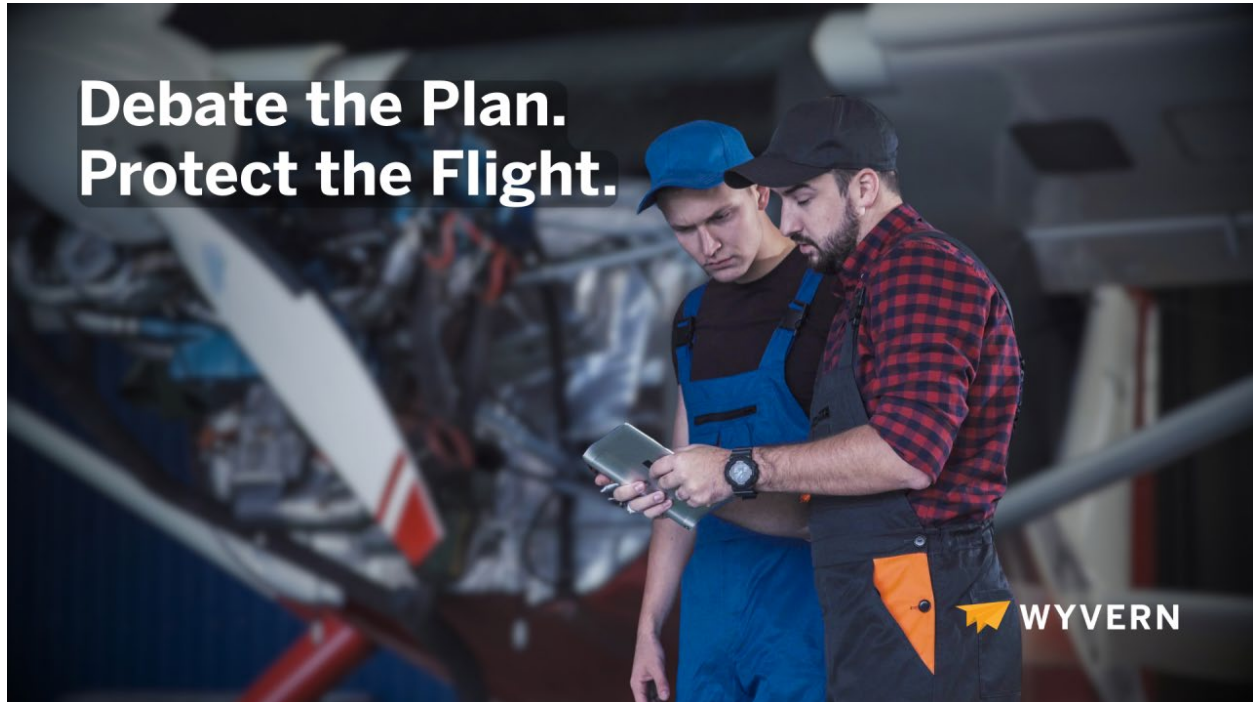


Conflict Management: When Politeness Becomes Risk



The Cost of Politeness

In the early morning hours of June 10, 1990, a maintenance shift manager at British Airways was replacing the windscreen on a BAC One-Eleven. It was a routine task, but he was working under the pressure of a looming deadline.

When he reached for replacement bolts, he discovered that the ones removed were slightly too small. Instead of consulting the parts manual, he relied on experience and selected bolts that “looked” correct.

A storeman in the parts department noticed the discrepancy. He recognized that the part number did not match the specification. He raised a subtle concern.

But the shift manager was senior. Confident. Under time pressure.

Rather than risk friction or “cause a scene,” the storeman did not press the issue. The conversation remained polite.

Artificial harmony prevailed over technical debate.

Hours later, climbing through 17,000 feet, the aircraft’s pressurization system delivered the verdict the team had avoided. The windscreen separated from the fuselage, and the Captain was partially ejected from the flight deck.

For the next twenty minutes, the flight crew physically held onto the Captain's legs while the First Officer executed an emergency descent and landing.

British Airways Flight 5390 did not come close to ending in tragedy due to a lack of skill.

It nearly ended in tragedy because politeness won — and the truth lost.

Not All Conflict Is Bad

Stories like Flight 5390 reveal a dangerous misconception: that conflict is something to avoid.

In **The Five Dysfunctions of a Team**, Patrick Lencioni identifies *Fear of Conflict* as one of the primary dysfunctions of teams.

According to Lencioni, strong teams engage in **unfiltered ideological debate** — passionate, direct disagreement about ideas and decisions.

Weak teams preserve artificial harmony.

They confuse professionalism with politeness.

They mistake calm meetings for strong alignment.

But suppressed disagreement does not disappear.

It waits.

And in high-reliability environments, waiting can be costly.

Ideological Conflict vs. Relational Breakdown

Lencioni makes a critical distinction.

Healthy teams engage in **ideological conflict** — disagreement about:

- Procedures
- Risk assessments
- Technical choices
- Operational plans

Unhealthy teams slip into **relational conflict** — where disagreement becomes personal, ego-driven, or authority-based.

The storeman in the hangar had ideological conflict:

“The part number is wrong.”

What prevented escalation was not a lack of awareness.

It was relational pressure:

“I don’t want to challenge him.”

When teams cannot separate the issue from the individual, safety erodes quietly.

Ideological conflict sharpens decisions.

Relational conflict corrodes trust.

Leadership determines which one dominates.

Why Healthy Conflict Improves Safety

Properly managed disagreement forces clarity. It exposes assumptions. It surfaces risk. It stress-tests plans before physics does.

Every effective crew briefing is structured around ideological conflict:

“What are the threats?”

“What are we missing?”

“What would cause us to discontinue?”

These are not signs of dysfunction.

They are evidence of safety discipline.

Lencioni argues that when teams avoid conflict, they struggle with commitment. Doubt lingers beneath the surface because ideas were never fully debated.

In aerospace, lingering doubt can become hesitation under pressure.

Healthy conflict removes ambiguity early — when options are available and time is generous.

The Risk of Artificial Harmony

Artificial harmony often looks efficient:

- Meetings are calm.
- Decisions are quick.
- No one pushes back.

But beneath the surface:

- Junior members hesitate to assert concerns.
- Risks are mentioned but not examined.
- Concerns are hinted at instead of stated clearly.

Flight 5390 was not a breakdown of knowledge. It was a breakdown of escalation. The technical issue was visible. The debate never happened.

The Leader's Responsibility

Healthy conflict does not emerge spontaneously. It is engineered.

Leaders who build resilient teams:

- **Invite dissent explicitly:** “If something doesn’t look right, I expect you to challenge it.”
- **Model non-defensive behavior:** Accepting correction without ego.
- **Distinguish challenge from disrespect:** Disagreement about ideas is not insubordination.
- **Reward early escalation:** Publicly reinforcing when someone speaks up.
- **Ensure closure:** Conflict must end in clarity — not lingering tension.

This is not about encouraging argument. It is about institutionalizing rigorous debate.

Conflict Inside a Safety Management System

Within an SMS, hazards are identified, analyzed, and mitigated.

Conflict behaves similarly.

When disagreement is surfaced early — during planning, maintenance review, or safety meetings — cognitive load is low and corrective action is simple.

When disagreement is suppressed, it resurfaces under pressure.

A WYVERN Virtual Safety Officer (VSO) often reveals that organizations do not lack procedures. They lack structured ideological conflict. Risks are logged. But not rigorously challenged. Mitigations are listed. But not stress-tested.

Safety culture is not defined by the absence of tension. It is defined by how tension is handled.

British Airways Flight 5390 reminds us:

- Professionalism without debate is fragile.
- Politeness without escalation is dangerous.
- Harmony without examination is risk.

In high-reliability organizations, disagreement handled well is not a threat to culture.

It is proof of it.

Looking Ahead

In Part 3, we will examine the subtle signals that healthy conflict is drifting into relational breakdown — and the early indicators leaders should never ignore.

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References

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