

What can Leaders Learn from the Colgan Air Accident?

By Shari Frisinger

Despite what the National Transportation Safety Board and the Federal Aviation Administration has determined to be the cause of the February 2009 Colgan Air accident, the errors made lie deeper than the technical mistakes. It's more about knowing yourself and how you react to stress. It is understanding that it's permissible to admit to shortcomings in your knowledge. It's about being proactive in resolving situations and addressing crises head-on.

Below are three steps you can take to prevent one of your situations from escalating:

1. Your staff is not impressed with what you've done in the past.

Captain Renslow continually talked about himself. One story that took over eight minutes he detailed how he expertly and "cool as #!" handled a situation a month after he upgraded to captain; the story ends with "after that day we ate a steak baked potato and drank a messload of beer (sic)."

This is very much like your parents telling you stories when they were young: "I had to walk three miles up and down hills in the snow every day". Leaders can detach themselves from others very quickly by disregarding the values, thoughts and feelings of their team members. Your team may view this as your self-serving behavior – why else would you drone on and on about yourself? Is power your motivation? Using indirect or subtle influences to sway or persuade the actions of others demeans your position. Are you unconsciously telling your team that you know best and you are not open to suggestions? Your team would much rather hear about what you have learned can help them from making the same mistakes – it's all about them, not you.
2. Don't rely on your staff to do what is in the best interest of the company. If your company culture is to penalize those who call in sick, you are going to get sick people coming to work.

The two pilots were not on the same emotional wavelength – he was not aware that she had disengaged from the conversation. In fact, he never commented on her quietness. Perhaps he attributed it to her not feeling well, or was he too self-absorbed to notice?

Think of how you operate when you are not at your best, relate that to your staff, and realize the negative impact they have by being at work. If you yourself go to work when you really should stay home because of the flu, a bad cold, etc – what values are you reinforcing with your staff? That company work is more important than their health? It's difficult for top performers to "turn it off"; especially when deadlines are looming. They need to be told it's permissible to stay home and sleep.
3. Be cognizant of 'teachable moments' where you can let them shine.

A huge turning point in this accident was when the First Officer told the Captain that she was not comfortable flying in icing conditions – she had not flown in similar conditions recently. The Captain had a prime opportunity to stop reveling in his own world and put the focus on her and what needed to be done. This was a perfect opportunity to review the procedures for icing conditions. He chose to barely

acknowledge her statement and immediately reverted to his story-telling.

You are presented with many situations that are teachable moments – that you can ask questions of your team to help them figure out, on their own, the best way to solve a problem. Many times we react and tell them what to do. In doing this, we become growth opportunity robbers: the employee of ways to improve their problem-solving abilities, ourselves of practice in mentoring our staff, and the company of the richness that only hard-knocks experience can bring. Every time we figure something out for ourselves, we create new brain-paths. These paths make it easier for us to solve the same type of problem the next time.

As a leader, part of your responsibility is to gauge and raise the level of your team’s ability to interactive cohesively. Even if your team consists of you and one other person – as depicted here – the responsibility still exists. The stepping stone to a leader that can transform a team is self-awareness – understanding where your emotions come from and how to express them in a positive, non-threatening manner. Your team members may be hesitant to surrender their ego in a confrontational situation; a confident leader will work to build the self-worth of each and every team member. You do this by encouraging ideas and constructive problem solving.

Additional steps you can take:

- Recognize when you are beginning to feel irritated, frustrated or angry. Remember that it is your perception of the situation that causes these emotions; it’s not the other person that instigates the conflict. It is your triggers.
- Deliver your comments or questions with empathy, not with sarcasm or annoyance. Ask yourself: what would my reaction be if I was spoken to in this manner?
- Remember that your team members want to be accepted, acknowledged and praised. A simple “thank you for” Or “I really appreciate when/how you”. Even “I’m sorry” can change the tone of your relationship.

Remember, it is incumbent upon you as the leader to set the tone and form the culture of your team. Your behaviors and your words are observed – and searched for congruency. Where you go, they will follow. Before you chastise your team’s performance, look at yourself to see what you are promoting.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shari Frisinger, Emotional Intelligence certified corporate trainer, consultant and speaker, helps companies with leadership, communication and teamwork challenges. Shari’s Doctoral studies focus on EI, brain science and communications. She continues to research how effective communication can lead to exceptional leadership and teamwork. As President of CornerStone Strategies LLC, she’s worked with companies of all sizes, including Pfizer, Chevron and the aviation industry. Hire her for your next speaking or training programs; visit www.cornerstonestrategiesllc.com or call 281-992-4136.