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FORUM**CRM IS DEAD**

Cass Howell

CRM is dead, at least in the U.S. No one killed it; it just passed on from natural causes, exacerbated by the evolution of the aviation industry, society and world politics. It was wonderfully useful in its heyday, and we as aviation professionals all owe a debt of gratitude to those responsible for its creation and implementation. They were truly visionaries.

So what happened to Crew Resource Management? Many things, both good and bad, but about a half-dozen factors combined to cause its demise. The first and perhaps most powerful influence on CRM was the consequences of the natural lifespan of many, if not all, business, education and social movements. A review of history will demonstrate that many movements have a natural lifespan of about twenty years, plus or minus five. Examples of this abound and include the Temperance and the Civil Rights eras, the quality improvement push in the automobile industry (anyone remember Total Quality Management?), any number of psychological therapies (psychoanalysis, behavior modification, humanistic theory, etc.). If the movement was not well grounded in fact or in demonstrated value the cycle (birth to death) could be much shorter. So it should not surprise us that CRM has reached the end of its life-cycle; indeed, we should expect it.¹

Having said this, it should be recognized that the single most influential event in accelerating the end of CRM was the attacks of September 11, 2001. These attacks, as everyone knows, were catastrophic to U.S. airlines in a number of ways. The most important to CRM was the immediate financial crisis that ensued in the airline industry. One after the other, almost all of the major carriers either went into bankruptcy or to the brink

of it. This financial crisis cut the legs from CRM, eviscerating it as management sought ways to draw down on training and all other costs. When airline is taking those little passenger pillows of its aircraft in order to reduce weight, and thus fuel expense, it is difficult to rationalize spending twenty million dollars annually on CRM training. When personal retirement accounts are reduced to pennies on the dollar so that the carrier can stay in business a little longer, there is immense pressure to find ways to do everything, including CRM, vastly cheaper, just barely enough to meet the letter of the law. Although all company representatives will insist, "We would never do anything to compromise safety," it is very difficult to believe that watching a training DVD on a computer for a few hours will equally supplant 2-3 days of personalized live instruction from experienced line crewmembers. While all carriers have not gotten to this dismal point, it is quite clearly where things are headed.

To some extent CRM has been a victim of its own success. The imperious Captain of old, whom 1st and 2nd officers more feared than respected, has largely been supplanted by a generation who have never known anything other than a crew-concept flying team, thus the driving force for the establishment of CRM has largely faded. The Captain's once unquestioned (literally) authority, argue many, has been further eroded by greater decision making latitude on the part of ATC, dispatchers, and even gate agents. Add to this more oversight in the form of cockpit voice and data recorders and FOQA, and now the Captain's throne is not so grand. Even automation often serves to place the Captain in the role of just confirming the FMC's recommendation, rather than making original decisions. Indeed, in Airbus aircraft the Captain (and others) is actively precluded from some

¹ Even our wars seem to be on a similar generational cycle, beginning with the Spanish-American War to World War I (19 years), World War I to World War II (23 years), World War II to the Vietnam War (20 years), Vietnam War to Desert Storm (17 years). Only the Korean War does not fit that interval sequence. Since Desert Storm we seem to have entered a state of more or less continuous warfare.

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actions. All of this, in combination, reduces the power-distance relationship that CRM sought to bridge, thus lessening its perceived need.

In addition to this egalitarian trend, CRM has lost much of its visibility. Not only has it been integrated anonymously into regular training, but the giants of the CRM movement, such as Lauber, Helmreich, Wiener, and Foushee have mostly retired or moved on to other research areas. Where is the next generation of advocates (zealots?) who will champion the progress of CRM? Is there anyone under age 60 who is a big name in the field?

This lack of institutional and practitioner energy is reflected in the dearth of active research and publication in the field, including FAA and NASA funding for such. It is equally apparent by the lack of forums that actively focus on and promote CRM. In a survey of over 100 aviation or academic research related conferences scheduled as of this writing, only one (Embry-Riddle's CRM Vectors Conference) included CRM in the title. While everyone recognizes that the application of good Human Factors techniques are still needed, the trend is to devote money and effort towards alternate programs, for example the Global War on Error initiative, at the expense

of CRM. This is in keeping with the aforementioned lifecycle concept, whereby movements are usually supplanted by "the latest and greatest," solution (hopefully) to age old problems.

Interestingly, Europe in particular and the rest of the world in general have been much less affected by these trends. To some degree this is because they got a later start, and thus the lifecycle is at the near end; another factor is that foreign carriers were not as devastated by the 9-11 aftermath as were U.S. airlines, thus CRM research and implementation continue to progress. As a result, in other locations CRM as a safety program has actually advanced beyond where it stagnated in the United States. Also, CRM variants in the nuclear, medical and other offshoot fields continue to evolve in a positive direction for the same reasons.

None of the aforementioned points is intended to lessen or undermine the contributions of CRM and its practitioners to aviation safety. It succeeded because it was effective, timely and achievable. Let's hope its replacement is even more so. →

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