

# The Human Factor of Distraction

*The September 11<sup>th</sup> tragedy has added new distractions for the aviation community and challenges us to rise above the confluence of emotions.*

As aircraft maintenance managers and technicians, when we talk about the human factor of distraction we are usually confronted with an error that could have been prevented.

## Additional distractions

Since September 11, we now have the very real additional concerns for our safety, the safety of our family and friends, and the knowledge that America has been attacked in a horrific manner that nobody ever imagined possible. To say that we are all a little unsettled is an understatement. Yet, we must all continue performing our jobs, going to school, and watching as events literally unfold in front of us on the news channels.

We have all been experiencing a different distraction that not only affects every air carrier, but also our personal lives. We have lost loved ones, friends, and acquaintances. Our employers have been affected financially and we may also be affected by layoffs and facility shutdowns. Our ability to move around freely has been reduced and many of us do not even want to do anything but go home and be with our families.

## Changes in attitudes

While we have all watched the news channels and read about the attacks and loss of life, I have seen a dramatic change recently in attitudes of managers and technicians. People are much more courteous to each other and people are not in such a hurry to get anywhere. I see workers spending less time at work and spending more time with their families, where their time, support and compassion is needed. It is clear that nearly everyone has found a new set of priorities.

## Returning to “normal”

It is unfortunate that a tragedy of this magnitude has to take place for a nation to come together. When you see how people have come together, it makes you proud to be an American. Out of tragedy and adversity, a new resolve is forming that extends from our national leaders to every American. That resolve is to continue our daily lives. Returning to a "normal" life, however, is extremely difficult as we are bombarded by every type of media warning of the next threat or the attack that could come at any minute including descriptions of the potential horror of biological and chemical attack.

## What happens to good people when bad things happen to them?

They become better and stronger people. Our parents and grandparents lived through economic depression, world wars, and the Cold War with its constant threat of nuclear annihilation. They were strong to the point that they have been referred to as "The Greatest Generation." Prior to

September 11<sup>th</sup>, the most adversity that many of us personally experienced was the Dot Com meltdown and losses in personal investments. We saw our 401(k) accounts and IRAs shrink in value and we thought this was a major adversity. Seeing the World Trade Center Towers collapse on live television and realizing that over 5000 lives were instantly lost gave us a new perspective and possibly a rearrangement of priorities.

## Fearful distraction

As New York City Mayor Guiliani said everyone will mourn in their own way, but that as a nation, we cannot be distracted with fear, which is what the terrorists want us to feel.

As we tried to make sense of the images in our minds of the World Trade Center Towers, we first experienced shock, then we all wanted instant revenge and retaliation (our emotional mind took control). As time went by, we may have had a chance to think rationally about the tragedy and come to realize justice will be served slowly and we will become a stronger and more united nation.

## What causes distractions?

A distraction shifts one's focus on incorrect stimuli relative to a specific task. The distraction may be unintended or created. Sudden changes in the environment in the form of activity, people, events or space may unintentionally divert a person's attention away from the primary task, increasing the potential for an accident.

From a technician's point of view, distractions come in many forms such as a cold wind through a hanger door, excessive movement of aircraft and personnel on the hangar floor, and frustration over lack of parts and tools to perform tasks effectively and efficiently. Other causes of attention lapses include, but are not limited to:

- Phone calls
- Horseplay in the workplace
- Shift change
- Sleep deprivation
- Illness
- Poor morale
- Problems at home
- Poor housekeeping in the shop
- Visitors

The FAA's *Human Factors in Aviation Maintenance and Inspection* web site offers a variety of documents, research, training, job aids and more at <http://hfskyway.faa.gov>.

## Moving forward with pride and professionalism

With all the distractions that affect us, we must still complete our jobs with pride and professionalism, ensuring our jobs reflect who we are. We have to continue to help each other out (checking and rechecking our work, working as teams, and looking out for each other) to ensure that high quality exists in everything we do. We must continue to work together as a team to understand and support each other across the entire employee and management workforce.

## Have a plan

To overcome all distractions big or small, we need to plan our tasks and shifts. Document all of our work as it is completed. Redouble our efforts to ensure that we perform our jobs to the best of our ability, continuing to deliver unequalled high quality for our employers and the flying public.

## About the author

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