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Hijacking Safety

by Carl Potter, CSP

Not long ago my wife, Deb, and I were standing in line at the bank to do business when a lady in the line next to us began a tirade about a check she was trying to cash. I'm not clear what the problem was, but the teller tried diligently to communicate with the customer that the transaction was not legal. After some very loud, obnoxious comments by the customer, the guard woke up and took notice and he and one of the bank supervisors came over to help calm the situation. It was clear that the woman was stressed and I felt sorry for her and the teller. After the client left, the supervisor turned to us and apologized for the scene. (Little did she know that this would turn into an article!) The supervisor and I discussed the customer's behavior and I explained that in our work it is evident that a lot of people are stressed out these days. I mentioned to the supervisor that in our research we have found that stress leads to errors and errors can lead to injuries or loss of production. This leads to a log of negative emotion around safety.

In the book *Primal Leadership*, Daniel Goleman calls this *emotional hijacking*. "Negative emotion, especially chronic anger, anxiety, or a sense of futility powerfully disrupt work, hijacking attention from the task at hand."

In many of my safety workshops, I run into people who are what I call 'safety hijackers.' These are people who are stressed out and display negative moods that tend to block out the idea that we can create a workplace where nobody gets hurt. Safety hijackers are found at all levels of the organization. Don't get me wrong, not everyone, or even a majority of employees, fall into this category. However, left unchecked, a small number of hijackers can make the workgroup toxic and errors will increase. I recently personally experienced how such stress can lead to errors.

I am a pilot and enjoy flying myself and Deb to and from our work with clients. I am committed to continual learning to improve my skills so I can be as safe as possible. In February 2010 I earned my Commercial Pilot Rating. While learning to perform the maneuvers for the commercial rating, my instructor's duty was to make sure I learned all the steps to pass the check ride with the FAA examiner. On the day of my check ride, my instructor signed off on my oral and practical flight test and the stress began to mount. Suddenly I began to think about the pending check ride too much. The night before, I had laid in bed thinking about it and almost talked myself out of taking the ride. When I showed up for the check ride, my examiner was Nan Gaylord. I am smart enough not to guess her age, but let's say that she has been flying for a few years. Nan is a rare breed of flight examiner.

When I walked into her office, Nan looked at me and asked if I was ready to do it. Trying to act like I was joking, I started shaking and said, "Sure, do I look nervous?" Nan tried to put me at ease with a little pilot humor, but I was still stressed. After the oral exam, it was time for me to do the practical test of flying. Sensing that I was still nervous Nan said, "I guess I am really going to have to pull out my best trick for calming you down." At that point she reached in her purse and pulled out a pair of glasses that made her look like Charlie Chan's sister (round black rimmed glasses with thick glass that magnified her eyes). I laughed a little and my stress level seemed to go down some, but I was still nervous. Then she pulled out her final weapon to destroy my stress, a set of "Billy Bob" teeth!" When this lovely lady stuck those fake teeth in her mouth with the glasses on, my stress level dropped. I laughed until my eyes watered. Humor can be a real stress buster and Nan's humor helped me to reach my goal.

Later I thought about the woman back at the bank. She was having a bad day and I don't think humor from the teller, the supervisor or the bank guard would have helped -- she was ticked! But maybe she could have used some of her own

humor to lower her own stress. Managing our own stress is a key to success in life, family, friends and even safety. Negative moods tend to make us physically tense and fill our minds with thoughts of failure. If we put others in charge of our moods we will fail. Choose your mood.

There is plenty of research that shows how being mentally and physically relaxed in a tense situation is more productive. Here are a few that I recommend:



- Relax your shoulders by letting them sag (standing, sitting, driving, walking or flying).
- Let part of your mind go ahead of your actions to visualize the outcome (In other words: think ahead).
- If you are in a hazardous situation, stop and reset your thoughts and relax your body.
- Stop and evaluate the situation. The situation is likely not as dire as you are making it out to be.
- Reset your safety clock by giving yourself a time-out when in a high-stress, hazardous situation.
- Get some funny glasses and "Billy Bob Teeth" and go look in the mirror.

As a pilot, I have to manage my stress when flying in the clouds on final approach to the runway. This is not the time for laughing, but it is the time for a relaxed posture and leaving my mind uncluttered by a negative mood. Next time you see co-workers or your boss being stressed or feel yourself falling into a bad mood, drop your shoulders, close your eyes and get a vision of Nan in her glasses and Billy Bob teeth. If you can't laugh at that, you may need professional help. But if you can lower your stress and lower the number of safety related errors made you will be on target to hit the goal: Nobody Gets Hurt.

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