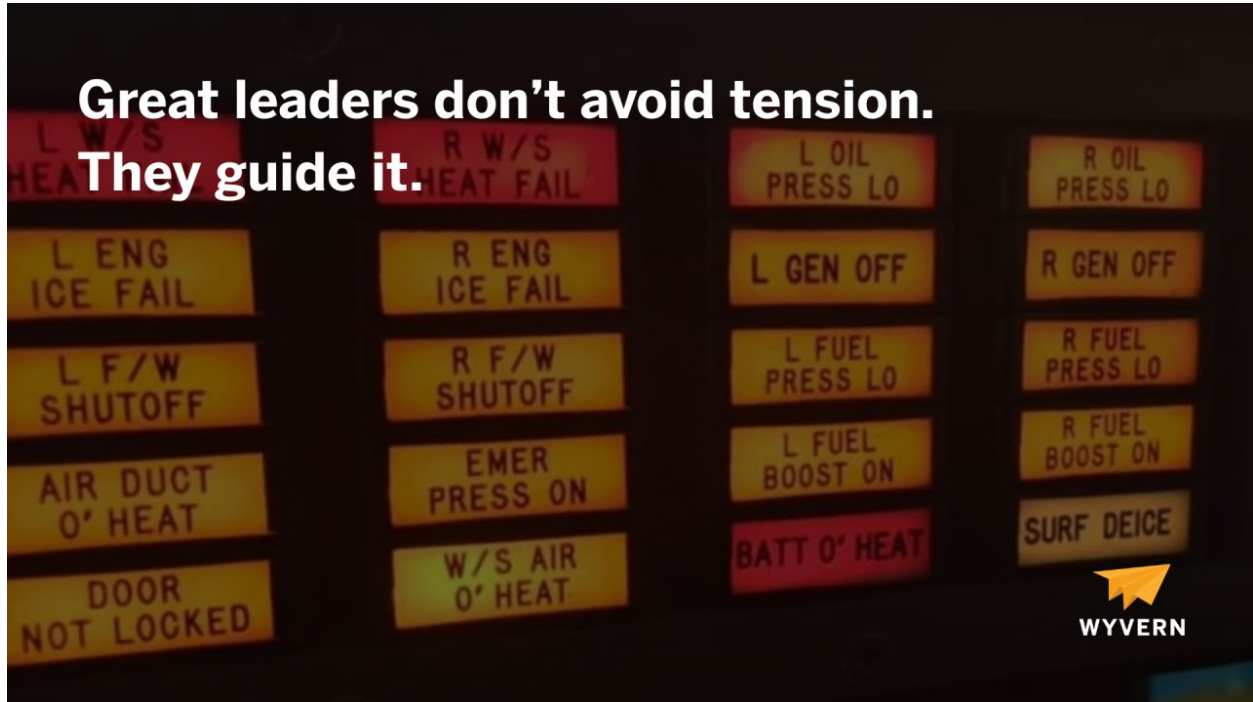


Conflict Management: Redirecting Tension



On November 4, 2010, an Airbus A380 departing Singapore suffered a catastrophic uncontained engine failure shortly after takeoff.

Fragments from the exploding engine tore through the wing, severing hundreds of electrical wires and hydraulic lines. Within moments, the flight deck was flooded with more than fifty simultaneous warnings from the aircraft's Electronic Centralized Aircraft Monitor (ECAM).

The flight deck was unusually crowded that day. Five highly experienced pilots were on board as part of a training and check-ride flight.

As the warnings continued to cascade across the screens, the pilots began discussing which failures should be addressed first. With dozens of systems affected and multiple checklists appearing simultaneously, the volume of information quickly pushed the crew toward task saturation.

In high-stakes environments like this, disagreement can easily turn into paralysis.

Captain Richard de Crespigny recognized the shift immediately.

Instead of allowing the conversation to spiral into debate over what had failed, he intervened with a simple reframing of the problem.

He told the crew to stop focusing on what was broken and instead focus on **what was still working**.

With that one pivot, the conversation changed direction.

Rather than arguing over hundreds of damaged systems, the crew began identifying the aircraft's remaining capabilities. The discussion shifted from competing interpretations of failures to a shared assessment of available performance.

By asking clarifying questions and setting a clear operational goal—determining the safe landing configuration for a severely damaged wing—the crew built a common mental model of the situation.

Nearly two hours later, the aircraft landed safely in Singapore with all 469 people on board unharmed.

The crew did not eliminate the tension on the flight deck.

They redirected it.

The Leader's Role: Redirecting the Energy

Conflict itself is not the danger in a high-reliability environment.

Unmanaged conflict is.

Disagreement often begins with professionals viewing the same problem from different perspectives. One pilot may be concerned about fuel reserves. Another may be focused on maintaining schedule. A maintenance technician may notice something unusual about a component that technically remains within limits.

These moments of tension are not failures of teamwork.

They are opportunities for better decisions.

The difference between productive conflict and destructive conflict lies in **how leaders guide the conversation once tension appears.**

Techniques for Redirecting Conflict

Leaders do not eliminate disagreement. They **structure it.**

Several communication techniques help redirect tension into productive dialogue.

Separate the Person from the Problem

Conflict escalates quickly when individuals begin defending themselves rather than examining the issue.

Leaders can interrupt this pattern by reframing the discussion:

Instead of asking:

“Why did you do it that way?”

Shift the conversation toward the operational question:

“Let’s walk through what we’re seeing and identify the risk.”

This keeps the discussion focused on **observable facts and operational consequences**, not personal intent.

Ask Clarifying Questions

When tension rises, assumptions often replace curiosity.

Leaders can reset the conversation with simple questions such as:

- What risk are you seeing?
- What information might we be missing?
- What outcome are we trying to protect?

These questions slow emotional escalation and restore shared situational awareness.

In many organizations, the underlying issue is not disagreement itself but **misunderstood communication**. Differences in interpretation, incomplete information, or unclear assumptions frequently create conflict that did not need to exist in the first place.

Encourage Discussion — Not Debate

In high-stakes environments, debate often becomes a contest over who is right.

Discussion focuses instead on **what is most accurate**.

Leaders who establish this expectation create psychological safety for team members to raise concerns, challenge assumptions, and contribute to better decisions.

Set Clear Goals for the Conversation

Productive conflict requires structure.

Without a shared objective, discussions often drift into circular arguments or unresolved frustration.

Effective leaders stabilize the conversation by defining the goal:

- Identify the risk.
- Evaluate the options.
- Agree on the safest course of action.

Clear goals move teams toward resolution rather than lingering disagreement.

Why This Matters in Safety-Critical Environments

Organizations that suppress conflict often experience a different problem: **latent risk**.

Concerns remain unspoken. Questions remain unresolved. Small tensions accumulate beneath the surface until they appear later as operational failures.

Research consistently shows that organizations benefit when disagreements are addressed constructively rather than avoided. Properly managed conflict improves decision quality, strengthens relationships, and supports organizational learning.

In other words:

Conflict handled well **strengthens safety culture**.

Conflict avoided **weakens it**.

The WYVERN Perspective

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

Conflict should be approached in much the same way.

When disagreement surfaces, it often signals that team members are noticing different information, risks, or perspectives. Effective organizations do not suppress these signals. They channel them into structured dialogue that leads to clearer decisions.

Programs such as WYVERN's **Flight Leader Program** and the support provided by a **Virtual Safety Officer (VSO)** help organizations strengthen communication discipline and ensure that safety concerns move toward resolution rather than lingering as unresolved tension.

In high-reliability organizations, safety depends not on the absence of disagreement but on the **quality of the conversation that follows**.

Final Thought

Conflict will always exist where intelligent professionals care deeply about the outcome of their work.

Leadership is not about eliminating disagreement. It is about guiding it toward clarity, learning, and better decisions. When leaders do this well, tension becomes something valuable:

Not a disruption to safety culture— but a signal that the system is working.

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