

As a long-serving commercial pilot and airline executive, STEVE FORTE, Virgin America COO, tells Brunswick's BRANDON BORRMAN that intensive preparation is the key to dealing with crises on the flight deck - and in the boardroom

Few professionals train to deal with crises more rigorously and regularly than commercial airline pilots. The lengthy qualification process, endless training, and compulsory “check rides” with inspectors instill a level of discipline and preparation that other professions rarely approach.

Yet for all the complexity in the pilot training process, the goal is straightforward: to be able to resolve issues that could arise suddenly and unexpectedly, that jeopardize the safety of pilots, crew, passengers and cargo.

In more than 20 years as a captain, Steve Forte has seen more than his share of challenging situations while in command of an airplane. As a former senior executive at United Airlines, and now as Chief Operating Officer of Virgin America, he has also seen first-hand how valuable the discipline he learned as a pilot can be when it comes to leadership during a crisis in the corporate world.

LEADING A TEAM

Forte learned as a flight captain to set a high bar for the responsibilities of senior leaders during a crisis. Perhaps less expected is his insistence that a company's leaders understand that they will function more effectively as part of a team rather than as dictators.

He draws a parallel to the Cockpit Resource Management (CRM) training that pilots undergo to ensure that potential roadblocks, such as seniority, do not slow down problem-solving.

“The whole point of CRM is that you need to train and convince senior leaders – captains – that they will make better decisions by gathering information and listening to those around them than by simply taking a ‘command and control’ approach. There are two elements to good decision making, neither of which work if you try to isolate yourself as a leader. First, don't make a decision until you need to. Second, gather as much information as

possible before making a decision. That means you have to actively seek input, ask questions, and rely on the experts around you. You will dig a much deeper hole for yourself if you start making decisions in a vacuum.”

Furthermore, the role of a leader in a crisis goes beyond just making decisions. A key responsibility for a captain is to be a beacon of calm in order to help your team remain focused. Business leaders should share that goal. “Remember, people may not be physically injured but you need to supply psychological support to the people around you. You need to keep your cool and help those working with you do the same.”

TRAINING AND CHECKLISTS

The importance of training and practice is often underestimated. A once-a-year “tabletop drill” – simply discussing duties in case of crisis – will likely leave people scrambling in the face of a real crisis.

Forte is a staunch advocate of proper crisis training. “Pilots undergo detailed specific training on almost every conceivable emergency. The value on the flight deck is obvious, but I have found the same value in business. The better you

**THIS IS YOUR
CAPTAIN
SPEAKING ...**



plan for possible scenarios, the better your results will be.”

The goal of such training, whether in the flight simulator or the office, should be to eliminate time wasted considering options and making decisions that could be reached more efficiently through practice, or managed through tools, such as playbooks and checklists.

“A few critical problems are routinely practiced by pilots because the motor skills and procedures involved require recurrent training if the pilot is to remain sharp. There is a very extensive list of other problems that can occur that are handled using checklists. These are basically ‘read and do’ lists, covering things such as hydraulic, electrical, fuel, and pneumatic problems.” Forte reckons the same principles work for businesses.

TYRANNY OF THE PLAYBOOK

There is a caveat to working from a playbook or checklist. Inevitably, companies encounter a crisis that is not covered, and when that happens crisis leaders have to manage the unexpected by drawing on the *principles* of the playbook.

“There will always be problems that occur in flight that are not specifically

covered by a checklist,” Forte says. “Things like multiple system failures or a total loss of normal flight controls. Or, to be more specific, when something happens like the DHL aircraft that was hit by a missile in Iraq in 2003. Events like these don’t have a specific procedure because they are impossible to anticipate. In these cases, pilots take whatever checklist guidance they have and then rely on their experience to figure out what to do. Crew cooperation and teamwork are essential in these situations.”

Similarly, the kinds of crises companies deal with are rarely, if ever, contained within the neat boxes and timelines of a playbook. Companies need flexibility and speed in their response too.

“On September 11, we had to throw the book out the window,” says Forte, who was running flight operations at United Airlines that day. “Our emergency manual anticipated that we would be able to travel to the crash site, and that didn’t happen for two days. We never planned to have more than one accident at a time. In New York there really wasn’t a ‘traditional’ crash site. Our crisis center, which would normally open for a few days, was open for weeks. And there were multiple new safety directives, sometimes several in one day, which required immediate communication and implementation.”

THE BOTTOM LINE

Whether a crisis is handled from a flight deck or a crisis center, the stakes can be very high. Forte credits his pilot training with giving him a sound foundation to lead an organization through a crisis, but not everyone has that advantage. The lesson he shares is that a captain doesn’t just issue orders; leaders make better decisions if they are not isolated. What is a captain without a crew? Seniority alone is not enough. According to Forte, effective leadership comes down to a simple philosophy: “It is all about what is right, not who is right.” ♦

BRANDON BORRMAN is a Partner in Brunswick’s San Francisco office, where he advises on a range of communications issues, including crisis.

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STEVE FORTE

Forte joined Virgin America in 2013 as the carrier’s first Chief Operating Officer, with responsibilities that include safety, flight operations and aircraft maintenance. He began his 30-year career in the industry at United Airlines, where he started as a pilot and moved to management, including serving as Director of Operations from 1999 to 2006. Forte was also Chairman of the International Air Transport Association (IATA) Operations Council. He is on the board of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce.



NAVIGATING A CORPORATE CRISIS

1. Work the problem logically and keep your cool.
2. Use all the resources at your disposal.
3. Focus on what you can do right now – what is the next step?
4. Document everything so you can improve in the future.
5. Don’t underestimate the importance of feeding the people you are asking to work around the clock.