

**Flight Attendant Role in Air Rage**

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**Master’s Project - Graduate Programs in Dispute Resolution**

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### **Abstract**

Passenger misconduct can range from verbal abuse, which is considered socially unacceptable, to acts of terrorism that can lead to death (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 14). In November of 1997, an article in the San Francisco Examiner by Marianne Costantinou used the term “Air Rage” to describe passenger misconduct and according to Michael Scheffer of the Skyrage.org foundation “the term stuck and has become part of the world lexicon to give the issue its sound bite appeal” (Personal correspondence Feb. 25, 2003). Air Rage incidents pose a safety threat to the airline industry, its employees, and its passengers. This study seeks to better understand air rage through six one-on-one audiotape interviews with three male and three female flight attendants. Respondents described what air rage meant to them, how they responded to it, their gender attitudes in relation to air rage, and how they believe flight attendants could be better trained to deal with air rage. The findings indicate that the inclusion of conflict resolution skills in flight attendant training would contribute to the de-escalation of level one air rage, verbal abuse. This paper also describes the relevance of the styles of conflict response espoused by the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Styles typology (1993) and suggests training options incorporating these that have the potential to benefit flight attendants, the general airline traveler, and the industry as a whole. Though small, this study suggests ways to de-escalate potential Air Rage situations before they threaten the safety of all involved.

## Introduction

*Traveling by jet these days is rarely, if ever, the hedonistic comfort-fest airlines pretend it is in their commercials. Is your flight delayed? Nobody will tell you why, and the airline won't offer compensation. Bumped from an over booked flight? Too bad – the carrier's bottom line comes first. Say you do get on the plane. Wanna lean back in your seat? Well, don't touch that button-unless you want to kneecap the passenger behind you. Feel like breathing? On most flights, the recycled air smells as stale as the breath emanating from the 400-pounder you've been wrestling with for the armrest. Thirsty? If you do manage to get the flight attendant's attention, he'll make you feel like the world's biggest pain in the butt because you want a glass of water. Flights over? Don't rejoice too much at being able to feel your legs again-the airline's lost your luggage. Does that kind of crummy experience excuse 'air rage'? No. But the point is flying can be uncomfortable and annoying enough to set the most even-tempered soul on edge (Chidley, 2000).*

Anyone who travels frequently will chuckle when reading Chidley's comments because, in many instances, they are close to the mark and there is more humor in truth than fiction. In the present economy little can be done to compensate passengers for delays, but keeping them informed (either by the gate agent at the boarding area or by a flight attendant on board the aircraft) would do a lot to alleviate the frustration and anxiety of being kept in the dark. A passenger who is unhappy with his or her seat assignment may be pacified by with a seat switch, but this is only possible if the flight is not full. Overall, the conditions in air travel can be stressful and all conflicts encountered are not so easily remedied.

Air rage can be defined as passenger misconduct, verbal abuse or disruptive behavior (Dahlberg, 2001, p. 1). For the purposes of this paper these terms can be used interchangeably. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the airline industry have identified four threat levels of air rage (PPCT Management Systems, 2002).

**Table 1 - Federal Aviation Administration Security Threat Levels**

<b>Level of Threat</b>	<b>Abusive Behavior</b>	<b>Control Responses</b>
<b>One</b>	<b>Verbally Abusive</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Irrational action</li> <li>• Defiant acts or body language</li> <li>• Unresponsiveness to instructions</li> </ul>	<b>Diffuse</b> Flight attendants are trained to deal with Level 1 events and may not need additional assistance.
<b>Two</b>	<b>Physically Abusive</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pushing</li> <li>• Shoving</li> <li>• Slapping</li> <li>• Hitting</li> <li>• Kicking</li> <li>• Damage to the aircraft or someone's personal possessions</li> </ul>	<b>Stand</b> Flight attendants will solicit help directly from pre-identified passengers and keep the flight crew informed. The captain can consider a diversion and landing plan.
<b>Three</b>	<b>Life Threatening</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weapon display</li> <li>• Weapon threat (concealed)</li> </ul>	<b>Act</b> Flight Attendants and passengers will use force to subdue action. Pilots will notify ATC, declare an Emergency and land at the nearest airport.
<b>Four</b>	<b>Cockpit Threatening</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cockpit security in direct jeopardy</li> </ul>	<b>Live</b> A threat to enter the flight deck is considered a threat to gain control of the airplane, flight attendants will use any means available to deter action.

(PPCT Management Systems, May 2002)

This project was designed by a 35-year veteran flight attendant to study air rage because as a major problem for the airline industry, further investigation into its causes, handling by flight attendants, and possibilities for focused flight attendant training would

be a service to the profession and the traveling public. Not only can air rage be disruptive for all involved, it can also lead to safety and security issues. The author polled her colleagues on their views of air rage and presents their observations. This paper explores the role of a flight attendant in the escalation or de-escalation of air rage. Flight attendants have the most passenger contact; they must deal with these situations as they occur. The author contends that conflict handling styles utilized by flight attendants can escalate or de-escalate air rage and inclusion of the conflict handling typology described by Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann (1994) in flight attendant training would enhance the skills of a flight attendant in handling air rage incidents.

**Table 2 –Five Conflict Handling Typologies**

<b>Conflict Style</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
Competing	Tries to win at the expense of the other party	Shows great concern for self and little or no concern for other party
Collaborating	Works to benefit self and other party	Shows high level of concern for self and the other party
Compromising	Seeks a combination of mutual sacrifice and mutual benefit for self and other party	Shows some concern for self and some concern for the other party
Accommodating	Gives in to the other party	Shows concern for the other party while sacrificing own concerns
Avoiding	Does not address conflict issues	Shows little concern for self and the other party

(Thomas & Kilmann as quoted in Perri, 2002.)

Air rage can develop from situations as small as a passenger being unresponsive to instructions from a flight attendant regarding safety or security procedures to extreme

verbal abuse. For example, threat and verbal abuse occurred on American Airlines from London to Chicago:

An elderly woman in seat 26B put her seat back in full recline. This caused grievous vexation to the passenger in 27B, a tall 53-year-old Danish businessman named Kragh. According to witnesses later interviewed by the FBI, Kragh launched an escalating campaign of harassment against the offending passenger and her husband. He repeatedly smacked her seat back and then jammed his knees into it, causing her to leap up. He chanted “kill you, kill you” to the couple. At one point Kragh took out his cell phone and ostensibly made a call to Chicago – his end of the conversation was loud enough that everyone around could hear – in which he described the woman’s husband and the flight information in detail. “Kill him when the plane arrives in Chicago,” he said. “I want him taken out tonight.” (Curtis. 2001, p.1)

Overhearing this, the flight attendants notified the captain, he landed the aircraft in Bangor, Maine and the passenger was removed and arrested. Mr. Kragh was sentenced to 21 days in prison for simple assault and paid a \$5,000.00 fine. While this particular incident did not involve physical violence, the threat was certainly there.

Aligning air rage with abnormal behavior Andrew Thomas (2000) defines it as follows:

Like other difficult-to-define human activities, air rage may take on any number of shapes, sizes, and forms. But in the end, it is a type of behavior that is abnormal, aberrant, or abusive within the context of generally accepted social norms and values. In other words, when someone acts crazy or menacing (p. 5).

Level one air rage – verbal abuse - has the potential to escalate into violence and poses a safety hazard for flight attendants, passengers, the pilots and the aircraft. All situations cited earlier by Chidley (2000) have the potential to become air rage. Will they? Not all of them will, but the reality is that human interaction, good or bad, can make the difference between a pleasant flight or one that explodes into air rage. An article in *Successful Meetings* magazine describes a lengthy weather delay at a regional airport. One passenger noted: “They kept announcing every few minutes why we were delayed; the airline was able to appease and cheer up passengers by using humor and empathy” (Cummings, 2000).

This paper examines the phenomena of air rage: exploring why it is a problem, its prevalence, why it is ignored by the industry, and most importantly, the role of the flight attendant in air rage incidents and possibilities for training flight attendants to better handle these conflicts.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Air Rage**

This section introduces the topic of air rage by exploring its prevalence and underlying causes, going on to explore the theoretical considerations guiding the development and successful handling of these conflicts using dispute resolution literature. It concludes with a survey of training possibilities.

#### **Prevalence of Air Rage**

“Air rage is back on the agenda,” asserts Ed Peters (1999). Did it ever leave? Air rage incidents were reported to the FAA as early as 1947 (Beeks, 2000). A passenger on a flight from Havana, Cuba to Miami, Florida was unruly and physically and verbally abusive to another passenger and to two flight attendants who tried to intervene. In another air rage incident that occurred in 1950 on board a DC-3 bound for Alaska:

A 240-pound male passenger became disruptive and assaulted a cabin crewmember. The first officer and two other passengers were able to subdue the passenger using a luggage tie down. Upon arriving in Anchorage, it was determined that the passenger had a prior history of assault and psychotic activity (Reiss, 1998, as quoted by Beeks, 2000).

Air rage, an ongoing problem, is a bigger problem than the airline industry admits. Perhaps this is because “carriers, still under the spell of marketing and public-relations departments, refuse even to compile comprehensive data on airborne offenders” (Rudden, 2001). This research paper uses the term “air rage” interchangeably with the words, verbal abuse, passenger misconduct, and disruptive behavior. It focuses on level

one air rage. Increase in the incidence of air rage is evident in data published by the FAA (2001):

**Table 3 – Air Rage Incidents as Reported to the FAA**

<b>YEAR</b>	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001 (as of June 15)
<b># OF REPORTED INCIDENTS</b>	146	187	321	281	306	304	100

Moreover, the FAA report cautions that:

This database contains only those incidents reported to the FAA. Reporting is at the discretion of the crewmember. As part of the FAA’s Reauthorization Bill (April 16, 2000) the FAA can now propose up to \$25,000 per violation for unruly passenger cases. Previously, the maximum civil penalty per violation was \$1,100. One incident can result in multiple violations ([faa.com/Unruly Passengers](http://faa.com/UnrulyPassengers) [03 July, 2001]).

Andrew Thomas (2000) disagrees with the FAA reported numbers on the incidents of air rage. He claims the numbers are vastly greater than those reported. He quotes Senator Bill Frist of Tennessee who said: “We’re witnessing a growing trend in unruly and out-of-control passengers” (Thomas, 2000, p. 6). The senator is concerned with the increasing incidents of this phenomenon. Ken Hotard, a communications director at American Airlines, has stated that his company had over 800 reported incidents of passenger misconduct in 1998, and “there is not a day that goes by when we don’t have some report” (Hanson, 1999).

While airline security is more stringent since the terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington D.C. on September 11, 2001, air travel is not necessarily safer or more pleasant. Airlines are still not required to report incidents of disruptive passengers and many passengers who violate safety rules are not punished. Nor are flight attendants adequately trained or equipped to deal with such passengers. Kolman (2002) has argued that the disparity between the air rage incidents that the FAA reports and publishes (approximately 300 incidents per year in 1999 and 2000) and the numbers the airline personnel report are astronomical.

This disparity in numbers creates a conflict within the aviation industry. The FAA, as the governing body of the industry, cites a very low number of incidents. The airline companies also quote low numbers, while some members of congress and union companies representing airline employees have cited much larger numbers. Perhaps because of this disparity, the Association of Flight Attendant's report on air rage gave everyone in the industry an "F" for failing to protect flight attendants from passengers (Peterson, 2001).

All of the literature culled from magazines, journal articles, newspapers, and the world wide web seem to share an identical conclusion: Air rage is a problem. The flight attendants know it is, the airline industry knows it is, and the government knows it is. However, it is the latter two groups that are in the position to make a difference. Our lawmakers have been hesitant to take a stand and reticent to force the airlines to do so. The airline industry and the government are more focused on security and terrorism because these issues are in the forefront and generate public support.

## **Air Rage and Conflict**

Now that we've discussed air rage in its socio-cultural context, it is appropriate to dig deeper and examine some of its causes. Air rage is conflict and Morton Deutsch (1973) describes conflict as two entities being incompatible. A conflict occurs when "an action is incompatible with another action [and] prevents, obstructs, interferes, injures, or in some way makes the action less likely or less effective" (p. 10-11). An example of this in the context of air rage could be when a passenger with a broken leg, not qualified for an exit row seat because of their inability to operate the emergency exit, demands the exit row seat for the extra legroom. The flight attendant cannot allow this request because of safety mandates. These incompatible actions cause conflict. In other words, when I want something the other party is not willing to give me, there is a conflict. I want what I want. You, the other party, doesn't want to give me what I want or won't or can't. Therein lies a conflict.

Conflict is inherent in systems, in organizations, in society, and in individual relationships. As Pondy (1992) points out "organizations consist of numerous pairs of opposing tendencies (e.g., risk-taking and risk avoiding, creativity and efficiency)" (p.260) and these oppositions create conflict. Without conflict it is difficult for companies to grow and change. Growth may not be the goal in the airline industry particularly in a post 9/11 world but change is necessary. Both the airlines and the traveling public have had to adjust to a new world order. Flight attendants, the front line representatives of the airline industry, face an increased workload in a downsizing industry, job insecurity, and a myriad of anxious passengers; these are all arenas for conflict. The traveling public has to deal with increased security creating the hassles of

long lines, flight delays, and increased time at the airport before they even get on a flight. These conditions create conflict. In a containerized cabin at 37,000 feet, conflict can lead to air rage.

Morton Deutsch (1973) tells us that many conflicts take place in a public spotlight and the course of the conflict may be greatly influenced by the participants' conceptions of their audience and how it will react (p.6). This is certainly the case with air travel: hypersensitivity of passengers to "petty" issues is common in this confined atmosphere and people are conscious of the treatment of their fellow passengers, strongly reacting to flight attendant treatment they consider unfair.

Morton Deutsch also identifies five types of issues that generate conflict. They are (1) control over resources, (2) preferences and nuisances, (3) values, (4) beliefs, and (5) the nature of the relationship between the parties. It is interesting to look at these causes, give examples in the context of air rage and see how they may be framed by the airline industry, flight attendants and passengers experiencing these conflicts. Issues of seat assignment can be categorized as caused by "control over resources." From the airline industry's viewpoint, it may make economic sense to cram as many seats into each aircraft as is possible to generate the most profit. From the perspective of the flight attendant, crowded seats may be a nuisance because it means they will have to service more passengers and receive more complaints about cramped quarters. To the passenger, crowded space on an aircraft may seem a great injustice because they are receiving so little comfort for the price of their ticket.

Investigating road rage and air rage, Cool (2001) found that:

America is in the midst of an anger epidemic.... People are constantly on edge, ready to retaliate if they feel anyone is disrespecting them... everything is moving faster than it did a few years ago... creating a constant sense of urgency and emergency... that tension leads to impatience and irritability, which is why people go ballistic about trivial things. (Cool, 2001. p. 2)

Air rage is aggressive behavior. Susan Opatow (2000) tells us that: “aggression takes many forms including physical, sexual, symbolic, and psychological”. Air rage is primarily aggression and very “upsetting” as one flight attendant put it. Wendy Stafford (2001) states that “everything from verbal abuse to violent behavior comes under the umbrella of aggression... bullying, intimidation, and sexual harassment” (p. 2) are all part of air rage. In one incident a female flight attendant witnessed a passenger calling her male colleague a ‘fag’. The passenger was angry because the male flight attendant could not find room for his carry-on bag fast enough. The passenger was removed from the flight, much to the credit of the airline. “If aggression gets to the point where it needs to be managed, then there is only reaction to the aggression, not prevention. If conflict resolution is the only way out, it is already too late” (Stafford, 2001, p. 2). In this case the airline exemplified a zero tolerance policy toward sexual harassment and followed through on supporting its employees.

### **Combating Air Rage: Theoretical Considerations**

What can a flight attendant do to combat air rage before it leads to aggression? First, they must realize the cognitive biases that dictate their own actions. One of these is the fundamental attribution error which is defined as: “the process through which we seek to understand the causes of others behavior – why they act as they do”(Baron & Byrne,

1997, p.605). Keith Allred (2000) defines a person's tendency to over attribute someone else's behavior to disposition and under attribute it to their circumstances as the fundamental attribution error. According to the Attribution Theory, the critical difference is not what the other person does, but WHY I think the other does it. Most flight attendants would say that their reactions to continued verbal abuse force them into a competing style of handling conflict with a passenger who becomes verbally abusive. Allred (2000) cites an example of this fundamental attribution error with a story about a passenger yelling at an airline employee. An observer might conclude that the passenger was at the least ill mannered and most probably had a short fuse instead of considering a set of circumstances; perhaps the passenger had been mishandled by the airline. It is normal to see our own reactions to verbal abuse coming from the circumstances of the other person instead of our own disposition. An interview with a flight attendant about an encounter with a woman in her eighties who would not take her seat reflects this attribution. The flight attendant did not see herself as having a directive personality, but she became so because of the woman's unrelenting behavior.

Other cognitive biases that are applicable to air rage situations are the four types of feasibility conditions introduced by Kenneth Thomas (1993) who says: "feasibility conditions are variables that increase the expectancy that integrative outcomes can be achieved. Four types... seem important: flexibility, opportunity, confidence, and trust" (p. 697-698).

In cases of level one air rage or verbal abuse, flight attendants might well note these factors. The flexibility factor requires just that - flexibility. Is loud aggressive verbalizing just venting and expressing displeasure or has it crossed the line into abuse?

Could a simple reminder from either party take the conflict out of the conversation and offer resolution? The opportunity factor gives both parties the time to determine where the conversation can or will go. Either party has the opportunity to try and turn the conflict into a resolution. The confidence factor can be enhanced through skills and attitudes. While it is impossible to teach skills and attitudes to a disgruntled passenger, it could be possible for a flight attendant to retrieve them from “a bag of tricks” as quoted by Ken, one of the flight attendants interviewed for this study. Ken was referring to air rage training as being similar to having a bag of tricks or tools to use to de-escalate potential situations.

Self-esteem issues are also part and parcel of that bag of tricks. While impossible to teach, self-esteem can be enhanced through learning certain skills and developing positive attitudes. Trust is the last factor involved in dealing with potential air rage situations. The flight attendant can begin by trusting him or herself to work through the situation and convey that sense of trust to the passenger. Often times, trust that is extended is reciprocated. Flight attendants as a group need to trust their own voices. Flight attendants tend to label their own voices as “petty” or “whining”. I am ashamed to say I have heard flight attendants refer to their colleagues as “whiners”. In an article by Kolb & Putnam (1992) we learn that “non-rational approaches to conflict are sometimes denigrated as ones exhibited by disputants who do not know better... are often equated with a feminized, and hence less valued, style of conflict management” (p.317). For anyone in the airline industry to label a flight attendant conflict with a passenger as “petty” or “whining” not only denigrates women but also the non-rational approach as a very valuable source of conflict management and training. “Emotional reactions such as

venting feelings and expressing displeasure” (Kolb & Putnam, 1992, p.317), in themselves are not potentials for Air rage incidents. Once the feelings are expressed they can be an opportunity to take the emotionality out of a legitimate complaint and “present rational, conscious, premeditated activity guided by individual decision and choice” (Kolb & Putnam, 1992. p.317).

In her recent book on Air Rage, Angela Dahlberg (2001) identifies several “winning characteristics” of cabin crew that may prevent air rage. She espouses that they thrive on the flexibility and change of their work environments while exhibiting genuine caring in their job performance (p. 38). Dahlberg also emphasizes the importance of communication skills (p. 39).

Understanding that passengers also need some space and time for a non-rational approach to the frustrations facing them in air travel today could go a long way in de-escalating potential air rage situations. Offering flight attendants additional training in conflict resolution could only add a positive note to the safety and security of all concerned. Kenneth Thomas (1993) supports the idea of addressing emotions. He states: “it seems ironic that conflict which is among the most emotion-arousing of phenomena, has been predominantly studied as though those emotions had no bearing on it” (p. 702).

### **Survey of Training**

The FAA Advisory Circular on Interference with Crew Members clearly states: “no person may assault, threaten, intimidate, or interfere with a crewmember in the performance of the crewmember’s duties aboard an aircraft (airsafe.com/03 July, 2001). This may be ideal but it is not reality. Air rage continues to occur and though specific training in handling it has been prescribed from several sources, the actual occurrence of

air rage training is infrequent. Dr. Robert Bor (1999) a professor of Psychology at City University, London, writing about air rage, said: “the focus has been on taking steps to manage it rather than prevent its occurrence” (p. 5). He believes that: “cabin crew interactions with passengers appear to be the single greatest trigger of disruptive behavior” (Bor, 1999, p. 6). He also emphasizes the importance of crew training: “Crew training should focus as much on how to de-escalate tense situations and pacify potentially unruly passengers... and recognize how one’s own actions can unwittingly exacerbate these (p. 8-9).”

The International Transport Worker’s Federation, a union that represents 200,000 cabin crews worldwide, called for governments to install mandatory training programs by the end of 2002, emphasizing that the focus should swing from dealing with incidents after the fact to prevention and passenger management: identifying and pacifying problem passengers before problems develop (James, 2001, p. 58).

It has been nearly two years since this report and not much that has been prescribed to combat air rage has been implemented. In a meeting with a senior vice president of corporate security for one of the major airlines, the executive stated that air rage or dispute resolution training was cost prohibitive in a post 9/11 world. He basically said that the airlines were more concerned with terrorist attacks than air rage situations, particularly level one incidents. In a survey on air rage, the authors indicate that the success of preventing air rage depends on three conditions: (1) awareness of airline policies toward unacceptable behavior, (2) zero tolerance, and (3) awareness of consequence (Bor, Russell, Parker & Papdopoulos. 2001, p. 23). Many individual flight attendants have a zero tolerance policy for air rage, and certainly the airline industry in

general at least gives lip service to it, however the lack of universal legislation contradicts what is actually happening in the industry. The Al-Anon Family program has a slogan that fits so many situations and seems to apply to the zero tolerance policy: “I hear what you say, but I see what you do.” This slogan is an example of actions speaking louder than words.

Thom Nulty of the *Sacramento Business Journal* asserts that: “with our rushed lives and today’s crowded skies, one can almost expect that there will be at least one angry passenger on any given flight” ([sacramento.bcentral.com/](http://sacramento.bcentral.com/)16 July, 2001). If this is true, airlines should consider the cost effectiveness of conflict resolution training and prevention for flight attendants. British Airways advocates air rage training for its customer contact personnel offering what they call “calming courses” for airline staff, a one-day scheme that is built into the training programmes” ([ananova.com/](http://ananova.com/) 19 August, 2001). While this is a good start, other airlines need to jump on the training bandwagon to alleviate air rage incidents.

One major U.S airline executive spoke off the record and told the author that the company had planned to offer its employees training in recognizing and dealing with passenger misconduct and conflict resolution. They had hired a conflict management company to teach the flight attendant group and customer contact personnel on the ground. Unfortunately, after the tragedy of 9/11, this airline determined it could not afford this project. Now more than ever air rage has the potential to become pronounced. While new security measures offer some travelers a sense of comfort, for others the scanning and body searches, especially of the elderly, the physically challenged, and

small children is offensive. Moreover the threat of terrorism puts some passengers on edge. Security measures can be a source and cause of air rage.

Being trained in skilled communications and being able to recognize and address abnormal behavior before it escalates can significantly lower the incidents of air rage. It could be that a passenger is just a nervous flyer and needs some reassurance; it could also be an opportunity to ‘nip in the bud’ a potential air rage incident. While air rage has different levels and often-different definitions, a flight attendant has only one responsibility in-flight: to insure the safety and security of the cockpit, and the passengers, and themselves.

Dealing with verbal aggression either from a male or female flight attendant’s perspective requires good communication skills. This is why training flight attendants can be so beneficial. As Opatow (2000) reminds us “unskilled talking, may not only fail to resolve conflict but also risk conflict escalation” (p.412).

The Federal Aviation Administration mandates that all flight attendants attend ongoing training each year to maintain their qualifications for evacuation procedures, certain medical treatments, safety, and security. To either extend or incorporate this mandatory training to include teaching flight attendants how to deal with potential air rage situations would benefit everyone.

Keeping passengers informed and being aware of potential conflicts are two ways that airline employees can be trained or taught. According to airline consultant, Angela Dahlberg:

the airlines’ problems with unruly passengers are rooted in the fundamental conflict between the need to keep up clockwork ‘production’ under stringent

operating regulations while also paying attention to the service aspects of work...(she) faults the airlines for their ‘authoritarian’ approach, which she says emphasizes ‘safety’-as defined by regulators-at the expense of service. There doesn’t have to be a conflict between safety and service (Dahlberg, as quoted in Walker, 1991).

## **Chapter 2**

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

A questionnaire was prepared to assess flight attendant respondents' personal definitions of air rage, their experience with this phenomenon, and any control they might have over the escalation or de-escalation of these situations. Also examined were the influence of the gender of the flight attendants and the passenger(s) involved in air rage incidents. Of the six interviews conducted, three were female flight attendants and three were male flight attendants. In the interview, they relate their definitions of air rage, their response to experiencing it, and their control over its escalation or de-escalation. Gender issues were examined as well as the flight attendants' opinions on the role of training.

#### **Questionnaire**

For the questionnaire in its entirety, see appendix A. The questionnaire asked flight attendants: 1) to describe an air rage situation, 2) to define air rage, 3) to identify the four levels of air rage, 4) to describe their initial response to air rage, 5) to convey their experience, if any, in law enforcement, 6) to identify if they had ever reported an air rage incident, 7) to identify whether they had handled a case of air rage they did not report, 8) and to recommend directions for future training, especially since 9/11, 9) their recommendations subject matter for new employee training as opposed to a seasoned employee, 10) and to identify their opinions on how the airlines could better prepare flight attendants to deal with air rage.

Six flight attendants were interviewed. Two interviews took place on September 16, 2002 at Logan Airport in the crew lounge of one of the major U.S. airlines, which asked to remain anonymous. A third interview took place at the Moscow Renaissance Hotel in Moscow, Russia on September 24, 2002. The next three interviews took place at Logan Airport, two on October 18, 2002 and the third on October 29, 2002. Some flight attendants were interviewed before they reported to a flight, others were returning from a flight or were on reserve standing by in case they were needed at the last minute for a flight, or helping out in the office or at a hotel on an overnight. All interviews were audio taped. Informed consent was obtained. A condensed version of the interviews is attached. (See Appendix B).

### **Procedure**

As an employee of the airline industry, the author met with the head of corporate security to discuss air rage. He told her that he was unable to share air rage stories. Next the director of the Boston flight attendant base was contacted and asked if one-on-one interviews could be conducted in her base city. The author explained her status as a master's student at the University of Massachusetts in Boston in the Dispute Resolution program and the purpose of her project – examining the role of a flight attendant in the escalation or de-escalation of level one air rage and correlating factors. The base director assented and offered to assist in any way she could. She directed the author to the health and safety supervisor, who she assured would be most helpful in getting her set up to do the interviews. While the office staff was more than helpful they made it clear that they could not supply the author with names of flight attendants who had been involved in

reported incidents. However, information could be solicited from flight attendants in the lounge who were willing and had the time to be interviewed.

Interviews began on Monday September 16, 2002. The author arrived at Logan Airport and health and safety supervisor had prepared for her arrival by setting aside a crew briefing room for her exclusive use for the day. The room had a table, chairs, access to electrical outlets, and a locked door. She also provided the author with access to her computer and copy machine, which allowed her to type and make multiple copies of the consent form so that each participant could have his or her own copy. The health and safety supervisor also provided a handout of Security Threat Levels, given to flight attendants in a Home Study Guide. This handout defines the level of threat, abusive behavior, and control responses when confronted with an Air rage situation. (See Table I, page 5) This table was used during the interview process to help respondents identify the level of their air rage experience.

After a brief meeting with the administrative staff and supervisors to introduce the author's project, she mingled with the flight attendants in the crew lounge. The crew lounge, a secure area on the first level of the airport, houses offices for staff and supervisors, and pre-flight briefing rooms for flight attendants. It is a large open area with lounge chairs, straight back chairs, and computer workstations. The author learned that the busiest times in the crew lounge were from noon through five o'clock in the evening. As the author had been based in Boston for the first 27 years of her career, she still knew quite a few flight attendants. She approached a few and told them what she was doing and asked if they would be willing to volunteer, all said no. Most of the flight attendants the author knows from Boston are older women who have been flying for over

30 years. After many years in this job, they show up on time, but not early and rarely if ever stay in the crew lounge to chat after a flight. The author then approached the flight attendants who did agree to talk who were either commuters who arrive very early for their flights or are waiting for a flight to go home, or they are attendants on ready reserve, and standing by in case they were needed to fill in on a flight.

### **The Interviews**

Ned (all names are pseudonyms) was the first flight attendant interviewed. Ned is a single man of Asian and Caucasian descent in his early thirties. He had just returned from a flight and was checking his email when was approached and asked if he had time to talk. The author explained that she was a graduate student in the Dispute Resolution program and the purpose of her study was to determine what role a flight attendant played in the escalation or de-escalation of level one air rage. She asked if he was aware of the different levels of air rage as determined by the airline industry along with the FAA. He could not recite chapter and verse, but once was shown the Security Threat Levels handout was more willing to continue our discussion, although he wasn't sure if he had a real story for the purposes of the study. Ned didn't think his story was "bad enough" to be labeled 'air rage'. He told the author prior to the interview that sometimes flight attendants are so used to verbal abuse that it is difficult to always know when a passenger crosses the line from being rude to abusive. As he stated in his interview, his situation while "not major... was upsetting to me". Once Ned understood that the author was looking for level one incidents, (verbal abuse), he was much more receptive to volunteering his story. The interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Sue-Ellen was the second flight attendant interviewed. She is what is known in the airline industry as a commuter. She lives in New Orleans and is based in Boston. She commutes between the two cities and usually arrives several hours before her official sign-in for a flight to give herself alternative flights, if needed, to get to work on time. Like Ned, Sue-Ellen did not know the different levels and was hesitant to relate a story about air rage. Once she understood that the author was primarily interested in level one air rage, she too became more receptive to volunteering her story. Sue-Ellen is married with no children and in her early forties. She is a true white southern belle both in looks and mannerism and was more than animated. Her southern patois was difficult to duplicate in the transcription of the tape, but her wonderful sense of humor comes through loud and clear. She has personality plus and could charm any one. While transcribing the tape the author unfortunately realized that the battery must have been low as sometimes the words became so soft or garbled that they could not be transcribed. The laughter always came through loud and clear. The interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.

The next interview took place on a layover in Moscow, Russia. The author's colleagues were aware of her status as a master's candidate and had been told how difficult it had been to get flight attendants to volunteer their time to discuss their experiences with air rage. One of her fellow flight attendants, Bob, then related an air rage incident that actually began with verbal abuse but escalated into level two air rage, physical violence. Bob is a white married male with children in his mid-late forties. He said he would be willing to volunteer for an interview. The interview took place in the author's hotel room. Bob a 'matter-of-fact' type guy, he told his story without much

emotion, although he was very open about not knowing exactly what to do in the situation and being upset about that. The interview lasted approximately 45 minutes.

On October 18, 2002, the author returned to the Boston crew lounge and met Marie, the fourth interviewee. She is a single woman, Caucasian descent and in her mid twenties. She was on ready reserve and sitting at a computer, checking her email, talking on her cell phone and generally just waiting to either be assigned a flight or wait for her release from duty. The health and safety supervisor was on-duty and introduced the author to Marie, who was happy to fill her duty time with an interview. Marie's youth and positive self-esteem helped her to be very confident about not only her story but also her opinions throughout the interview. The interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Ken, the second interview of the day, was the fifth interviewee. He is a white male, a divorced parent of grown children, who is in his mid fifties. Ken was very aware of the different levels of air rage, as he had just completed the personal defense training offered by the company. Ken's confidence came from his age and his life experiences and job diversity within the airline industry. The interview was the lengthiest, lasting for approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes.

The sixth interview took place on October 29, 2002. The health and safety supervisor from Boston called the author and told her of a meeting with the head of corporate security from the company's home office, officials from the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), and management. She thought the author might benefit from this meeting. Vicki, a fellow flight attendant and a long time acquaintance, was in the office as a supervisor substitute and when was informed of the project volunteered to be interviewed. Vicki, a white married female with no children is over 50. She exudes a

calmness that makes her not only a reassuring flight attendant but also a popular and well-liked supervisor when she was in management. The interview lasted approximately 45 minutes.

### Chapter 3

#### Results: Flight Attendant Stories

Styles of conflict vary and of course the method to either dissuade or ignite further conflict depends upon the problem at hand, its severity, and the state of mind of those involved. The results of the six interviews explore the range of flight attendant definitions of air rage from their perspectives, each individual’s response to or understanding of air rage, and gender as an occasional issue.

#### How do flight attendants define air rage?

Two definitions of air rage were evident in the respondents’ remarks. The first defined air rage as a mild socially unacceptable behavior and the second defined it as aggressive and even criminal behavior. Their definitions encompassed passengers who give flight attendants a hard time to those seen as dangerous and a safety risk.

As is indicated on a scale of abusiveness, the flight attendants described air rage as ranging from behavior that is not abusive at all to life threatening.

#### NOT ABUSIVE EITHER VERBALLY OR PHYSICALLY:

Marie	Ned	Vicki	Sue-Ellen
“hard time”	“aggravated”	“mad or angry”	“rude”

#### LIFE THREATENING:

Ken	Bob
“out of control”	“abusive & life threatening”

Marie defined air rage as the behavior of: “anyone who gives me a hard time... it’s attention seeking behavior... making it difficult to do [my] job”. Ned, Vicki, and Sue-Ellen define air rage similarly to Marie. Ned says: “I guess people who are aggravated by the days events, you know, maybe by the airline... maybe by delays or not getting their first class upgrade... it doesn’t mean anything physical to me, but just blowing off steam”. Sue-Ellen defines it as “rude” behavior on the part of a passenger. Vicki refers to air rage as a customer who is “mad”. Ken defines air rage as “something... like when a person is completely out of control, jumping up and down on a suitcase or pushing someone”. Bob aligns himself with Ken’s definition: “I think air rage for me is verbal and physical abuse in life threatening situations, especially if someone is trying to threaten our cockpit or trying to hurt one of our crew or our passengers”.

It is interesting to note a gender discrepancy here - all three women and the only single male flight attendant define air rage as more socially acceptable. The other two male flight attendants, both husbands and fathers, utilize a different set of norms and see air rage as socially unacceptable and as a display of deviant behavior. Air rage anecdotes described (see Appendix B) by Ned and Bob exemplify the opposite ends of the abusiveness scale. However, both the Transportation Safety Administration and the airline industry consider both anecdotes air rage according to the Security Threat Levels table as defined.

While flight attendants definitions fall into two categories, their responses to air rage are as different as the individuals interviewed.

### Response to Air rage Situations

Responses of flight attendants range from mild to moderate to intolerant of air rage.

MILD:

Vicki	Ken	Sue-Ellen	Bob
“detaches self, it’s the uniform”.	“looks past the little things”	“offers benefit of doubt”	“let people vent a little bit”

MODERATE:

Ned
“develops a negative attitude”

INTOLERANT:

Marie
“has zero tolerance for any abuse”

Vicki’s first response is to “step back and take a deep breath and try to detach myself”. Bob said: “I let people vent a little bit... but, then there are cases where people can’t vent or the only way they know how to vent is to be abusive whether it’s verbal or physical... and so I try to feel it out in the beginning before it gets out of hand. But, you know sometimes that doesn’t work”. Ken states:

There is a lot of humanity out there, and I can empathize... with some of them coming on in a bad mood. So, I’m willing to look past the bad mood. And you should really be able to do that. If you’re not, you’ve got to grow up a little because they go through a lot more difficult things than we do just to be a passenger. Now, I’m not condoning the abusive actions. What you try to do is

look past the first little things, maybe a little rudeness, a little shortness, don't hold it against them... You don't have to accept the unacceptable but you do have to accept a little bit of....

Sue-Ellen said: "I usually give somebody who is rude the benefit of the doubt... You don't want to just walk up and be rude to somebody who is being rude because you'll make it worse."

Ned is junior on the seniority list and the only one to admit to taking verbal abuse personally. He said: "my initial response and I probably need to work on this because I personally get an instant attitude because I take it very personally."

Marie says she has a different reaction now than when she started flying. Basically when she started flying she would have turned the world upside down to accommodate and appease a yelling customer, but today, post 9/11, she has "zero tolerance". She said: "I have plenty of other things I would rather be doing on a two hour flight than dealing with or worrying about someone who is going to lose it."

Being confronted with anger is always unsettling. In a containerized cabin at 37,000 feet a flight attendants response air rage can become a crucial factor that determines how it plays out. A flight attendants' initial reactions may determine whether or not he or she has control over what happens next, and whether the situation escalates or de-escalates.

#### Does a Flight Attendant Have Control Over What Happens?

I asked my respondents if flight attendants have control over what happens. Four flight attendants responded to this question. Respondents described flight attendants

responsibility for escalating or de-escalating air rage as occasionally at fault to playing a key role.

OCCASIONALLY AT FAULT:

Ned
“depends on the flight attendant”

PLAYING A KEY ROLE:

Bob	Vicki	Marie
“we can prevent it”	“ a flight attendant plays a significant role”	“we’re not innocent”

Ned replies: “it depends on the individual flight attendant... there are some people who just can’t calm (other) people down...” He offers this advice: “please don’t take it personally... and if you can try to be apologetic and try to empathize with them.”

Other respondents replied that flight attendants do play an important role in the escalation or de-escalation of air rage. Marie candidly stated: “we’re not always innocent.” She then described an incident that she witnessed between a colleague and a passenger. The passenger may not have been the nicest person in the world but he was not rude or abusive, just demanding. By refusing to make the passenger his requested iced tea because she didn’t like the way he asked for it, the flight attendant escalated the situation into something that never should have happened. Marie observed another incident in which a male flight attendant refused to refund a couple the price of the headset rental on principle because he felt they had watched most of the movie and were just looking to “get away with something.” His refusal escalated into a shouting match as the couple were deplaning at their destination and might have escalated into physical

violence if the captain had not intervened. Marie stated: “I think it solely depends on the individual and their experience and what... and their level of conflict resolution and what their boundaries are... But it doesn’t take years and years of flying to know how to escalate or de-escalate a situation.”

Bob said: “a lot of stuff that happens we can stop. We can prevent it... you know I don’t want to beat us up as a group but... I know I’m not always ‘Mr. Nice Guy’ ... I don’t know what the answer is... well... we’ve just got to be trained.”

Vicki agrees that a flight attendant “plays a significant role in that (escalation or de-escalation).” She said: “There hasn’t been enough training. There hasn’t been enough understanding. Management needs to recognize this as a serious issue that they need to play a role in... in providing support to the flight attendants and that’s providing the tools which is training and help, so yes, the flight attendant role is crucial. There is a real cost-benefit analysis here. We should have special training... it’s critical. A flight attendant plays a critical role in defusing something.” Vicki related a story about a fellow flight attendant who mishandled a situation with a passenger. Vicki does not describe the situation but does say that her colleague “flew off the handle” and “grossly over reacted” to the situation. Vicki, as the On-Board-Leader, took the offending flight attendant aside and diplomatically discussed the incident.

Gender Issues

Asked if gender of the flight attendant or passenger was an issue, respondents described gender as an occasional or important factor in air rage:

OCCASIONAL ISSUE:

Marie	Ken	Vicki
“both genders are guilty of	“ depends on the personality	“ it is situational and can

being abusive”	of the flight attendant”	depend on flight attendant”
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IMPORTANT ISSUE:

Ned	Sue-Ellen	Bob
“has experienced more run-ins with men than women”	“men are more prone to verbal abuse”	“men are more prone to using verbal abuse with flight attendants”

Three flight attendants describe gender as an occasional issue. Marie’s experience has been that both men and women can be abusive. She says: “I think it goes either way. Because many of the stories I have heard involve women, but I tend to think first off that a man would be... but now I’m inclined to say it would be even.... Men and women are both guilty of losing it. It’s not limited to one gender or the other.” Marie thought being a female flight attendant was a hindrance. “If an irate passenger sees me... small... I don’t have the appearance... of a big brawny type... verses someone who is 6’3”... and a man... He is going to have the upper hand, strictly by manners... mannerisms... whatever.”

Ken isn’t sure why but does think that being a male flight attendant does help to lessen confrontations in the cabin between passengers and crewmembers. He then summarizes his thoughts and vacillates between gender and personality as to why it helps to be a male flight attendant:

“I can’t get into a debate on women and men in the air... I’m sure there are some women who can intimidate someone to death if they have to, but for some reason I don’t know if it is the male voice or not, we don’t usually talk a lot, we are just like the problem solvers, you know... we’re not big yappers, just give us the bottom line, let’s execute it, get it done, boom! I think people sense when they can get away with stuff and when they can’t. I think it does lean more toward the

male figure... but I also think it has as much to do with personality. I don't really want to categorize it in a sexist way... but I lean more towards the man, because men are more combative if they are pushed. We grew up that way, punching each other, rough housing, and playing hockey... we are going to be a harder person to deal with most of the time. But I really think it comes down to the personality and how you handle it and how you present yourself.

Vicki felt the particular situation or circumstance had more to do with gender being an issue. For example she felt "Europeans are more used to a male presence being on board... in an authority role...in some countries where there is this macho tradition, you might have to be more aware of your presence and the way you come across... As a female you have to make sure that you are viewed as an authority position". Vicki also makes reference to her femaleness and size as a hindrance. She says:

I am a low-key person. I mean I can certainly have a strong presence, but I prefer initially to have a low-key presence... make my requests known. Also I'm not a large person, which I think is a hindrance. I'm not tall, I'm not big, you know I'm 5'4", I don't wear heels and so I think there is a whole psychological package with it. I'm not someone that someone would initially... that they would look at me as someone with authority.

Ned felt that he had had more "run ins with men than with women." This may or may not have more to do with the fact that more men travel on business than women. On average a First Class cabin is filled with more male passengers than female. With the exception of vacation destinations, males are predominant on most flights, even in the economy section. Ned thinks that being a male flight attendant telling another male that

he could not bring his bag on board “might have hindered the situation, probably another man looking at a women would probably think that a woman would be more intimidated, I guess... I wasn’t intimidated.” He expressed his opinion that perhaps a male passenger could more easily intimidate a female flight attendant and “get away with bringing his bag on board because she might find a place for it as opposed to me standing up to him and saying: ‘listen we need to check your bag’.” In the instance with the passenger and the bag, Ned didn’t feel that being male helped as the entire crew had to deal with the “backlash of his attitude.” The passenger was irate and sulked for the entire flight, which is always an unnerving experience for a crew.

Sue-Ellen echoed Ned’s comments about the dominance of male passengers. She felt men were mostly prone to verbal abuse, but perhaps it is “because it’s mostly men traveling.”

Bob agrees that men who are more prone to using verbal abuse with crewmembers. He says: “men are used to having their secretaries or wives do things for them. Who knows what kind of day they have had, then they get on an airplane and they have a woman tell them what to do... God forbid!!! I mean that sends a lot of men over the edge.”

## Chapter 4

### Discussion: Implications for Training

The Thomas & Kilmann (1974) conflict handling typologies is utilized as a framework to examine the styles each flight attendant employed to handle the air rage conflicts they encountered. Certain of these styles are more useful in de-escalating air rage than others. Gender was also examined to see if it influences how air rage situations play out. Finally, flight attendants were queried on their sentiments of the airline industry's in-house training to deal with air rage and asked to suggest future training possibilities.

#### Conflict Theory

As was stated previously, Morton Deutsch (1973) emphasizes the influence the public will have on the nature of disputes. Air rage takes place in a very public spot light, an aircraft, and the audience can't escape. It is also pertinent to reiterate issues he identified as causing conflicts: (1) control over resources, (2) preferences and nuisances, (3) values, (4) beliefs, and (5) the nature of the relationship between the parties. Control over resources such as space on an airplane, more specifically the space where one sits and where one puts their luggage seems to be the biggest issue causing air rage incidents to those studied for this project. Seat assignments and carry-on baggage were the two major causes of confrontation for the flight attendants interviewed.

Values also played a role in that a passenger might feel their individual liberty, i.e. the purchase of a ticket entitles them to the space they purchased, which they feel is jeopardized when they can't bring on their carry-on bag or don't like their seat assignment. This type of passenger can tend to forget that social justice tries to

accommodate the masses and individual liberty isn't always possible due to the nature of space in the containerized cabin of an airplane.

Beliefs are another issue that could be argued. "Many conflicts are over what 'is': over facts, information knowledge, or beliefs about reality" (Deutsch, 1973, p.16). Space becomes a fact, but the argument always becomes 'who gets the space'? The reality gets distorted because everyone believes they deserve the space they want again because they purchased a ticket for themselves and their bags.

Lastly, the nature of the relationship between the two parties becomes a huge issue. Both the passenger and the flight attendant have needs and interests. The flight attendant wants bags secured safely for take-off and landing. If that can't be accommodated due to space constraints then the bag must be checked. The flight attendants' agenda is dominant for the safety of passengers and crew. Though passengers want their carry-on bags with them and can become very territorial about them, their need is second to safety, which is a flight attendants primary concern. If the airline industry were more efficient at getting people's luggage to them at the carousel and, lost fewer bags were lost, the traveling public might not need to be so vigilant about stowing their luggage in the passenger cabin.

Nobody wants to be seen in a negative light in public. Passengers on airplanes and the flight attendants working them are no exception. Conflict is never encouraged but it does happen regularly on airplanes. Given that four out of five of the basic types of issues described by Deutsch (1973) could relate to the issues from this study suggests that it would behoove the airline industry to look at conflict resolution skills and style training would be a big benefit.

## **Conflict Handling Typologies**

Avoidance. In their conflict handling typologies, Kenneth W. Thomas & Ralph H. Kilmann (1974) define avoidance as not addressing the issue. Ned described it as: “walking away”. This is the mode most used by the flight attendants interviewed. Part of the reason for conflict avoidance is that the airlines are a customer service oriented industry. They, therefore, encourage flight attendants to accommodate the passengers. With new security and safety issues post 9/11, accommodation is not always possible. When the flight attendant cannot accommodate a passenger they tend to avoid them. Sue-Ellen and Bob’s stories reflect avoidance styles of handling conflict.

Sue-Ellen used an avoidance style in all four of her air rage encounters. Two were carry-on baggage problems, one was an alcohol related, and the last was a problem with a seat assignment. In the first situation, a passenger threw his bag at her feet and the Captain intervened. In the second scene with the bag, she was a witness not a participant. She had overheard the passenger call her colleague a “fag” in a derogatory tone, but did not intervene because other’s had it under control. The alcohol related incident was also a situation that she witnessed and was not directly involved in so she chose to defer to the wishes of the on-board-leader of the flight, which was basically to not serve the offending passengers any alcohol and let the law enforcement officer and non working pilot handle them. In the final situation, a woman was behaving erratically. Sue-Ellen thought it best to ignore her.

While Sue-Ellen and the erratic passenger exchanged words, she was consistent with her avoidance conflict resolution style and asked herself: “what’s going to help and not make it worse?” In a positive light, her avoidance style can be seen as

“diplomatically sidestepping an issue, postponing an issue until a better time, or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation (Thomas & Kilmann. 1974, p. 10).”

Bob also described air rage incidents that were handled with avoidance. This episode began as a level one verbal abuse threat and became a level two incident. A young couple and their infant child boarded a plane in New York bound for the west coast. Bob noticed that the male passenger seemed “nervous and erratic in his behavior” on the ground. The passenger became irate when he was told that his baby’s bottle could not be heated until after take-off. During the flight this man overheard Bob telling the on-board-leader Kathy, that a diaper was caught in the toilet that was causing a loud banging noise that was very disruptive to the entire back cabin. When Kathy came back to look into the lav, the passenger “went absolutely ballistic, got Kathy in a headlock and was twisting her arm and repeatedly called her a cunt”. He had lost it and was screaming at the whole crew. Kathy, a psych major, did not lose her calm but kept telling the passenger to “let go of my arm, you’re hurting me.” Bob immediately called the cockpit to advise them of what was happening and while he was on the interphone with the captain, the passenger let go of Kathy’s arm and returned to his seat. His wife came back, explained the stress they were under with their child and apologized. The crew did have the police meet the flight at their destination, but no charges were pressed. In this case Bob used an avoidance conflict style by calling on Kathy the on-board-leader. Might a collaborating style have saved Kathy from the physical violence she experienced? It is difficult in this situation to make a judgment call as to which style would have served everyone the best because there are too many variables when dealing with someone as obviously distraught as this passenger. Given the circumstances it was

probably best that Bob used the avoidance style, as Kathy was very adept at taking care of herself and because of her the situation did not escalate into more violence.

Collaborating. Kenneth W. Thomas & Ralph H. Kilmann (1974) define collaborating as working toward the full benefit of both self and the other party. This style can be complicated for flight attendants to use because they are trained to think of the passenger first. When the flight attendants interviewed used it was in conjunction with other styles. For example Ned and Ken's stories reflect an initial willingness to be collaborative.

Ned encountered an irate passenger over a carry-on baggage problem. The passenger became loud and aggressive. Ned apologized and used a collaborating conflict style by showing the customer that the overhead bin space was completely full and assuring the passenger that his luggage would arrive safely at his destination and asked the passenger what else he could do. When I asked Ned if he wanted to resolve the conflict, he said: "I have a habit of walking away... I get put on the defensive very, very easily... so what I try to do is have somebody else take care of it... sometimes I find if another person handles a situation they can get better results." As previously described, in the Al-Anon Family Twelve Step Program there is a slogan that states: "I hear what you say, but I see what you do." This usually refers to the fact that someone's words and actions can be very different. In this interview I saw this dichotomy. While Ned espoused an avoidance style of conflict in general, when faced with a conflict he actually used a competing style using his rank or position as a flight attendant and softened it with collaboration through an apology and offering reassurance that the passengers bag would make it safely to his destination.

Ken's incident was a seat assignment problem. A woman sitting in a middle seat in the rear of the aircraft told Ken that the passenger next to her smelled and she wanted to change seats. There were no seats to change to, but she gained the sympathy of passengers in the front row and then told them that the passenger next to her tried to molest her. She alluded to this later in the flight to one of the flight attendants, but never made a formal accusation. Ken offered her temporary seating in the forward flight attendant jumpseat. He also told her she could stand in the forward galley as long as the seat belt sign was not illuminated, talked to her at length, and explored her accusations, all of which appeared to be unfounded. These actions seemed to appease her for a while, but her mental condition seemed to deteriorate and Ken's collaborating style deteriorated with it. Her erratic behavior began to frighten other passengers and some passengers wanted the captain to land and have her removed. This is when Ken switched his style to that of a compromising one. "The objective is to find some expedient, mutually acceptable solution... seeking a quick middle-ground position (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974, p. 10)." He convinced the young woman to stop her tirade, stay calm, and land at their destination or continue her behavior and have the captain land the airplane at an alternate airport. Ken's compromising proposal allowed the flight to continue, officials met the flight and state troopers took the young woman into custody.

Competing. Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann (1974) define the competing style of conflict handling "as a power oriented mode, in which one uses whatever power seems appropriate to win one's own position (p.10)." Both Marie and Vicki's stories demonstrate a desire to win their own position with the offending passenger, but neither was ultimately able to do it.

Marie's air rage story involved a woman in her eighties. The woman was unhappy with her seat assignment and would not take her seat. The flight was full and the passenger was delaying the boarding of an already delayed and full flight by refusing to take her assigned seat. Marie tried to use a compromising conflict style by trying to assuage and convince the woman to take a seat. She reminded the woman that the good news was she had a seat on an overbooked flight and she could try and get someone to change seats. The woman continued to yell and out of desperation Marie utilized a competing style and forcefully told her to "go sit down". When the passenger did not respond, Marie became even more competitive and used her authority as a flight attendant. The passenger did go to the back of the aircraft where her assigned seat was located but eventually lost complete control of her emotions and was removed from the flight. The flight crew actually became concerned that she might have a stroke or heart attack over the situation she had become so distraught. Marie's original style of compromising instead of competing and asserting her authority, had she been able to continue it, may have prevented the breakdown and, finally, the removal of the passenger. Marie does admit that her directive "go sit down" and the tone she used was "probably not THE best option... you know not the best decision", but given that the crew had been warned by the gate agent that this woman might be trouble, the whole crew did not have a high tolerance level for her ranting and raving. Might training in conflict resolution skills and styles have allowed the flight attendants armed with this prior information about the passenger to try a different style of handling the conflict? Is this putting too much responsibility for a passenger's emotional well being on the flight

attendants? These are similar to questions need to be explored by flight attendants and this could occur in air rage management training.

Vicki also encountered a seating problem during the boarding process. The passenger became loud and intimidating. Later the situation escalated into a threatening one for the flight attendants involved. The passenger had wanted to change his seat to sit in the exit row seats, which do have more legroom. Unfortunately, exit row seats must be occupied at all times by English speaking and able-bodied passengers. They must be able to hear instructions and be able to operate the exit in the case of an emergency. Neither the passenger nor his wife spoke fluent enough English to understand and respond to the commands of the flight crew in the case of an emergency. He was so angry that he could not sit in the exit row that threatened the Greek speaking flight attendant and let it be known that he would not move, no one could make him, and he wasn't going to do so. Vicki used a competing conflict style; this was not a situation that could be compromised, as it was a safety issue as well as a mandate of the FAA. The interphone to the cockpit happened to be directly across from the exit row seats, the aircraft banked sideways just as Vicki hung up the interphone from speaking with the captain, so the passenger understood that she was serious and that the aircraft would return to New York if he didn't comply with crew requests. In this example, use of the competing style calmed a volatile air rage situation enough so that the flight could continue on to its destination without further incident.

Compromising. According to the Kenneth W. Thomas & Ralph H. Kilmann (1974) conflict handling typology, compromising involves a combination of mutual sacrifice and benefit for each party. Unfortunately, compromising on safety and security

issues is never an option for airline personnel. For example, Vicki could not allow the Greek-speaking passenger to sit in an exit row seat. She would have been fined by the FAA and faced possible termination by the airline had she let him sit there. She did try to win him over by explaining that the rules were those of the United States government and the airline industry and not hers. In this particular situation a compromising or accommodating style of handling the conflict would have probably worked but could also have threatened Vicki's job.

Accommodating. Kenneth W. Thomas & Ralph H. Kilmann (1974) define accommodating as giving in to the other party. Perhaps because flight attendants use this style of conflict as a matter of course that potential air rage situations do not develop further. Like compromising, the accommodating style of conflict cannot be used to jeopardize the safety or security a flight, but both styles could be emphasized in training as precursors to working with the other styles. It is important to remember that not all styles can work in all situations, particularly on an aircraft, but learning about all of the styles of conflict is a good tool to have in a flight attendants 'bag of tricks.'

### **Conflict Training**

Flight International magazine discusses the importance of training to handle air rage. The article cites the importance for the airline industry "to do their best within the existing infrastructure [and that] training –highly specialist, time-consuming and costly-is essential to prepare ground and air staff to deal with the situation" (Learmount, 1999), of air rage. He describes a major British airline that offers conflict management training: tailored for cabin crew and concentrating on 'de-escalation' techniques, with restraint training as a final resort. Skills taught include: understanding and coping

with the effects of adrenalin; understanding challenging behavior and how cabin crew should respond-this includes training in body language; awareness of the factors that affect people's behavior; interpersonal and communications skills; [and] action plan and emergency procedures (Learmount,1999).

However, it is important to remember that training of airline employees to combat potential air rage is only one factor. Legislation needs to be in place to offer as a deterrent to this behavior, as is stated earlier. The United States has increased the fine for violations for unruly passengers from \$1,100 - \$25,000. Other countries have been more aggressive with air rage rules, in order to stem the increase in air rage incidents. The inexorable rise in passenger disruption on aircraft has been stemmed in countries where procedures and legislation have been put in place to combat the problem according to the International Air Transport Association (Moxon, 2000, p. 18). With the exception of Great Britain, Canada, and Malaysia, countries have been slow to push through new legislation.

Since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the media has reported more air rage incidents. But as is often the case in a bureaucratic system of government, it has been difficult to bring all of the interested parties to the table. Congress, as the legislative branch of our government, needs to coordinate with the Federal Aviation Administration, the airline industry, and law enforcement to address this on going problem (Satola, 2002). Satola quotes Andrew Thomas who complains: “when Congress debated the aviation and security measure, air rage was never discussed” (Satola, 2002). U.S. pilots support legislation. In an article written for the June/July 1999 issue of Air Line Pilots newsletter, a Northwest Airlines pilot states:

What is needed today is an industry standard of behavior. Once a standard has been set, airlines will be respected and appreciated for enforcing it... States need to adopt legislation and procedures that would permit local authorities to conduct proceedings quickly and easily against persons alleged to have endangered an aircraft or it's occupants (Reiss, 1999, p.13).

While supporting legislation, Captain Reiss introduces the importance of training and its focus on de-escalation, but warns “the cabin staff of several airlines have already expressed their objection to such training because it seems to reflect greater concern about the passenger’s feelings than the dignity of the cabin staff (Reiss, 1999, p.13).” His concern has been echoed in other articles concerning air rage as well as discussions with my colleagues. Interestingly this specific question was asked during the taped interview process of this paper and not one of the flight attendants expressed this thought. Perhaps because the interviewee was asked to suggest or design a training program was the difference, instead of just asking if they would be willing to go to a training session. For such a program to be successful:

The employee must believe that the social skills being taught are useful and valuable, that the training time is well spent, and that the content is relevant. A blend of focus on the feelings of the staff, evident causes of disruptive behavior, the feelings and expectations of the passenger, crew coordination, legal factors, and the use of physical restraint as a last resort, seems to be of value (Reiss. 1999, p. 13).

### **Flight Attendants Want Training**

All of the flight attendants interviewed were proponents of additional training for dealing with disruptive passengers. Because it has become part of the job description to chant the long ago learned mantra: accommodate, accommodate, accommodate, flight attendants have become immune to verbal abuse from passengers. Therefore it can be difficult to recognize the escalation of an air rage situation until it has gotten out of control.

The first step in the de-escalation industry-wide would include appropriate training in how to recognize and deal with potential air rage situations. Marie espouses, “one-on-one training... it would have to be something tangible that you can see, you can hear, that you can experience... experience yourself.” She is especially concerned about conflict avoidant flight attendants who are mild, meek mannered, and tend to shy away from conflict. Yet even they must learn to deal with potential air rage situations or they will escalate. She observes:

“if you’re going to have training for something like this then it would have to seriously take into consideration... all types of abuse... from not only defending yourself...but how to de-escalate... how to use your judgment and when you see it’s appropriate to calm a passenger down who is upset or just ‘nip it in the bud’ with zero tolerance.”

She sees training for an evacuation of an aircraft in an emergency situation with training for handling difficult passengers. However, training for an evacuation of an aircraft is relatively repetitive even though each emergency situation might be different; training flight attendants to deal with difficult passengers could also have a repetitive slant using different approaches. Most flight attendants who have been interviewed after an

emergency evacuation of an aircraft say that their initial and recurrent training immediately come to the fore and they were able to act upon what they had been taught. The same ability to respond quickly and make informed choices can also become true for de-escalating potential air rage situations. Marie advises that the training should concern: “communications, because it deals a lot with conflict management... how to present yourself, how to carry yourself” and communication isn’t just about words. Marie believes flight attendants need to “focus... focus on how you are going to react. It has to always be in your mind. You have to always be thinking about what to do. If somebody starts to yell at you, it will take you by surprise.” If you know what your options are, however, you are in a better position to handle yourself and the situation. Marie warns: “it is hard to teach a person how to behave... to teach a person how to react in a certain situation, what to do, what to say... because each situation is different. But to get the idea... the idea of what to do.” The advantage of additional training in conflict resolution skills and styles might offer flight attendants not only an awareness of what they think they should and would do, but what they actually do. It also offers them knowledge of alternative styles of handling conflict if the situation warrants it.

Ken advocates training for vigilance, a sort of behavioral profiling. He mentions things like training flight attendants to notice people who are nervous or upset or any behaviors that appear to deviate from the norm. “Notice where people are sitting and how passengers react to one another,” he suggests as a vigilant approach. He is talking about how to be present in the moment.

Kathleen, a recently retired flight attendant enjoyed one of the best reputations among her colleagues because of her skilled vigilance. During the boarding process, she

was in the aisle talking to the passengers, assisting them, showing concern if they appeared out of sorts in any way. She reaped many accolades, both written and verbal during her 36-year career as a flight attendant. People like Kathleen would be excellent sources to recruit to teach de-escalation training to active flight attendants.

While Marie did not mention role-plays or scenarios by name, in essence they are what she is promoting. Ken was eager to suggest role-plays as a good method of training; he readily admitted that he hated them, but “there is no substitution” for them. He relates, as does Marie, to the role-play flight attendants do for emergency evacuations. He related his own story about a ditching evacuation he did in recurrent training, the mistakes he made hurt his ego because he was in front of his peers, but the lessons he learned from it are invaluable. He suggests having three or four different scenarios to act out or discuss, “you have to get in there and see what you don’t know...it can be the greatest learning tool.”

A former professor of mine often stated: “man is basically savage coated with a thin veneer of civilization.” In contrast, Vicki believes in the positive aspects of humanity. She believes that “people don’t want things to escalate and they DO want to learn” and that is why you can’t ever “over train” a public contact person. Vicki, an advocate of role-plays and scenarios, asserts:

I think just having training where they give situations that are culled from flight reports and analysis... first of all you’re with your peers and there is a tremendous positive reinforcement... thinking like... WOW... you’re not alone in responding this way or feeling that way. That maybe you were exhausted... you didn’t handle something the right way... give people the opportunity to learn. Those are all tremendous

validations and people who are going to this type of training realize that when they felt like that it was normal and how can I learn from that. How can I use what I felt and channel it in a different way... to protect myself... physically and emotionally... I think the type of training could be extensive role-playing. I think having an environment that people feel comfortable being open and saying: ‘this happened and I don’t think I handled it well’ ... that would be an opportunity to learn.”

Vicki has been flying for over thirty years and has been in both the flight attendant position and held various positions within management and has always been a proponent of her peers’ and giving flight attendants all of the tools they need to do their job. She believes air rage training would be a benefit to the airline industry, the flight attendant group, and the traveling public, particularly in a post 9/11 era when no one wants to be involved in or be witness to any form of air rage.

Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) mandated training for flight attendants does not require any type of dispute resolution training. The company the author works for does offer a day of “verbal judo” which is basically teaching skills about talking through a potentially volatile situation and learning when it is best to remove yourself from that situation. The FAA does requires all new hire flight attendants to complete an initial training course for thirty-five days, eight hours a day. In the training the flight attendant is required to learn: the evacuation procedures, the operation and location of emergency equipment on all aircraft that is flown by their company, emergency medical treatments, the rules and regulations of the airline industry, and security training. Each trainee is required to take a test each day on his or her newly acquired knowledge and skills. They must maintain a 90 percent average to stay in training and must also pass a

‘hands-on-training’ component consisting of emergency drills and evacuations in a mock up of an aircraft. During the last two weeks of training each flight attendant also does a certain number of on the job training (OJT) or familiarization flights. Once a flight attendant has completed initial training, they must re-qualify annually to maintain their FAA qualifications and status as a flight attendant. This one day, eight-hour re-qualification training includes emergency equipment operation, ‘hands-on-training,’ review of medical treatments, and security training.

### **Blueprint for Training**

Flight attendants have a unique role in the escalation or de-escalation of air rage. In the process of escalation, the flight attendant is able to detect the ascent of the rage through each of the four levels of air rage to evaluate the circumstances. Once the forward door of the aircraft closes and the flight is underway it is the flight attendants responsibility to handle any situation as it occurs. As we all know, there is no escape from the cylindrical tube, known as an airplane, at 37,000 feet.

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) mandates training for flight attendants. This includes the physical and mental review of all procedures relative to air safety. It does not, however, have requirements for training flight attendants on procedures or methods of handling air rage. The government does not want to become responsible for the actions or re-actions of flight attendants. Their role has only been to enact legislation that makes interfering with the duties of a crew a federal offense punishable by a fine or imprisonment or both. So, who is responsible and what method of training should one apply to an air rage situation? Each airline ought to be accountable to and for the people they hire and conflict resolution as a course of study ought to be a

part of flight attendant training. In each of the interviews the respondents contributed what they believed and conceived to be the reasons as to why they reacted to air rage the way they did, how much thought they applied to their reaction, and the results of their reaction. Both for the young and more mature flight attendant all agreed that training to learn how to handle air rage situations would enable them to be more confident.

Could we stop air rage by choosing the method of ‘nipping’ it in the bud by a psychological survey or history on all passengers before purchasing a ticket? This idea would be as impractical to impose as it is to conceive. In a country that was founded on the idea of freedom, it just is not possible. If we cannot hand select our passengers, what can we do to quell the tide of air rage? Train the people we do select to serve our passengers – our flight attendants.

Utilizing the interviewees’ recommendations the author offers a list of teaching methods and a list of the content of a purposed training.

Teaching methods:

1. Computer based training.
2. Mentoring program for new employees, i.e. tag up with a seasoned flight attendant to learn the ‘ins and outs’ of job.
3. Workshop/role reversal.
4. Films that show air rage incidents.
5. Self-defense training. (Offered on a volunteer basis after 9/11, but discontinued)
6. Role-playing.
7. Safety and security training. (Offered in annual recurrent training, but this would focus on dealing with air rage)

Content of training (culled from flight attendant interviews):

1. Be aware of boundaries...pick your fights.
2. Something tangible, that you can see, hear, and experience.
3. Must look at all types of abuse, from defending yourself physically to using your judgment to know when it is appropriate to just calm a passenger down.
4. Idea training, dealing with conflict management.
5. How to's: how to present yourself, how to carry yourself, how to react to different situations.
6. Vigilance training to pick out potential problems.
7. Examine 'real' situations culled from flight reports.

In reviewing the recommendations of the interviewees in this study, in order to include as many of their suggestions as possible, a computer-based program would be designed and offered to flight attendants as a tool to prepare them for a day of 'hands on' training. The program would present twenty scenarios, all culled from actual flight attendant reports, and would be divided into four sections. This computer-based training would take as long as necessary for each individual flight attendant to read, access, and answer. In order to attend the 'hands-on' training day, each flight attendant must complete the computer-based program. This computer-based training section would allow each respondent to select a multiple choice answer and then offer that respondent an immediate evaluation of the choice they made. This would be strictly for the flight attendants benefit and not something assessed by either a supervisor or training instructor. It would give the flight attendants an opportunity to look at their own ability to be aware of potential air rage situations, their communication skills not only with

passengers but fellow flight attendants, administer the Thomas & Kilmann (1974) Conflict Handling Mode Instrument to access their own conflict styles, and do a self-evaluation.

Section one: would be recognizing a potential conflict, considering how you may respond to that conflict. This section would involve awareness or being vigilant, observing people. How good are your observation skills? Are you present in the moment? Are you doing your job?

Section two: emphasizes the importance of communication not only with passengers but also between flight attendants. Do you understand the importance of body language as a form of communication? What are the forms of communication besides verbal? What form of communication allows you to respond in a positive light?

Section three: tackles analysis of flight attendant approaches or conflict styles. They will take the 30 question Thomas & Kilmann (1974) Conflict Mode Instrument, then score and interpret the results. Learning about the conflict styles of competing, collaborating, avoiding, accommodating, and compromising will serve as the basis for introducing to flight attendants ideas about ‘how to’ handle different situations.

Section four: encourages self-evaluation during and after the conflict. The training of flight attendants to better handle conflict will include a self-evaluation process so that they may reflect and learn from their experiences. What are your ‘triggers’? Can I see the other person’s ‘triggers’. What style worked? Was there a resolution? What style would you recommend?

The actual ‘hands-on’ training day would entail the use of hypothetical situations using films, role-plays, role-reversals, and interactive workshops promoting conflict

resolution skills. These activities would make the flight attendant part of the solution without berating or belittling their confidence in their job performance. In other words, if you're part of the solution you're not part of the problem. This concept puts a very positive spin on training in conflict resolution.

The company has recently pursued a line of instructing certain individual ground employees in pertinent positions to be relegated as the "conflict" person. This is fine for ground situations, but in an in-flight situation this individual is not accessible. All flight attendants on all flights need to be trained 'conflict' people. This could be accomplished by the few hours it would take to complete the computer based training and a day of 'hands-on' training. The 'hands-on' training could be taught initially by hiring an outside conflict management firm to teach in-house training instructors who would then become the facilitators for the actual day of training. As it stands now, the flight attendant has to rely on past experiences, self-control, and methods of conflict handling learned on their own. Not all flight attendants have these innate abilities therefore a conflict resolution training program taught in initial training and offered along with FAA mandated recurrent training would prove most beneficial to the flight attendant, the airline industry, and the traveling public.

### **Change and Conflict**

The airline industry as a whole has tried to deny and even downplay the prevalence of air rage in the skies, perhaps in hopes that it would just disappear. In fact after the terrorist attacks on 9/11 air rage incidents did appear to be down. According to the flight attendants interviewed for this study all agreed that passengers were better behaved, more polite, and less disgruntled right after 9/11. However, one year after

9/11/01, passengers were back to their same old behavior – rude, crude, and socially unacceptable.

Eric Marcus (2000) introduces us to “three critical psychological components involved in any change process: motivation, resistance, and commitment to change. Much of the theorizing on the change process is rooted in Lewin’s (1947) original concepts of unfreezing, movement, and refreezing (p. 366).” What could create the unfreezing of current unenlightened practices and the motivation to stop air rage? What can create the movement or what is the resistance to changing how we handle air rage situations?

The myriad of negative consequences of air rage can (1) motivate an industry already in trouble financially, (2) increase the fines for interference of the flight crew through legislation, and (3) create a public campaign to make the traveling public aware that the airline industry is not only just concerned about terrorism, it is also concerned about air rage as both are safety issues and offenders will be prosecuted. One of the best steps toward refreezing and real commitment to change is having the airline industry look at future training for flight attendants to offer them conflict resolution skills and styles to de-escalate potential air rage situations before they become a safety hazard. Marcus (2000) also tells us about the Beckhard and Harris (1987) model of managing Planned Change: Current state – transition state- desired future state (p. 371). Beckhard and Harris suggest that even though the process is linear, it is best to begin with the desired future state. The author found this interesting. Like life, it is circular. If flight attendants are better trained to deal with potential air rage situations, the airline industry is less likely to face the negative consequences, and if there are fewer incidents there will be less

need for more government regulations in an industry that some feel is already too regulated.

### **Limitations and Possibilities for Future Research**

This study's small sample size (6) limits the generalizability of the results, as does all studied flight attendants' employment at the same airline. Future research on air rage should study a larger group of flight attendants from an array of geographical regions that are employed at different airlines to combat this limitation. It would also be interesting to poll flight attendants from airlines outside the U.S. to compare results with their U.S. counterparts.

The author's method of soliciting interviews (asking flight attendants if they were willing to be interviewed while in airport lounges or on layovers) may also have colored the study's results. Veteran flight attendants, the majority spending little time in lounges or in public areas while on layover, were omitted from the study, as were flight attendants who didn't have time for interviews the days they were conducted. More resources could enable future researchers to offer compensation and increase participation.

### **Conclusion**

So what role does a flight attendant play in the escalation or de-escalation of level one air rage? The six flight attendants interviewed exhibited opinions espoused by many other flight attendants. Flight attendants believe that air rage is a problem and that a flight attendant plays a major role in its escalation or de-escalation. Certainly further research can fine tune questions investigated here, including how flight attendants define and respond effectively to air rage. Research with larger numbers of flight attendants from different companies might produce different results but, by and large, flight

attendants as a group and a profession care about their career path, care about their respective companies, and care about how they handle themselves in a conflict. The author proposes that learning better ways to handle air rage through training in dispute resolution skills and styles can bring flight attendants and their companies into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It can foster better customer relations and benefit the traveling public.

## **Appendix A**

### Questionnaire

1. Could you describe an air rage situation that you were personally involved in?
  - (a) What happened?
  - (b) Did you participate in resolving the situation?
  - (c) Did you want to resolve it or did you want to walk away?
  - (d) In your experience is it men or women who use verbal abuse?
  - (e) Did being a woman (or man depending on the interviewee) help or hinder the situation?
  
2. How do YOU define air rage?
  
3. Are you aware of the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and the airline industries definition of the four levels of air rage?
  
4. What is your initial reaction/response to verbal abuse? (Verbal abuse and level one air rage to be used interchangeably throughout this interview)
  - (a) Have you personally experienced it?
  - (b) How did you personally experience it? (Don't lead the interviewee, but if at a loss, suggest: emotionally, intellectually, were you detached, etc.)
  
5. Do you have any former experience in law enforcement, self-defense, or martial arts training?

6. Have you ever reported an air rage incident?
  - (a) Are you aware that you can report “verbal abuse” as an air rage situation?
  
7. Have you ever handled a case of air rage, where you felt you should have reported it, but chose not to? If “yes” why?
  
8. Have you noticed any difference in the incidents of verbal abuse since 9/11?
  - (a) Has your authority as a crewmember changed since 9/11?
  
9. What would be your personal recommendation for future training?  
(If the interviewee doesn’t have a ready response or feels stuck, offer suggestions or types of training they could agree to or not such as: interactive (role plays), computer based, take home readings, class room lecture, etc.)
  
10. What training would you recommend for a new employee (i.e. initial training) and a seasoned employee? Would they be different?
  - (a) Do you think the airline industry ought to offer additional in-house training to deal with air rage?
  - (b) Does seniority or experience play a role with a F/A who deals with an abusive customer?

How could the airlines better prepare you to deal with level one air rage?

Gender: Male ....\_\_\_\_\_ Female....\_\_\_\_\_.

Age: 20-30....\_\_\_\_\_, 31-40....\_\_\_\_\_, 41 & over....\_\_\_\_\_.

Length of Service as a F/A or Customer Service Rep.... 1-5...\_\_\_\_\_, 5-10...\_\_\_\_\_, 10-15...\_\_\_\_\_, 16 & over....\_\_\_\_\_.

## Appendix B

### Condensed Flight Attendant Stories

#### Question # 1 Describe an Air Rage situation.

##### Interview # 1

Ned

Encountered irate passenger over carry-on baggage. “There was this gentleman... I think we were going to Atlanta, and we didn’t have enough room for his bag, so of course we had to check his bag and he wasn’t too happy about that. So, he proceed to get loud and what have you... yelling about how much he hated the airline, why can’t you find a place for my bag... what have you... getting really angry. It wasn’t really major but it was kind of upsetting to me.

##### Interview # 2

Sue-Ellen

Four scenarios. (1) Carry-on baggage. Not enough room for customer’s luggage and it had to be checked. Customer became loud, aggressive, and threw luggage at the feet of the flight attendant. Because the Captain was standing with the flight attendant at the main cabin door and witnessed the customers’ behavior, the flight attendant did not have to handle the situation. In this particular instance she used the avoiding conflict style, because the Captain intervened without even being asked too. (2) Another carry-on baggage situation involved a customer calling a male flight attendant a “Fag”. The customer was being helped by a male flight attendant and both were looking for overhead bin space to store the customers luggage, there was no room, so the customer tried to cram the luggage in and brushed the male flight attendants arm away from the overhead bin and said “let me try to put in it, Fag”. While Sue-Ellen witnessed this incident, she

did not get personally involved. The male flight attendant immediately left the customer contacted the On-Board-Leader and the passenger was removed from the flight. This was a competing style of handling the conflict, this power oriented mode, basically gave the customer who insulted the flight attendant no options. He was removed from the flight.

(3) Alcohol related situation. Two old sea merchants who had been drinking were allowed to board. Both the gate agent and the Captain determined as long as the two men were not served any alcohol, they would be fine to take the flight. During the flight they drank from their own bottle and became loud and started to use profanity. The flight attendant took advantage of an off duty law enforcement officer and pilot to sit next to them and talk to them. Again this was an avoiding style of conflict for this flight attendant.

(4) Seat assignment problem. A woman sitting next to an emergency exit became loud and aggressive toward this flight attendant whose responsibility it was to arm and disarm the slide pack or evacuation chute on the door. She kept saying: “this stupid bar, this stupid bar is in my way”. Upon landing when the flight attendant went to disengage or detach the girt bar from the slide, the woman became irate. Sue-Ellen, having heard this through out the flight without addressing it, said to her: “you know what, the next time you fly you might want to tell somebody that you don’t want to sit next to an emergency exit door”. Well the customer started to yell and get loud, but the flight attendant decided that the woman was behaving erratically and it might be best to ignore her. Again, Sue-Ellen used avoidance as a style of conflict. Her comment was “you have to kind of have to size a person up, you know... decide what your going to say... or are you going to let somebody else handle it, you know do you need to let somebody else do it, do you look like their ex-wife, do they hate all women, or do you need to get a male flight attendant, do you need to get a girl with a different hair color, I don’t know... what going to help and not make it worse...”.

### Interview #3

#### Marie

An 80-85 year old woman became outraged because of her assigned seat. She had been on an earlier flight that cancelled and was reassigned a seat in the rear of the aircraft. She wanted seat 15A. Marie explained that this flight was in an oversold position and 15A was assigned to someone else and as she was being accommodated on this flight it was not possible for her to have her original seat assignment. Marie tried to use a compromising conflict style by reminding the woman that at least she had a seat, and she could try and get someone to change with her, but as a flight attendant she could not make the person at 15A swap seats. The woman became relentless and would not leave the boarding area and was therefore delaying the departure. The captain became involved, but the woman just kept yelling at the flight attendant. Out of desperation, the flight attendant told the woman to “go sit down”. She did move to the back of the aircraft but refused to take her seat. When it came time for departure she was hysterical, breathing erratically and was finally removed by the local sheriff’s department in handcuffs. While the flight attendant admitted that her directive “go sit down” was “probably not THE best option ... you know the best decision we could have made at the time”, she also stated: “The fact that she came on board not even asking, not even willing to help herself, and try to maybe find another passenger who would be willing to switch with her. And given the information we had, that she had been behaving in the same

manner in the gate house, you know being very abusive to even the gate agent who let her on. I had no sympathy for her, at all. I have little tolerance for passenger who behave in that way”. Once the customer did not respond to the flight attendant’s compromising style, the flight attendant asserted a competing style by using her authority or rank as a flight attendant.

#### Interview # 4

Ken

Seat assignment problem. Shortly after take-off a young well-dressed woman (about 25) approached Ken and used profanity in her request to change her seat because the person sitting next to her “smelled”. There were no seats available on the flight, it was full. Ken offered to let her sit on the forward flight attendant jumpseat or stand in the forward galley as long as the seat belt sign was not illuminated. That seemed to appease her for a while, but eventually she involved two gentlemen in the front row of the aircraft and told them that the passenger sitting next to her was molesting her. It was determined by the flight crew that the passenger in question did not smell, had the center seat and the 70 something woman on the aisle assured the crew that he had not made any unusual advances toward her or had she witnessed any misconduct with the young woman who had been assigned the window seat. The woman on the aisle thought the young man had been sleeping the early part of the flight. He offered the young woman temporary alternative seating and did explore her accusations. It was determined that she sought attention at the cruel expense of someone else or was trying to create a lawsuit, as she announced that she had a pending lawsuit against another air carrier. For three hours this male flight attendant tried to contain the actions of this young woman who created havoc with constant movement in and out of either her seat or another passenger seat and her profanity. Her erratic behavior frightened some people, no one was sure of her mental attitude. A few passengers asked the crew to land the aircraft and have her taken off before she exploded. Upon landing at the destination, the aircraft was met by airline officials and law enforcement. The flight attendant told the young woman: “that is the most despicable behavior I have ever witnessed, you compromised an entire flight and an entire flight crew, you impeded our... (ability to perform our duties) there is a law against that... you cannot interfere with a flight crew, you scared people”. The state troopers then took her into custody.

#### Interview # 5

Bob

Physical violence. A male passenger traveling with his wife and infant boarded the a/c and Bob noticed that he seemed “nervous and erratic in his behavior... he seemed very tense. He asked questions about changing seats, as he could see there were plenty of empty seats. He also asked to have his infant’s milk bottle heated and was told that it had to be done in the galley and they would do it immediately after take off. After take off he tried to give a female flight attendant a dirty diaper. She said to him: “sir, there is a place in the restrooms to put these, I’ll give you a bag to put them in”. He was nasty and very annoyed that she wouldn’t take the dirty diaper. About 20 minutes into the flight a loud noise was coming from one of the rear lavatory’s and it was determined that it was a dirty diaper thrown into the toilet that was causing the noise. Bob notified the OBL, Kathy,

who came back to see what the noise was and Bob told her he could see that a diaper was caught in the flap of the toilet and told her: “oh, ya, there is a family I’ve seen with a child in the middle of the airplane...” Just then the father of the infant, who was not very nice, heard this and “went absolutely ballistic, got Kathy in a headlock and was twisting her arm and repeatedly called her a ‘cunt’. Kathy in a very calm manner just kept saying: “let me go, your hurting my arm, let me go”. His wife came running to the back and pleaded with him to let go. He had lost it and was screaming at the whole crew. Bob immediately got on the interphone and advised the cockpit crew of what was happening. He finally did let go, his wife apologized, and they returned to their seats, he was emotionally distraught. The wife explained to the crew that the baby had just undergone an organ transplant in New York, her husband hadn’t slept in three days and they were both a nervous wreck. The crew did have the police meet the flight, but Kathy, the OBL, did not press charges.

#### Interview # 6

Vicki

Seating problem. A large Greek man and his wife wanted to seat in the exit row seats. The FAA mandates that only English speaking able-bodied customers may occupy the exit row seats. He was told by one of the language-qualified flight attendants that he could not sit there and was told why. He did not comply. Vicki, who was flying the On-Board-Leader position, was notified and approached the customer along with a male Greek speaker and through the interpreter again explained the FAA ruling regarding exit row seating. He became loud and intimidating. Vicki apologized to him, told him she understood that there was more legroom, yes the seat offered more space but unfortunately he couldn’t sit there. He complied, went back to his assigned seat, but was unhappy and disgruntled. “At this point he was not abusive but was on the line”. After take-off, he returned to the exit row seat. When the Greek speaking flight attendant advised him that even in the air he was not allowed to sit there he started to yell. Vicki said: “he was a large man, and used his physical presence in a somewhat threatening manner, getting a little too close to the Greek speaker and myself”. “He became verbally abusive... threatened the Greek speaker and adamantly indicated that he would not move, that nobody could make him move, and he wasn’t going to move. The captain was notified and said that the aircraft would return to New York and the passenger would be removed if he did not comply. While the Greek speaking flight attendant was relating the captain’s message, Vicki said the passenger made a “very dismissive gesture with his hand in my face and said to the translator: ‘tell her to get of out of here, I don’t take orders from women and I’m not listening to her anymore and she’s bothering me”. Vicki told the Greek speaker to translate very carefully: “we have been patient and we have explained our regulations and reasoning’s behind our regulations and he either moves now or I notify the captain and we go back to New York and have him removed from the flight”. His response was again: “I told you to get her away from me, I don’t take orders from women, and you can’t do that (return to New York). Vicki got on the interphone to relay to the captain what was going on and just as she picked up the headset to communicate with cockpit, the pilots were given a descent altitude by air traffic control and the aircraft banked in a descending movement. Once the aircraft maneuvered downward, the passenger flew out of the exit row seat and returned to his original seat

and stayed there for the remainder of the flight. He spent the rest of the flight being angry, but did not make any attempts to move again, he was not rude and only spoke or acknowledged a crewmember when he had to. Vicki said: “he wasn’t just dismissive with his hand; he was very loud... it was his intent to be intimidating, to threaten me, so I would just go away”.

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