



CAPTAINING THROUGH COVID-19

As we cope with the new reality of work during COVID-19, how can captains, supervisors and other team leaders create the right environments for teams to perform well and stay well? **Captain Paul Reuter** offers some tips from experience.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a strong message is being sent by the European Union Aviation Safety Authority (EASA) and other stakeholder organisations to operators to implement peer support and to give proper support to crew members. This aims to help crew members to deal with the uncertainties and impacts of this crisis. It is also heart-warming to see initiatives such as the European aviation mental wellbeing initiative (EAM-WELL), the European Aviation Wellbeing Committee, the European Pilot Peer Support Initiative (EPPSI), the European Association for Aviation Psychology (EAAP) and others that try to stress the importance of 'wellbeing' for safe and resilient crew performance.

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the realities of the COVID crisis into teamwork. As I reflect upon this as a captain, I realise that in general, operators give us very little guidance on how to build a team. Our manuals are very prescriptive on what to brief but very short on the relationship side of team building. Often, apart from highlighting the occasional safety topic or mentioning the odd CRM theme, we do not thoroughly address anything related to team building at all.

There is no silver bullet for achieving this but – in trying to learn from my own work – here are five thoughts that might help.

1. Acknowledge the Current Exceptional Situation

The aviation sector, and society at large, faces the biggest challenge in a long time. As individuals, most of us have never had to face such uncertainties, concerning our livelihoods and our wellbeing. The aim of the crew- or team leader is to help create an environment where crew members feel psychologically safe while also clearly setting boundaries and focusing the team on the mission. A quick check-in with your crew or team on how everybody is doing will help your crew feel confident that their worries are taken seriously. Sharing that you, as senior members of the crew, are also impacted by the uncertain consequences might help junior crew members to open up about their worries.

2. Frame the Mission

In these times, rumours such as threats of redundancies and cuts to income will have spread among crews, both in person and via social media. This will affect everyone, but junior crew members may be more susceptible to be overwhelmed by the amount of bad news and rumours. If such a topic comes up during a briefing, acknowledge and address it. Try to put it into context but then refocus your crew on the mission, reminding them that we cannot let events over which we have no control affect the way we perform.

3. Consider the Challenges that the Cabin Crew Faces

While most operators allow us to leave the mask in the cockpit, cabin crews need to wear the mask both in the cabin and in the galleys. They have no respite regarding wearing a mask and may also be confronted with additional tense situations associated with compliance with the current hygiene rules.

Now, more than ever, it is important to stress to your cabin crew that any issue they face in the cabin is an issue that you will solve as crew, and that you as a commander and the cockpit crew will be actively involved in finding a solution.

Another issue you might want to consider is that some of your crew might be grateful for a little time out or a 'safe space' during the duty where they can relax and recuperate a little.

There is no need to chase the schedule and on turnaround it might be advisable to ensure that your crew gets a few minutes alone without cleaning personnel or passengers in the cabin to relax and refocus. This will help create trust and confidence within your crew and ensuring that you have a dedicated and fit crew to operate the next sector.

4. Have Each Other's Backs

A well-functioning and resilient team is a team where people are not afraid to voice concern or acknowledge vulnerabilities. A team leader needs to foster such an atmosphere.

Your team should understand that you 'have each other's back' – to look out for and support one another. To be able to do so, people need to feel psychologically safe to speak up and be honest about their feelings. That goes for the team leader as well. For your team to perform and have your back, you will need to be honest with them. Even as a leader, you are allowed to feel unsure, have doubts and voice them. No one expects you to have all the answers.

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5. The Joker Card

In these strange times, some crew members (especially junior) might feel obliged to show up for duties when not fit to fly.

If you have any doubts about the fitness of one of your crew members, find a way to raise the topic gently. Refusing a crew member who is unfit for duty is in everyone's best interest. As a team leader, you should help the crew member come to a realistic assessment of their fitness and you make it clear that you will back up the crew member further down the line if you swap him or her out. Similarly, should your crew voice concerns concerning your own fitness, address it honestly and in a constructive way and if needed, step back from your duty.

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In the company I work for, which is quite small, we have the advantage of knowing (almost) everybody, so it is easier to approach each other than in a company with thousands of crew members.

Similarly, we tend to brief together, providing many opportunities to incorporate these ideas in our preflight. With some operators you might meet your cabin crew only in the shuttle or at

the aircraft. Still, it is advisable to take two minutes to gather your crew and to briefly address the topics that you believe need addressing.

As a captain, you not only hold ultimate responsibility for your crew. You should also see yourself at the centre of that team, giving support and helping your team and your team members to learn and grow. A proper debrief after a flight or even an open discussion on the events of the day and how they were handled should be seen by everyone as an opportunity to learn and improve, yourself included.

While we may feel that sometimes the challenges and hurdles that this crisis is facing us are huge, we should acknowledge that there are opportunities as well. One opportunity might be to refocus our efforts on how, as a crew, we are a team, bigger than the sum of its parts and how important it is to foster relationships within the team.

Whether our team is a small crew of a regional airline or a department within a larger organisation, we might rediscover how empathy, mutual respect and support, as well as transparent communications, can make us, as individuals and our teams more resilient, better performing and ultimately bring back some fun and joy to our work. 



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