one-third of the incidents. While many factors such as seating, length of flight, origin, departure times and the like were reviewed, no single cause for incidents of interference could be identified. Slightly over one-third of the passengers causing these incidents were female. The report concluded that "crew members and corporate executives alike should focus on enhanced training that would address the de-escalation of conflicts, confrontation management, effective intervention techniques, and incident follow up".

It is that approach that a number of airlines

are now pursuing. They are training their staff to work with the passengers emotional upset, to help them regain control – softly. This method more closely matches traditional customer service policies to assist passengers, rather than trying to command and control them by methods more suited to emergency procedure operations.

The techniques of mediation and martial arts have a lot to offer for the training of staff to better control security problems. Mediation has a long history of working with emotionally disturbed people in highly charged areas such as family law crises. The martial art of Aikido (which means the way of harmony) provides principles of collaborative action which provide a physical metaphor for the operating techniques of mediators.

Mediative interventions: It is accepted that under stress humans react with either flee or fight responses.

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This is an autonomic nervous system reaction to perceived threats. Once triggered, the reaction is an emotive response lacking conscious control.

Recognising this, a mediative approach

teaches flight attendants skills to avoid reacting instinctively to passenger aggression, and to respond harmoniously. This response occurs on physical, verbal and emotional levels.

The different approaches can be illustrated by example. Using a command and control style, a flight attendant coming across a passenger using a lap-top as the aircraft descends for landing could:

- Stand to the front looking at them (physical);
- Ignore their obvious activity (emotional);
- Issue the verbal directive, "You have to put that away now as we are coming in to land".

A flight attendant using a mediative intervention would proceed differently. He or she would:

- Stand alongside the passenger's seat, as much as possible looking in the same direction as the passenger (physical);
- Align his or her focal attention (with that of the passenger) at the computer (emotional);
- Acknowledge the passenger's exertions: "you look busy". State the procedures impersonally: "computers can't be used when an aircraft is landing". Offer alternatives, assistance or advice and assume compliance: "I can put the computer in an overhead locker for you", "you'll have time to continue after we are on the ground" (verbal).

The difference in approach is that while a command and control method seeks to limit

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behaviour to, generally, only one mode, the mediative approach offers up a multitude of possibilities and then intercedes to lead the passenger to the preferred option.

The directive approach tells the passenger what they have to do. If there is a challenge to that, then the most likely outcome will be positional warfare as each side tries to overpower the other. The responsive approach by comparison, attempts to "tune into" the passengers concerns, assist the passenger to explore options to resolving their problem and gently guide them to a preferred solution.

By respecting and receiving the upset passenger's emotional situation the cabin crew redirects the passenger's energy by reflecting and reframing their concerns. This approach allows the passenger to regain control of themselves without the need for aggressive or coercive action. It also reduces tensions and the likelihood of the incident escalating into a violent disruption that could threaten the safety of the aircraft.

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