THE MESSY REALITY OF WORKING IN THE CABIN

When we think of aviation safety professionals, do we also think of cabin crew? If not, then we need to learn more about their work, as **Patricia Green** explains.

Our aim in aviation is to keep our skies safe and ensure every flight is as safe and efficient as it can be. We all have our individual roles to play, as cabin crew, engineer, dispatcher, pilot or air traffic controller. We all use crew resource management (CRM) to ensure effective communication, teamwork and decision-making processes. We try to understand human factors in operations, and use our CRM and threat and error management skills to mitigate risks every day.

Safety and service

There is a perception that cabin crew are not safety professionals, but rather service providers. This is perhaps because most people only 'see' the service aspects of our everyday work. They don't see what we are trained to do. It would surprise most people that service is about 2% of our training. We are trained to deal with any emergency within the cabin, including fighting a fire to landing on water, handling a decompression, evacuation on land, and medical emergencies.

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We have to know everything in our cabin; the emergency equipment, the communication systems, the oxygen systems as well as knowing all the associated procedures. With experience, we develop an intuitive approach in the cabin and become sensitive to our environment and the situations that unfold on each flight. We become sensitive to movement, sounds, smells and anything non-routine.

The ICAO website for cabin safety states:

"Cabin crew members also play an important proactive role in managing safety, which can contribute to the prevention of accidents."

The Contribution of CRM

There is no doubt that since the introduction of CRM training, aviation safety has improved. Communication between the flight crew and cabin crew is much better. We have more of an understanding of each other's work and there is less of a status barrier. Cabin crew are now actively encouraged to report to the flight crew anything they think is suspicious or potentially abnormal, and we are their 'eyes and ears in the cabin' at all times.

The effectiveness of CRM can be seen in such accidents as United Airlines

232 in 1989 in Sioux City, where there were many survivors and the crew handled the emergency well without conventional controls. United Airlines 811 in 1989 is another example, after an explosive decompression occurred causing considerable damage to the aircraft. British Airways 5390 in 1990 is another case, where a windshield was fitted incorrectly and the captain was blown partially out of the aircraft and the crew's actions saved his life.

However, this is not always the case. One such example (often used in CRM training) is the Kegworth disaster in 1989. BMA 92 tried to make an emergency landing after an engine issue – the cabin crew reported a fire in the wrong engine, and the flight crew shut down the working engine. The cabin crew "Didn't feel it was their business…" to report anything further. Another example is Air Ontario 1363 in 1989, where there was snow on the wings on take off. A passenger, who was a pilot, asked the flight attendant to tell the flight crew but she didn't. One of the training managers said that "The flight attendants were trained not to question the flight crew's judgement regarding safety issues."

Since then, basic knowledge of the aircraft and flight are taught in cabin crew training, as it was found that greater technical knowledge would improve communication in an emergency.

Even as recently as 2019 in Stansted, UK, an incident occurred on a Lauda Air flight where the senior flight attendant initiated an unnecessary emergency evacuation on the ground. There was an engine problem and she was overwhelmed, misunderstood the flight crew's command and was having difficulty communicating with other crew members. She stated "For me, if the door was closed, I have nothing to do with them…" The investigation showed flaws in training and the senior flight attendant's lack of flying experience.

Challenges to Effective CRM

So, what have we learned about the difficulties we may have with CRM in our everyday work life? There are regulatory barriers with the sterile cockpit procedure and the locked cockpit door, so it can still be difficult to communicate efficiently. Once the cabin door and cockpit door are closed, we are essentially sealed off from the rest of the aviation community and often there will be little understanding of what is going on in the cabin.

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Outside of the aircraft, there can sometimes be issues organisationally, with a 'them and us' attitude, where there is a lack of respect towards the cabin crew and a lack of trust towards the management. Rules and procedures are often enforced by non-flying managers or people who do not work in the cabin, so dissatisfaction issues occur across all levels. Reports are not always responded to, even though we are on the frontline, dealing with these issues. This could be resolved by managers taking time to understand everyday work for cabin crew.

A small cabin crew complement is also an issue (one per every 50 passengers for most countries, but one per every 36 passengers in Australia).

Other issues affecting good CRM on a day-to-day basis can be the practicalities of working in the cabin. Long hours and often numerous sectors can result in fatigue, which affects our health and performance. Stress, workload and the potential threats that may be encountered such as an unruly passenger, medical emergency or other events, can make daily work more difficult. There are also worries regarding air quality and now, of course, COVID-19.

The cabin design and ergonomics also affect our day-to-day work. This includes the design of the galley, the width of the aisles, seat pitch, and access to safety equipment in an emergency. Cabin safety focal groups can help to improve cabin design and effectiveness.

Learning as One Team

So, what can we take from a cabin crew perspective? You might not see us, but we are right at the heart of aviation safety, every day. There needs to be greater learning about our everyday work, and learning together between professions, for safety as well as service. It is essential that we all work and learn as one team, no matter what barriers there might be (physical or mental). We are all safety professionals.

Patricia Green has been cabin crew for major airlines in the UK and Middle East. She has also worked as a VIP Flight Attendant for high profile clients and world leaders on their private jets. Most recently, Patricia was Head of Cabin Crew and Cabin Safety Focal Point. She has a Postgraduate Diploma in Human Factors in Aviation.

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