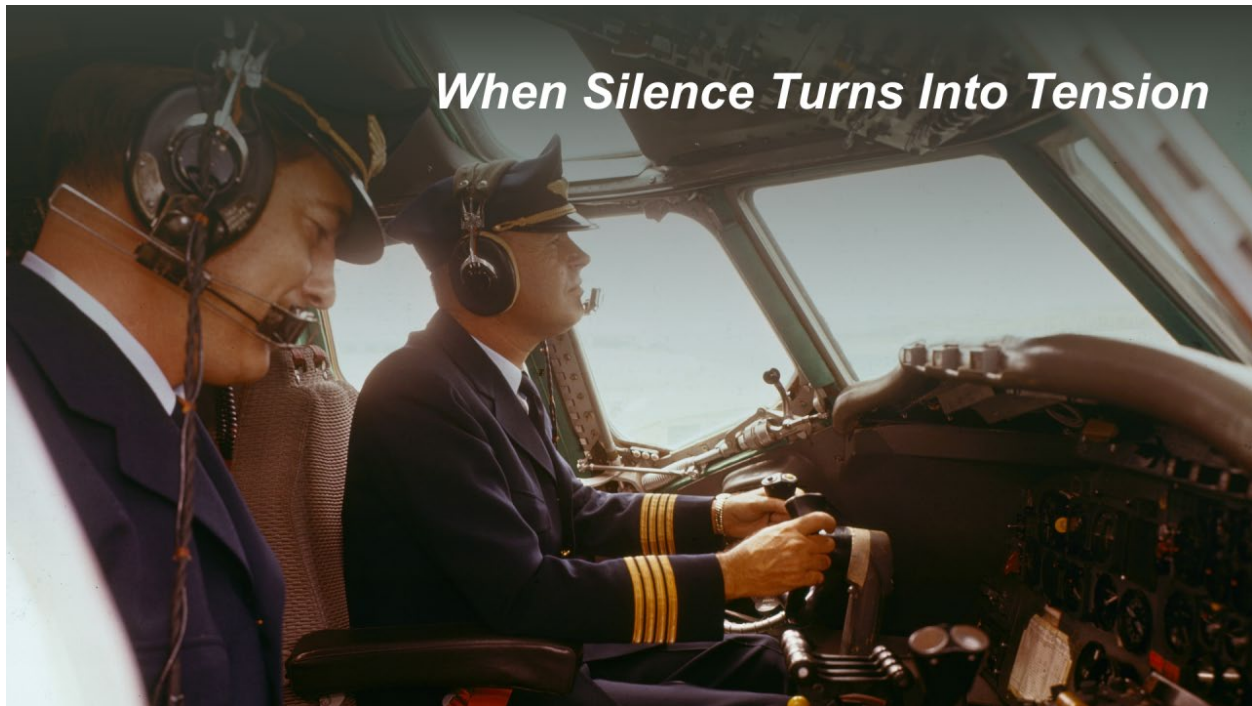


Conflict Management: When Silence Turns Into Tension



On December 28, 1978, a United Airlines DC-8 circled Portland, Oregon, troubleshooting a landing gear indication.

There was no panic on the flight deck.

No shouting.

No visible breakdown of professionalism.

The crew was experienced. Standard troubleshooting procedures were followed, but the clock was ignored. The aircraft was controllable.

And yet, United Airlines Flight 173 ran out of fuel and crashed six miles short of the runway. Ten people lost their lives.

The National Transportation Safety Board concluded that the probable cause was:

"The failure of the captain to monitor properly the aircraft's fuel state and to properly respond to the low fuel state and the crewmember's advisories regarding fuel state... Contributing to the accident was the failure of the other two flight crewmembers either to fully comprehend the criticality of the fuel state or to successfully communicate their concern to the captain."

That final phrase matters:

"...to successfully communicate their concern."

No one was silent.

But the disagreement was never resolved.

And that distinction is where conflict management begins.

When Expression Is Not Enough

The flight engineer raised concerns about fuel:

"Fifteen minutes is gonna really run us low on fuel here."

The first officer questioned the timeline.

The captain remained focused on the landing gear anomaly and passenger preparation.

Fuel was discussed.

But fuel never won the argument.

This was not a lack of awareness.

It was a failure to convert concern into decisive action.

In high-stakes environments, disagreement must be resolved — not merely expressed.

Silence in Professional Teams

We often associate conflict with raised voices or visible tension. But in professional teams — especially in aerospace — conflict is often quieter.

It sounds like:

- "We're getting a little low..."
- "You sure about fifteen minutes?"
- "We'll land soon."

Patrick Lencioni, in *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, identifies **fear of conflict** as a primary dysfunction. Teams that avoid healthy conflict often default to artificial harmony.

Disagreement is softened. Concerns are hinted at rather than asserted.

The result is not peace. It is unresolved tension. And unresolved tension erodes decision quality.

High Stakes + Strong Emotion + Hierarchy

In *Crucial Conversations*, Patterson and colleagues define crucial conversations as those where:

- Stakes are high
- Opinions vary
- Emotions run strong

UA Flight 173 met all three conditions.

- The stakes were life-critical.
- The crew had differing views about urgency.
- Authority gradient was present.

When hierarchy is layered on top of urgency, teams can slip into deference rather than disciplined escalation.

No one on that flight deck was reckless. But no one forced the conflict to resolution either. And in aerospace, time does not wait for consensus.

Conflict Competence Is a Safety Skill

The accident of UA Flight 173 became one of the foundational case studies behind Crew Resource Management (CRM). Aviation learned that technical proficiency is insufficient without assertiveness, escalation discipline, and structured disagreement protocols.

Conflict is not the enemy of safety.

Avoided conflict is.

A mature safety culture is not conflict-free.

It is conflict-capable.

That means:

- Concerns are stated clearly.

- Risk is reframed decisively.
- Authority is respectfully challenged when necessary.
- Conversations reach closure.

In safety-critical operations, "I mentioned it" is not enough. The issue must be resolved.

From Emotional Intelligence to Conflict Management

In our recent series on Team Emotional Intelligence, we discussed psychological safety: the ability to speak openly without fear.

But speaking is only the first step.

The next question is harder:

What happens when disagreement surfaces?

Leaders must:

- Recognize rising tension early.
- Clarify shared priorities.
- Reduce ambiguity.
- Make timely decisions when risk shifts.

Unresolved tension consumes cognitive bandwidth. Clear resolution restores margin.

The WYVERN Perspective

Within a Safety Management System (SMS), hazards are identified, analyzed, and mitigated.

Conflict behaves the same way.

If tension is detected but not resolved, it becomes latent risk.

In high-reliability environments, silence is rarely empty.

It is usually compressed disagreement.

The responsibility of leadership is not to eliminate conflict.

It is to ensure that conflict moves toward clarity — not avoidance.

This is where structured oversight matters.

A WYVERN Virtual Safety Officer (VSO) helps organizations build the conflict competence described here by facilitating unbiased reviews of communication patterns during safety meetings, ensuring that concerns don't just surface, but reach resolution.

An external perspective can reduce the authority gradient, normalize respectful challenge, and reinforce escalation discipline before tension becomes an operational consequence.

UA Flight 173 reminds us:

- Professionalism without escalation discipline is not enough.
 - Concern without resolution is not enough.
 - Awareness without action is not enough.
 - Safety requires more than voice.
 - It requires courage, clarity, and closure.
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Looking Ahead

In Part 2, we will explore why healthy conflict sharpens decision-making — and how leaders create environments where disagreement strengthens safety rather than undermines it.

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References

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