

FLIGHT CREW BRIEFING

Original idea from John Wiley

An effective crew briefing is an opportunity to transform a group of individuals into a highly effective team



Military aviation has a long history of requiring briefings prior to each sortie. This requirement is standard regardless of aircraft. This policy also has been adopted by most airlines, albeit somewhat modified to include a crew briefing, a departure briefing, a pre-takeoff briefing and an approach briefing.

It can be argued that the single, most important briefing is the crew briefing since it may set the tone for the entire flight. However, this assertion is not universally accepted.

Although their numbers are diminishing, there is still a small group of aviators who say the crew briefing is

little more than time for a group hug and for everyone to feel good about themselves. Some aviators derisively refer to the crew briefing as *"the social hour."* This is indeed unfortunate since these captains may never lead a highly effective crew except by sheer chance.

GROUP OR TEAM ?

Dr. Robert Ginnett is a senior fellow at the Center for Creative Leadership in Colorado Springs. For 10 years, he was a tenured professor at the U.S. Air Force Academy. He has studied airline crews for more than 25 years and has found there is a difference between a fully developed team and a group of individuals working together. Ginnett uses the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team and the 1988 U.S. Olympic basketball team to illustrate his point.

There were few superstars on the 1980 hockey team, and their chance to win a gold medal was deemed impossible. Before they could get the gold, they would have to overcome a barrage of teams all rated superior in talent, experience and ability. Yet the U.S. hockey team overcame incredible odds to take the gold.

This is starkly contrasted against the 1988 basketball team, made up entirely of superstars. These superstars suffered defeat at the hands of teams not as highly regarded, and these superstars did not reach their expected potential. The gold medal eluded them. Ginnett says the difference was that the hockey players made up a highly effective team that worked together while the basketball players operated as a group of individuals.

Many aviators do not like articles with psychological terms and concepts and they shrug off such pieces as "more psychobabble." But to understand how groups transition into effective teams, it is imperative to at least touch on how groups become teams. According to various studies, groups form in three stages: inclusion, control and trust. Individuals want to know they are part of a team. This is the inclusion. The second stage is knowing who is going to exert control and how that control is going to be exerted. The final stage is trust.

Note that a leader cannot merely expect a group to extend trust just because he or she is appointed leader or wearing four stripes. Individuals want to see some reason to justify their trust. If a team is to achieve high performance, this third stage - trust - must be achieved as quickly as possible. The well-done initial crew briefing can promote inclusion and establish control so that trust can be achieved.

Certainly, the assembled members of the crew will be asking a lot of questions - silently, if not aloud - during the beginning stages of a briefing. This is illustrated in an interview Ginnett conducted with a first officer:

Ginnett.- *"Are all captains the same?"*

FO: *"Oh, no. Some guys are the greatest in the world to fly with. I mean they may not have the best hands in the world, but that doesn't matter. When you fly with them, you feel like you want to do everything you can to work together to get the job done. You really want to do a good job for them. Some guys are just the opposite ... you can't stand to work for them. That doesn't mean you'll do anything that is unsafe or dangerous, but you won't go out of your way to keep them out of trouble either. So, you'll just sit back and do what you have to do."*

Ginnett. *"How can you tell which kind of guy you're working with?"*

FO: *"Oh, you can tell."*

Ginnett.- *"How?"*

FO: *"I don't know how you tell, but it doesn't take long. Just a couple of minutes and you will know."*



In the first few minutes of contact, the group sizes each other up and decides how easy or how difficult this captain will be to work with. Therein lies the importance of a good, clear crew briefing. It is the first opportunity for the captain to put forth a clear vision of what is going to happen and what is expected. The captain also has a chance to demonstrate he or she is comfortable in the leadership position. Again, the group is studying the captain to see what type of leader this person will be: autocratic, inclusive or unknown.

For this article, we will consider four groups of captains. The first group comprises captains who ignore the requirement completely and do not conduct a briefing. Tony Kem, author of *Redefining Airmanship and Flight Discipline*, refers to this behavior as *"selective compliance."* Since the captain has selected this requirement to ignore, the crew is left wondering what other regulations, policies and procedures are going to be ignored. This crew is unlikely to evolve into a highly effective team.

The second group offers a meager effort to comply with the requirement. Their briefing might be as simple as *"I will do my job. You do yours"* or a variation on that theme such as *"I do everything by the book."* Obviously, the first briefing does little to promote communication or cooperation. In fact, it reinforces barriers between the cockpit and cabin crew, and this crew also is unlikely to win any gold medals. The latter response may seem like a concise briefing, but again it does little to stimulate communication or cooperation and the crew is left in a quandary about how to deal with situations that are not *"in the book."* A third group undermining captains - pays lip service to procedure but makes it clear they aren't true believers as is exemplified in the following report extracted from NASA's Aviation Safety Reporting System.

"...The trip started with the usual introductions and a very formal crew briefing. I thought obviously the captain takes CRM very seriously. This is good ! However, as he talked, he pointed out that certain company procedures are 'BS' and we would do it this way. He made it clear that the PF was to program the FMC and it was not necessary for the PNF to follow along the route with VORs. "The computer knows where it is going."

"Also discussed was his recent sim checkride and the mentality behind some of the standard procedures that are 'BS' and were derived from the old 'air carrier X' and 'air carrier Y' mindset."

He said that his evaluator was an 'X' check airman and that they have forced a lot of worthless procedures on us and that he ardently disagreed with some of them to his evaluator. Once we got going I realized the start of a negative trend when additional non-standard actions were directed on the pressurization and bleed panel, flight director commands and mode control panel functions after takeoff". . . I became aware that when I was allowed to do my job even the most routine of tasks was closely scrutinized. I thought back to his crew briefing as a preface to CRM and realized that the briefing was more harmful than none at all because his words and actions were totally divergent. This already had broken down an important element of synergy and complicated matters by the resultant confusion."

The report ends with the crew having to do a go-around because the first officer refused to continue a descent below 1,500 feet at night while the captain tried to acquire the airfield visually. It is especially interesting to note in the follow-up documentation provided by NASA that both pilots were from the airline acquired in the mergers, and NASA inserts the comment, *"One pilot agrees with current policy and one obviously doesn't."*



This third group's negative briefing is, by far, the most destructive. Ginnett writes, *"These captains create conditions that undermine crew effectiveness. In an organization with established [Standard Operating Procedures] that foster effective crew work, undermining captains negate the pre-existing and positive [SOPs]."* Ginnett continues, *"If captains say they do not want flight attendants to get off the aircraft to talk to gate personnel without their permission, the flight engineer who overhears this may well wonder whether he or she needs the captain's specific approval to conduct a walk-around inspection of the aircraft. Worse yet, should he or she take the initiative to plan ahead for the crew's benefit or wait to see if it is "what the captain wants?"*

There is an additional problem with such a negative briefing. The impressions and experience with these captains can extend beyond this crew. Ginnett notes that *"if a captain can behave inappropriately and the organization fails to correct that inappropriate behavior, the other members will doubt the validity of the [SOPS] and, hence, expect less of subsequent captains and crews."* This negative briefing can have a negative influence that will spread like a cancer within an organization and cause reduced expectations and performance.

Contrast the performance of those three groups with our fourth group, which consists of captains whose good crew briefings helped create highly effective teams. In one research project, Ginnett also broke his groups into captains who were highly effective (HE) in building teams and those who were not as effective (LE). Ginnett expected HE captains would stress tasks to be accomplished by the group, team boundaries consisting of who would do what and when, and relevant norms for effective behavior. Ginnett was surprised that the HE captains did not do this.

The HE captains did not discuss tasks very much but spent more time discussing boundaries. However, rather than enforcing barriers, the discussions focused on breaking down barriers and making barriers more "permeable." The HE captains used the initial crew briefing and subsequent opportunities to make sure everyone worked together. HE captains also used the term "we" more to create a more inclusive environment. The HE captains also extended the boundaries of the team to include other members such as gate personnel, ground personnel, maintenance and ATC. One captain even suggested that passengers could be part of the team if flight attendants listened when they voiced concern.

In contrast, the LE captains spent more time reinforcing boundaries and defining how tasks would be done and by whom. One captain went so far as to explain to the flight attendants how the garbage should be bagged. HE captains also stressed three norms in their crew briefings. They emphasized the importance of safety, effective communication and cooperation. It may seem odd that safety had to be mentioned at all, but crews still want to know if the captain is willing to compromise safety for other goals or if safety is the prime mandate. In effective communication, the HE captains demonstrated they wanted an exchange of information by taking the time to do a crew briefing. Thus, it was not just lip service to a concept, but the captain showed he or she wanted to talk to the crew, that he or she expected the crew to talk to him/her.

HE captains gave a logical, organized briefing. This showed they had prepared for what was about to happen, they had a plan and they were comfortable in the role of a leader. Being comfortable as a leader did not seem significant until later. Ginnett noticed those captains who did not exhibit this trait were more likely to be rated as LE.

HE captains also told the crew they did not expect perfection from themselves or the crew, but that everyone should take responsibility for a successful outcome for the group. This was noted by one captain telling the crew, ". . . so anything you see or do that will help out, I'd sure appreciate hearing about it." By doing this, the HE captains used various leadership techniques that reinforced the captain's position authority while enhancing participation from others.

HE captains also engaged the crew and when giving briefings, they did not run through a canned briefing. The briefing allowed time for comment and questions and they encouraged conversation among the crew. This is not to say the HE captains took longer to brief the crew or that they spent time discussing more detail than the LE captains.

Ginnett is quite clear in one assertion. The responsibility for forming a highly effective team rests squarely on the shoulders of the captain. It is the captain's behavior that has a significant impact on how the crew will perform. This was demonstrated in a simulator event that involved a crew encountering mechanical problems shortly after takeoff for a long-range flight. The crew had to dump fuel, deal with the mechanical problems and return to a short, wet runway.

In this experiment, it was expected that the outcome would be primarily influenced by the flight engineer, but this was not the case. The captain was the defining factor. Those captains who saw the problem as a crew problem did better than those who saw the event as a "*piloting problem*."

Ginnett concludes the best captains are the ones who "*appreciate and exploit the opportunity for crew effectiveness provided them at the time of the crew formation*." Also, these captains "*... expand and create new opportunities for constructive interaction among the crewmembers. They elaborate and expand the norms regarding safety, cooperation and communication*."

It should not be difficult to do a good crew briefing. Spend some time preparing it. Develop a logical and concise format to present the information if the company does not provide one. Emphasize safety, communication and cooperation. Take time for the crew to interact, to ask questions, to make comments. Break down stereotypes and barriers that stifle communication and interaction. Don't be content with a group of individuals. Build a team. To do less is to miss a great opportunity.