

Assertiveness in the



Being assertive is not easy. It's often easier to be aggressive or passive. So how does someone without natural assertiveness, learn the skill? And why is it important for aviation safety?

Organisation development specialist, Julie Rowlands, says if people want to develop assertiveness, they do have to screw up a bit of pluck.

"It's the courage to do what you know is right, in the face of being challenged about it. Or, when someone is testing you, and you don't like their style, and you don't like the impact they're having on you, it's having the confidence to do something constructive about that.

"It's not about being fearless in a confrontational situation. It's about managing your anxiety and remaining calm and quietly determined, despite the situation."

Julie says men, in particular, confuse assertiveness and aggressiveness. Being the loudest voice in the room, controlling the group, staring down people who disagree with you is not being assertive, it's being aggressive. And while organisational goals may still be reached by someone 'monsterring' their staff in such ways, morale will inevitably be low, output poor, and staff churn high.

Assertiveness, on the other hand, is built on respect – for one's own worth and for the worth of other staff.



Julie Rowlands



Aviation Workplace

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“People wanting to develop assertiveness skills have to be prepared to initiate ‘the courageous conversation’,” Julie says. “Even if it doesn’t go perfectly, learning from each opportunity to attempt assertiveness will build the skill. Unless you actually start practising, it will always be a theoretical exercise.”

So what is ‘being assertive’?

“What underpins assertiveness is the acceptance that everyone in an employment situation has rights,” says Julie Rowlands.

“A manager has the right to expect a certain level of behaviour

and/or performance from those reporting to them. And an employee has the right to be able to offer suggestions if something is concerning them, without fear of ridicule or retribution – a ‘just culture’.

“Assertive people – managers and employees – recognise those rights and respect them, even while they might occupy different viewpoints.”

Julie Rowlands says in some workplace environments, managers do not welcome suggestions which they automatically regard as criticism, and if from less experienced staff, invalid.

One go is all it takes – Richard’s story

You could say I was a relatively passive person. I was pretty happy to go along with what everyone else wanted.

I was a commercial pilot with about 1500 hours, when the company I flew for was sold to a guy with a brand-new CPL. This guy decided that when there were no passengers, to save money, we would fly single-engine (carburetted) IFR, at night, over a known icing area.

I was really troubled by the prospect of making such high-risk flights. I tried to point out to this new guy the lunacy of what he was proposing. I told him of another pilot who’d been flying single engine on a similar route and who’d

had an extremely close call with carb icing.

But he wouldn’t budge. So I told him I wasn’t going to put my neck on the line and he would need to find another pilot.

Maybe if I hadn’t felt like my life might be in danger, I wouldn’t have been so assertive. But it marked the first time I hadn’t gone along with what the boss wanted. Made me realise it is worth standing up for what you believe is right.

As it happened, I got another job quite quickly flying IFR, and instructing.

I’ve had to be assertive on many occasions since then, but the confidence to be so, began with that first instance.

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She advises employees in that environment to prepare themselves for defensiveness and attack.

“Anticipate it, and recognise that it’s normal, particularly if you have criticised someone else’s actions and behaviour. Then prepare to calmly reassert yourself again. And again. Sometimes it can take up to five ‘assertions’ to get your point of view seriously considered.”

Which works fine for the employee in an environment where five ‘assertions’ would be tolerated without the threat of job loss.

But as Julie observes, the aviation industry is very hierarchical. “At times it will be more difficult for the young engineer or pilot to challenge what they believe is unsafe or inappropriate.

“It’s easy to say to them, ‘You just have to say something because safety is at risk’, but we’re not the person who has to live with the consequences of that action. It’s something they, themselves, have to decide to do.

“If they do decide to challenge it, however, they have to do it assertively, which means raising the issue in a way that’s often

focused on a solution, rather than the problem. So instead of saying, ‘you shouldn’t be doing this, it’s wrong’ the words need to be something like ‘I’m genuinely concerned about this because of these reasons, but if you were willing to look at doing it this way, I think it might get a better outcome and a safer outcome.’

“In the face of a reasonably difficult CEO, who is short on time, something like that needs preparation so you can approach it in a composed way.”

But what about the situation where there is no time for such preparation – where someone is being asked to do something immediately, like sign off on a task they’ve had nothing to do with, and are possibly unhappy about?

“In that situation, it’s still being assertive,” says Julie, “to hit the ‘pause’ button, keep breathing calmly and ask for more information, and more time to consider the request.”

The Bulls-based flying doctor of *Healthy Bastards* fame, Dave Baldwin, says that situation is similar to that which many house surgeons used to face.

“You signed off on stuff when someone told you to, because you were a wee bit scared. Then something would go wrong, but you’d signed off on it, so you were responsible. That’s a maturing experience which had you more assertive in the future!

“After that, every time someone tried to get you to sign off on something you were unhappy with, you’d say ‘I’d rather go through this process and see what’s happening’ and they might respond with something like ‘No, hurry up, you have to sign this, we’re short of time here’ and the newly-assertive you would reply with ‘Well then, why don’t you sign it?’

“You learned from the school of hard knocks.”

Julie Rowlands says a trawl around the internet will uncover the many assertiveness courses, ‘courageous conversations’ workshops, and conflict resolution coaching now available.

The Assertiveness – Safety Connection

Anyone who’s done a Safety Management Systems (SMS) course can tell you SMS is underpinned by the buying-in to a safety culture by all staff.



Dave Baldwin

Assertiveness and Respect – Lynda’s story

I was a first officer working with a European airline, and rostered to fly with a captain I’d not flown with before. When he greeted me with “oh no, it’s a bloody sheila” I knew then the duty was not going to be pleasant.

He was new to the airline and had no experience on the route we were flying. I was, however, very familiar with it.

I put up with this guy’s foul-mouthed, racist and sexist comments for the two-hour flight to the south of France. As we neared our destination, he became progressively high and fast on approach. The airline has standard challenge phraseology that first officers should use to bring any deviations to the captain’s attention. Despite my using these phrases, he continued to ignore me.

Nearing the ‘missed approach’ point, I escalated my terminology to the highest level to get him to act, with no response. It was now clear that he was way behind the aircraft, had lost situational awareness, and the aircraft was in great danger.

Finally abandoning all standard phrases, I ordered, “Go round now! We are going to die on those mountains ahead!”

That ‘reality statement’ finally jolted him out of his tunnel vision.

He was so surprised at being upbraided by this little ‘sheila’, he immediately followed all my directions until we landed safely.

He knew I’d saved the flight and I had his respect.

When Good Managers Go... Even Better – Joe's story

I was a certification manager for an aircraft operator with a number of engineers reporting to me.

One of them had to review the applicability of Federal Aviation Authority Airworthiness Directives (ADs) to our fleet. But I became aware he wasn't thorough in that work, and was mistakenly assuming the ADs weren't applicable.

When I had to question him as to why he hadn't looked more deeply into a particular AD, he argued the toss, trying to convince me it was irrelevant.

I had a choice. I could 'come the heavy' with him and get the result I wanted, or I could keep calm but firm, and get the result I wanted.

Given the seriousness of the situation I gave him a 'lawful employment instruction' to complete his research thoroughly, document his findings and get back to me within an hour.*

He returned in that time, apologising and admitting the AD was, indeed, applicable to our aircraft. Subsequently, he always researched ADs thoroughly, documenting his findings.

My assertiveness changed the engineer's behaviour in a positive way. I could have bullied him into compliance, but I would have ended up with a resentful employee.

*A 'lawful employment instruction' is one that an employer can give to an employee and the employee must legally abide by the instruction.

An SMS is at its most robust when all staff feel comfortable reporting occurrences and hazards, and even their own mistakes.

Neil Richardson, from the British aviation safety consultants, Baines Simmons, and recently in New Zealand to provide training on SMS, mulls a possible association between an organisation that gives genuine consideration to its employees' suggestions, the resulting quality of its SMS, and, quite possibly, the company's bottom line.

"What no senior management team needs is a nasty surprise like an aviation accident. You could call SMS, the 'Surprise Management System'. They don't need anything that upsets their broader business or strategic goals because an event of significance will punch a hole in their bottom line."

But while many organisations have a stated culture of allowing all staff to have their say on safety, Neil suggests that the reality is different.

"The regulator expects the organisation to have a safety culture and will offer a viewpoint, but when the door closes behind them as they leave, ongoing behaviour can be very different.

"It has to come from the leadership. If the senior managers don't understand or buy into it themselves, it becomes difficult to make it stick.

"Possibly the best motivator of senior management is to convince them that it is good business to allow even junior staff to voice their concerns about safety.

"While most organisations will not experience a significant accident, the precursors to such will be more prevalent. Operational errors, inadequate defences, and the like, will likely be causing financial stress as well as eroding safety margins. Whatever profit is being made, allowing all staff members to report their worries will at least help to preserve that profit."

Dave Baldwin – who estimates he sees about 20 per cent of New Zealand aviation operations as he tours the country carrying out medicals – says the type of manager who considers themselves "the general at the top", the guy – normally – with ego issues and what Dave describes as a "personality-disordered fly off-the-handle temperament", is disappearing.

"Thank goodness!" he exclaims. "That culture does seem to



Neil Richardson

have faded during my 25 years in aviation medicine. The demigods are disappearing. There is an emphasis now on teamwork, and questioning of the higher-ups is not seen as a bad thing."

Despite that, there is a small percentage of companies he deals with who he would class as having a bullying culture.

"When someone's genuine concerns are ignored, it's a form of bullying. For instance, forcing someone to do something they are clearly unhappy doing. It can be real tough stuff.

"The irony is that for a financially-stressed company, where everyone is being slapped around to save money, forcing your staff into doing things they are reluctant to do, only makes things worse. Their morale suffers, their physical health suffers, and their work performance suffers.

Neil Richardson says there is, however, a slow turning of the tide.

"Yes, it is slowly coming. Insurance companies, for instance, are switching on to the benefits of their client having a genuine SMS and just culture, and how it is an advantage not just to the organisation, but to them as the underwriter.

"People are beginning to look at the return on investment in these things." ■