

**Foreword:**

Nick Frisch recently sent me the following comments, which I feel have significant bearing on the problems we are facing with flight instruction, and suggestions on ways to fix them. This is not a scholarly paper; rather it is more a vision statement.

I'd like to offer a short bio on Nick to give credence to the fact that he has substantial experience with the topic of customer relations, and inter-personal relationships.

Until a year ago, Nick had spent his entire adult life involved with flight training and flight schools. After getting his CFI at the Beech Employees Flying Club (BEFC) in 1982, he taught at John Long Flying Service and Tulsa Pilots' club in Tulsa. He went on to work for Beech, and was on the instructor board of the BEFC for about 14 years. During that time, he served as a Beech factory instructor teaching King Airs. When FlightSafety took over in 1987, he undertook the development of training programs for the piston line – Bonanza, Baron, and Duke.

Nick was program manager of that for 8 years, and then was promoted to Center Instructional Technologist – the guy in charge of creating and implementing new training programs for the Beech center. They implemented scenario-based training beginning with piston airplanes in 1989.

When Nick moved to Seattle, he went to work for Galvin Flying Services, an old-line FBO with a flight school. He ran that school (and served as chief CFI) for 10 years. In that time, they captured the training program for Honolulu Community College (HCC) away from UND. They generated a robust clientele for their "Diamond G Club". Under Nick's leadership they also captured the FAA Aviation Safety Inspector training from ERAU, and although there were many competitors, Galvin is now the primary site for FAA ASI training. He also served as an advisor for the Boeing (Alteon) initiative to launch Multi-crew pilot license (MPL). Galvin trained the initial MPL instructor cadre on Diamond aircraft for the Australian launch of MPL.

Moving on to FIT Aviation at the Florida Institute of Technology, Nick orchestrated a complete turn-around, and captured the Pilot Training College (PTC) of Ireland business away from the FlightSafety Academy. They also launched the "Falcons Flying Club", a from-scratch effort that exceeded expectations for membership, and captured a contract for Turkish Airlines that now makes FIT Aviation one of the nation's largest flight schools, more than quadrupling flight hours from the day Nick first walked in the door.

Clearly Nick knows that of which he speaks.

*D. Stewart*

## **The importance of Inter-personal Relationships** **In Providing Effective and Successful** **Flight Instruction**

When I was a newly-minted instructor, I knew how to operate an airplane, sort of. I knew nothing of customers. I was a rotten instructor. It took a long time for me to get better at handling customers, and as I continued through hiring and training instructors from many sources for several flight operations, I became aware that instructor training often falls short in teaching instructors how to deal with people. CFI training obviously must focus on pilot knowledge, and it normally includes some emphasis on instructor professionalism. However, really understanding people and vital relationships is typically overlooked in the CFI curricula.

The most important things I've learned about relationships came from understanding my marriage. The interpersonal skills that I have found most valuable in aviation are borrowed, so to speak, from authors on marriage and relationship. These skills can do much to save our industry.

### **What I've learned about instructors and customer attraction and retention:**

I learned that a customer wants a good teacher more than a "world's greatest pilot". When I was on the hiring board at FlightSafety, I was able to shift the mentality away from *hours and type ratings* to *teaching ability* in the instructors we hired. Result: happy customers.

I learned that cooperation and listening, along with significant effort to standardize, made for a far more harmonious environment. Customers like instructors who get along well, respect each other, and teach consistently. Customers hate in-fighting in their school, and really hate "I know Bob taught you that, but let me show you how it should be done..."

Customers who are experienced pilots are sometimes predisposed to resist new learning. There are many filters, and each instructor who came before has left a mark, for good or ill. Change requires confidence, competence, and caring on the part of the CFI, and training is all about change.

Because training is all about change, in order to gain the most benefit from time spent, the customer must have confidence in the instructor-client relationship. The relationship, not the instructor's level of expertise in aviation, is the most important tool to make learning successful. The relationship is the best predictor of a satisfactory outcome, where satisfactory equates to a customer who survives each flight and comes back for more training.

Our industry largely ignores the need to teach relationship. We take for granted that people understand themselves and others. This, in my view, is the most damaging thing we do to our industry. I might be the only guy in aviation history who used Gary Smalley's "Hidden Keys to Loving Relationships" with a room full of 80 aviation employees. They loved it. Most people enjoy learning how to build effective relationships.

Customers who are treated well, with honor and respect, want to come back for more. Customers who are treated poorly often become discouraged and leave. I had Galvin customers tell me "This is the only place where I am consistently treated as if I were important. I love it here".

There should be someone in every flight school who knows how to handle difficult situations, so as to repair damaged relationships between:

- customers and instructors
- instructors and the school
- customers and the school
- instructors and other instructors

Everyone should know they can use that person as a resource, before the relationship is beyond repair. Better still would be to have every employee have outstanding relationship skills. Repairing a damaged relationship builds trust and can result in an even better relationship. I worked as fast as I could to teach every person in the schools I managed how to handle friction, disputes, and damaged relationships. The result was a profound increase in positive, trusting attitudes. Customers and instructors wanted to be a part of the school, wanted their kids to be a part of the school, wanted to bring their family and friends. I believe that relationships build schools far more effectively than advertising.

Unhappy customers make a company vulnerable to competitors. Unfortunately, many customers are also vulnerable to simply giving up, and in our industry, customers giving up has reached crisis proportions.

Customers hate to be lied to. We lie to customers a lot as an industry, especially about how much it costs to become a pilot. When we are honest up front, we may lose the "price shopper", but we create expectations that can be met in the real world. We complain that cost causes us to lose customers. I believe that is true mostly for customers who have been led to believe that they will make the minimum numbers and begin to realize they have been had. It is the hidden, unexpected costs that destroy customer confidence, and make them feel like a patsy. Once a customer loses confidence because they believe they were lied to, they are likely to leave and never come back. Worse, they are likely to scare away other business.

**What I've learned about safety and relationships:**

CFI's, like it or not, are often motivated to fly airplanes rather than teach customers. This is an industry culture issue. Individual schools can overcome this with a motivational system that rewards CFI's for putting customer interest first. Customer relationship and safety must be the primary focus of every person in the school. This can be done in part with money, but it must be primarily a cultural orientation towards customer interest. CFI's will shift emphasis as the culture shifts.

The customer relationship is important, and it works hand-in-hand with a safety culture that is open, honest, and shares information without threat of punishment. Any CFI/pilot is still learning, still making mistakes. Punishing mistakes that are not negligent destroys trust and confidence. There is a whole body of knowledge on building a modern safety culture. Someone in every school should be very familiar with the concepts of safety management systems and teach them to everyone else as quickly as practical.

Unsafe behaviors that are rooted in anger, disappointment, resentment, or fear generally have their origin in relationship dysfunction. A pilot who is "so mad he can't see straight" is probably angry at a boss, coworker, wife, girlfriend, customer, or someone. Functional relationships can defuse anger and moderate fear, while dissipating resentment and disappointment. Good relationships reduce stress and related fatigue.

Telling the truth about safety is important. This is one of the very best things John King has done, in my view. Equating GA safety with airline safety is a lie, and we do not benefit our industry by lying. Our good relationship with our customers depends upon us being trustworthy, most especially about safety and risk management.

If you have made it this far, please know that I appreciate the time and attention to this. The crises that we seem to continually face as an industry have many roots. However, the issues of customer attraction and retention are powerfully influenced by relationships. Broken relationships cost our industry money, effort, and many customers.

My recommended solution for the relationship issues is to have SAFE, NAFI, AOPA, EAA, FSANA, GAMA, NATA, NBAA, and whoever else we can get on board sponsor a web-based training program that focuses on building effective relationships as a tool for CFI's and flight school employees. Some solid principles, vignettes, role-plays and exercises could go a long way toward building the skills that attract and retain customers as well as reduce interpersonal relationship stresses that affect safety.

Nick Frisch