

# **The Art of Communication**

***CRM is a lifelong learning process and involves various forms of communication.***

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The first time I heard the term crew resource management (CRM) and its partner human factors, I thought, what a bunch of propeller-head nonsense. This is common sense stuff, not rocket science.

But after my role changed from operational guy in the back of the aircraft to pilot in command flying with a wide variety of crewmembers and personalities, I have changed my opinion.

CRM is a lifelong learning process and involves various forms of communication. This article is not meant to make you an expert on the topic, but it will hopefully initiate some discussion within your organization while also giving you some tools and information to help keep you and your crews safe when you head into harms way.

## **History of CRM**

CRM was developed by NASA research personnel and presented in 1979. The research presented at this meeting indicated that the primary cause of most aviation accidents was human error and that the main problems were failures of interpersonal communication, leadership and decision making in the cockpit.

CRM was adopted by the FAA in the 1980s and further advanced by the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) throughout the 90s. CRM probably became best known after it was implemented by airlines and led to a decrease in accidents and incidents.

The main problems listed by NASA (failures of interpersonal communication, leadership and decision making) also can lead to non-aviation related accidents or events, for example during tactical situations, rescues, etc. Therefore, CRM has a place both in and outside of the cockpit.

I think it's safe to say that the original developers of CRM didn't spend much time with law enforcement and public safety officers. They didn't know about unions, west coast vs. east coast operations, bid rights, assignments based on seniority rather than competitive testing, supervisors who have no aviation background, a high turnover rate and limited training budgets. If they had, they might have called it mission impossible.

A friend of mine once said, "The problem with CRM is that the people who have the most interest in it need the training the least, while the people who think it is BS or won't take part in it need it the most." So where do we start?

## **CRM Today**

There are a number of definitions for CRM, but one of the most accepted was introduced by Dr. John Lauber of the NTSB. According to Lauber, CRM is "the use of all available resources (equipment/hardware, procedures/software and people/liveware) to promote safety and the efficiency of flight operations."

Military aviators are taught the seven skills of CRM (decision making, communication, mission analysis, leadership, assertiveness, adaptability/flexibility and situational awareness) and the crucial relationship they play in cockpit management.

In the opinion of some in the industry, good CRM and situational awareness takes place long before you get to work, in what I call total resource management.

The fire service and law enforcement world often talks about "sizing up a scene," and the question students are asked in the academy, and later as seasoned veterans is "when does size up start?" As you can imagine, the most common answer is "at the time of the call." But if you think about it, size up or situational awareness in this case starts when you wake up to start your day.

What qualities make a good street cop or good TFO? Is there a correlation with those qualities and the seven skills taught to military aviators? According to Lauber, the purpose of CRM is "to promote safety and the efficiency of flight operations." But perhaps we should drop the word "flight" and just say that good CRM should be applied in all operations.

In the following sidebars, we will look at how some of the elements of CRM can be applied to specific hypothetical situations often encountered by law enforcement.

### **Putting It All Together**

There have been many books written on CRM, many containing hundreds of pages and all with a slightly different take on the subject. This article is not meant to make you an expert on CRM, nor do I claim to be one myself. But I have experienced the dysfunctions of a team and working through them.

One of my favorite sayings is: "Deals take place on golf courses and in bars, not boardrooms." I have found that social gatherings make the best place for discussions, whether it is at the dinner table while on shift, an off duty gathering, or educational seminars like ALEA regional or annual conferences. This isn't to say you will avoid controversy in these venues, but differences of opinion are digested somewhat easier in these get-togethers.

In any case, CRM is a perishable skill unless it is practiced, implemented and evaluated on a regular basis.

Sidebar:

### **Recipe for Disaster**

Since becoming a new dad, my sleep pattern at home has become erratic, making me a less than well rested employee. Now, add an hour drive to work at O-dark-thirty in the morning - all made possible by an energy drink - while thinking about how much money I've lost in the stock market. Then I hit the hangar and learn that I'm flying complex missions with two brand new crew members in bad weather, things can get ugly.

We have all been in or worked with someone in the above scenario, but did we change how we thought about our missions or what missions we should accept under those circumstances? Probably not. Let's look at some of the situational awareness you can gather before even leaving the house.

You wake up after a:

- A. restful night
- B. sleepless night

Your life at home is:

- A. great
- B. not bad

- C. could be worse
- D. Iraq is looking pretty good

Your stress level is:

- A. lower than normal
- B. normal
- C. elevated
- D. Like a Southwest Airlines commercial: "You gotta get away"

The morning news is talking about:

- A. a major traffic collision with injuries
- B. a tactical situation
- C. an unexpected VIP in town requiring extra security, police escorts and air support
- D. weather issues
- E. a public protest
- F. terrorism alert levels going up or down

Once you've digested that, it's time for your drive into work, which might pass through a number of areas without weather reporting stations and varied terrain. Here, you can gain more situational awareness. Take note of clouds, visibility and outside air temperature.

Upon getting to work, you are told your regular partner is out sick today. Continue to gain situational awareness.

You will have:

- A. part-time, qualified relief whose last flight was over 90 days
- B. a pilot or TFO who is normally assigned to days, and you are on the night shift
- C. the unit SGT or commander, who hasn't flown operationally in over a year
- D. a new dispatcher just released from training

Anytime something is different from your normal routine, you must recognize it in order to handle it in the course of doing your job. This should raise your situational awareness and make you a better aviation law enforcement officer.

Sidebar:

### **Skills to Live or Die By**

I talked earlier about CRM skills that military aviators are taught, so let's apply them in the scenarios above.

**Situational Awareness** - Maintaining situational awareness means keeping your head on a swivel, rotating 360 degrees, utilizing all of your senses and taking everything in.

**Communication** - The most obvious of the CRM principles, communication is usually the one most lacking but the easiest to affect through training. Have you communicated any of your findings to your team? Do you have concerns about the crew makeup? What are the expected goals of the mission? Apply the ABC's of communication: be accurate, bold and concise. Say what you mean, and mean what you say.

**Assertiveness** - Assertiveness requires the genuine, complete and direct communication of ideas, wants and needs. The assertive statement involves opening with something to get attention, stating your concern as "an owned

emotion," stating the problem (real or perceived), offering a solution and obtaining agreement/closure.

**Mission Analysis** - involves risk assessment and risk management of the mission.

Sidebar:

### **Risk Assessment and Management**

Risk is a factor of probability, severity and exposure. Risk assessment is part of the risk management process and ranges from simple to complex. Risk assessment requires personnel to identify hazards, analyze the degree associated with each and place those hazards in perspective relative to the mission or task at hand. Some examples would be reduced visibility, high, hot and heavy aircraft conditions, newly assigned personnel and operating at night. This assessment can be done pre-dispatch, allowing you the opportunity to make a go/no-go decision or modify your response plans prior to a call for service or while en route.

After making the decision to launch and establishing a game plan, you might arrive on scene to find a totally different scenario than the dispatcher reported. You have now entered the risk management phase, which requires the entire crew to remain flexible, adapt, make decisions and exercise on-scene initiative and leadership.

Let's consider having a partner who works days and has not seen a night shift since the first Bush was president. In the hypothetical situation, you are the normal night shift pilot, and you and your partner have a reputation for making FLIR kills, but tonight your partner has called in sick, and you have the day shift TFO filling in.

First, perform a risk assessment. What is the:

- A. probability of getting a FLIR mission - high
- B. severity of the FLIR mission - high
- C. exposure - high (for both ground units and the aircrew)

Then ask yourself a few questions. How will you communicate your concerns, or will you? What decisions will you make pre-dispatch to reduce the risk? Will the situation allow you to be flexible and adapt?

Sidebar:

### **CRM and Being Part of a Team**

Coming from a special operations background in the military, I was taught early on the seven skills of CRM, although it wasn't called CRM at the time. Regardless of the term you use, in the end, you have to start with teamwork, but what does that really mean? In the Book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, author Patrick Lencioni identifies the components of a dysfunctional team and how to overcome them.

#### **Dysfunction 1**

**The Absence of Trust** - No quality or character is more important than trust. Trust is not the ability of team members to predict one another's behaviors because they have known each other a long time. Trust is about being vulnerable. Without this, the team will not admit their mistakes, failures, weaknesses and fears.

**Overcoming the Absence of Trust** - The key to building trust is not time, but courage. Be willing to take risks. Give team members an objective and a reliable means for understanding one another. Trust on a team is never

complete and must be maintained over time, but trust is the foundation of teamwork.

#### **Dysfunction 2**

Fear of Conflict - Without trust, when teams are engaged in conflict, it will feel that the employees are under some degree of personal attack. Team members need to push one another outside of their emotional comfort zone during discussions. If not, are they truly making the best decision for the organization?

Overcoming the Fear of Conflict - Good conflict requires trust, which includes engaging in unfiltered debate around issues. Conflict at times will be uncomfortable. Conflict norms must be discussed and made clear among the team (e.g. don't make it a personal attack). The fear of occasional personal conflict should not deter a team from having regular, productive debates (e.g. tailgate sessions, after action reviews, bar room discussions). The idea of "going along to get along" is not always the best option.

#### **Dysfunction 3**

The Lack of Commitment - Most people can commit to ideas other than their own. They just want to have their ideas heard, understood and considered within the context of the ultimate decision. When everyone in a team is not committed to the same goal, they are fighting each other and unable to reach the same goal set by the team.

Overcoming a Lack of Commitment - Commitment requires clarity and buying in. Avoid assumptions and ambiguity. End discussions with a clear understanding that the message was heard and understood. Buy-in does not require consensus. Teams must commit to one decision and work towards that goal. Commitment within a team is the ability to defy a lack of consensus.

#### **Dysfunction 4**

The Avoidance of Accountability - Accountability is overused and misused. Lack of trust, fear of conflict and lack of commitment lead to a failure to hold each team member accountable. Without accountability, we are hurting not only the team but also our teammates.

Overcoming the Avoidance of Accountability - Accountability in a strong team occurs directly among peers. A leader must demonstrate a willingness to confront difficult issues. One must overcome the understandable hesitance of human beings to give one another critical feedback.

#### **Dysfunction 5**

Inattention to Results - Self interest and self preservation both interfere with the ability to focus on and obtain results. When team members stop caring about results, they inevitably start caring about something else. Ego is the ultimate killer on a team.

Overcoming Inattention to Results - The true measure of a great team is that it accomplishes the results it sets out to achieve. Team members must prioritize the results over the individual or department needs. To stay focused, team members must publicly clarify their desired results and keep them visible.