



DEVAN A. NORRIS

LEFT, RIGHT, LEFT

As someone who has recently switched from the left seat of an ERJ to the right seat of a 737, I can say with confidence that switching from flying an Embraer to flying a Boeing was a lot more straightforward than the transition from being a captain back to being a first officer. To learn about the new plane and the new company I studied manuals, flows,

profiles, systems, and procedures—everything I could think of. Yet somehow in my focus of training for a new stage of my career, I had forgotten that I was not just moving forward. I was also going back—to an old way of life. I was going back to the right seat.

When you are a new first officer there is a general understanding you will be something of a chameleon, tailoring your interpersonal behavior on the flight deck to mesh as smoothly as possible with your captain. You tend to keep controversial topics off the table, and keep quiet rather than arguing with some of their more inventive pronouncements. Of course, you always hope you will have a good dynamic and enjoy being yourself during your time working together, but that is hardly a given. Every pilot who has ever worked as part of a crew has at least a few stories of what happened while they were working with someone known as “that guy.”

“That guy” is legendary, and stories have been told about him (or her) from the very beginning of aviation. Some of the stories have themes that are common to us all and some truly stand apart. But whether they are hilarious or whether there is a seriously cautionary moral to the tale, these stories always have a common thread. Something the other crewmember did or said was kind of silly, or annoying, or just plain dumb—and it happened with you sitting right there. As a first officer or as a captain, how you respond to events like this will have an effect both on the atmosphere of the flight deck and even on the safety of the flight itself.

Since I have no poker face, if I hear something weird you will likely know my feelings about it long before you hear my opinion verbally. This trait made it necessary for me to develop a habit of communicating openly—since I couldn’t fib if I wanted to. That openness has proved useful many times, allowing me to point out any objectionable occurrences in the cockpit as they happen. This is true both when someone uses

an unapproved procedure, or if he or she has said something that crossed the line.

Questions or candor are not always welcome, but they are often necessary. It is how you phrase them that can make the difference between open discussion or several days of the cold shoulder. There is diplomacy involved in effective cockpit dynamics. While successful cockpit management is largely based

on the tone the captain sets, the responses and demeanor of the first officer influence a lot of it. It is not easy for everyone to strike the right balance between direct and diplomatic. Many, myself included, have found at times their comments were unwelcome and have struck a nerve when an honest question was interpreted as criticism. This can have a negative impact on your mood as a crew, but it is important to work through it and foster honest communication.

Communication is the cornerstone of good crew resource management (CRM). If you have a problem with a co-worker, do what you can to resolve the issue at the time—or at the very least

make them aware you have an issue. Leaving it festering in your mind while he or she blithely continues helps no one. Don’t wait for someone higher up the chain of command to deal with the issue. If it is important enough to consider reporting, it is important enough to say something at the time. The first indication a person has crossed the line should not be a call from the chief pilot’s office.

In your career, there will be some people whom you love to fly with, and others you would prefer to avoid. Regardless of your personal feelings (or even whether you sit in the right seat or the left), approaching the cockpit with an open mind and a willingness to honestly speak and listen will only improve your skills as a crewmember and enhance safety for everyone. →

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Devan A. Norris, WAI 13890, is a first officer for a major airline on the 737, and an apprentice air show air boss.

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