



AVIATION



MARITIME



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Periods of transition are always stressful. While aircraft and train transportation can be stressful, it doesn't give passengers the right to assault crew members, flight attendants and fellow passengers, or disrupt flights with threatening or violent behavior.

As airline passengers have returned to flying in increasing numbers following the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (Covid-19)-related drop in ridership during 2020, the number of reported unruly passenger incidents has been alarming.

U.S. Transportation Department

Secretary Sean P. Duffy said there has been a 400% uptick in outbursts on planes since 2019, with incidents "ranging from disruptive behavior to outright violence." He said there have been 13,800 unruly passenger incidents since 2021, with one in five flight attendants experiencing

DE-ESCALATING UNRULINESS

For safe travel, de-escalate angry passengers with peace-producing techniques

By Mark Robins

physical incidents that same year. While the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has said the rate of unruly passenger incidents has steadily dropped by over 80 percent since record highs in early 2021, recent increases show there remains more work to do. While it is decreasing in occurrence, what can be done to quell a disruptive passenger?

DIFFUSING THE UNFRIENDLY SKIES

Not every passenger is going to be a happy one; dealing with angry passengers is part of the transportation industry. Learning de-escalation techniques can help you satisfy your passengers and prevent them from having a bad experience. De-escalation techniques calm angry passengers before they exhibit unruly behavior and in-flight outbursts. A few de-escalation techniques include the following:

Remain calm and don't take it personally. When a passenger raises their voice or gets aggressive, your natural reaction might be to feel defensive. It's tempting to match their energy, but responding with sarcasm, defensiveness or even a harsh tone can make things worse — fast. Respectful communication builds credibility and shows you're a professional. The best tool you have in these moments is your own calm. Emotional reactions only escalate the situation. Staying calm gives you more control over the tone of the conversation. Take a deep breath before responding.

Count to three if you need to.

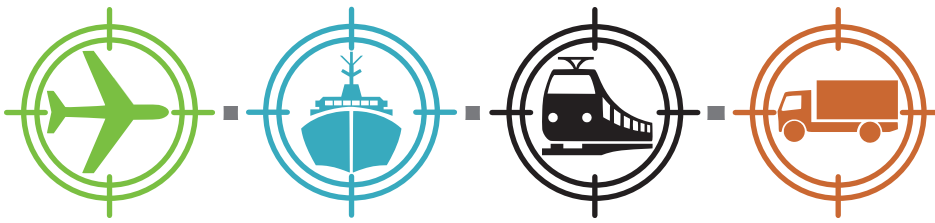
Hostile passengers rarely start that way; something usually pushes them over the edge. Understanding why passengers become hostile is a critical first step in resolving the situation and preventing similar encounters in the future. Maintain a professional demeanor no matter how tense the passenger may be. Most of the time an angry person isn't upset with you directly; it's the situation that has them worked up. Understanding this will help you to remain calm during the conversation, no matter what the passenger says.

Embrace active listening. Most of us can hear well, but listening is far more than just that. Active listening is a cornerstone

of effective customer service. One of the fastest ways to calm an angry passenger is simply to let them speak. Most people want to feel heard before they're willing to hear solutions. Interrupting can make a customer feel dismissed or disrespected.

Allow passengers to be heard and express their concerns or frustrations while demonstrating that you are genuinely interested in resolving the issue. Nod occasionally. Fully concentrate on what the passenger is saying, understand their concerns and respond thoughtfully. Don't jump in with a solution until they've finished speaking. This skill helps build trust, resolves issues efficiently and provides a positive experience. Always show understanding and acknowledge





passenger emotions, although they may be in the wrong.

Empathize. Empathy is one of the most effective ways to de-escalate heated situations. This means putting yourself in their shoes, so you can appreciate why they're angry. What if you were the passenger whose flight was cancelled at the last minute? Tell them you empathize. Saying something like "I can understand why that would be frustrating!" moves you from an adversarial relationship with the passenger to a sympathetic one. This alone can go a long way to relieving the tension and working out the problem.

Emotions play a major role in hostile passenger behavior. Passengers may be dealing with a personal issue, or the stress of travel. That's why empathy and emotional intelligence are so important. Recognizing when someone's anger is more about how they feel than the problem itself can help de-escalate tense conversations.

A simple but powerful way to create connection during a tense interaction is to use the passenger's name. It can instantly make the conversation feel more human and less transactional. Names build trust and signal that the customer is more than just a number or complaint. People respond positively when addressed personally — it can soften their tone. It shows attention to detail and makes the interaction feel more respectful.

Active communication. Collaborate with the passenger to find a solution that addresses their concerns within the

boundaries of company safety policies. Don't just tell passengers what's going wrong — make sure they feel heard while you're working on it. Listening actively can defuse even the most irate passengers. You don't need some script to read from or an apology that sounds like a chatbot wrote it. Just acknowledge how they feel.

Use humor carefully. When used correctly, a bit of levity can help put the passenger at ease and make the interaction feel more positive overall. Humor can be a powerful tool for diffusing tense situations with passengers, but it needs to be used carefully. Only attempt humor if you're comfortable with it and the situation seems appropriate. Don't try to be funny if the passenger is extremely angry or upset — it may backfire. Use discretion; not every situation calls for jokes.

Maintain positive body language. When dealing with angry passengers face to face, your body speaks just as loudly as your words. Posture, gestures and facial expressions can either calm or escalate tension. Nonverbal cues help create a safe, respectful environment. Passengers pick up on tension — even if your words are polite. Positive body language reinforces empathy and professionalism. Maintain open posture — avoid crossing your arms or turning away. Make eye contact, but don't stare.

Offer solutions. After understanding the problem and considering the passenger's perspective, offer practical solutions. These should be fair and within

your company's policies. By presenting options, you empower the client or passenger to make a choice, which can lead to a quicker resolution and saves time for both parties.

Take ownership. Nobody likes being passed off to another person or department. So, whether you're at fault or not, assume the role of problem-solver right away. You can say something like this: "Tell you what, let's get this issue resolved right now," then start discussing ways to fix the problem. It's worth repeating: don't say yes just to end the conversation. Avoid overpromising. Overpromising might ease tension temporarily, but it often leads to bigger problems later. Trust is hard to rebuild once broken.

Know when to escalate. Sometimes, a passenger's issue may exceed your ability or authority to resolve it and it's important to recognize when to escalate the situation to a higher authority. Escalating the issue promptly ensures that the passenger receives the attention they need and prevents frustration from escalating further. It shows that you take their concerns seriously and are committed to resolving the matter. It provides the passenger with the best chance for a satisfactory resolution by involving someone with more authority or expertise.

If the passenger's behavior escalates to a point where an employee does not feel safe, they should not hesitate to involve security personnel or a supervisor. Their presence may help de-escalate the situation, or at the very least, they are trained to handle threats and abusive behavior.

Happy ending. End the interaction on a positive note if at all possible. If applicable, tell the passenger how much you appreciate their business and ask him or her if you can do anything else.

Documentation. Maintain accurate and detailed records of any incident involving disruptive passengers as it will assist in resolving potential legal disputes and insurance claims. Keep detailed notes of the conversation, including what was said, the customer's actions and the

outcome. This record is important to improve customer service practices or address any potential harm caused by the incident.

TRAINING AND PROTOCOL


One of the key aspects of managing disorderly passengers is through proactive training and preparation. While some aspects of good passenger service might come naturally to some employees, it's important that every staff member is trained in handling passengers, especially difficult ones. Empower your employees with the skills and authority to resolve conflicts. Well-trained transportation employees with the necessary knowledge and skills can handle difficult situations

more calmly and professionally. Continuous training keeps employees' skills fresh and ensures they're prepared for a variety of challenging situations. Role-playing builds confidence, as you'll know how to react in real-world scenarios.

Employees should be trained to be calm, patient and courteous, and how to prevent conflicts. To de-escalate the occasional difficult situation, conflict management training and conflict resolution training are essential. Employers can conduct regular training sessions that cover conflict resolution techniques so employees are well equipped to de-escalate tempered situations with ease.

This training can equip staff with the skills to de-escalate conflicts effectively

and handle aggressive or angry passengers. By learning techniques such as active listening, clear communication and non-confrontational body language, staff can diffuse situations before they escalate into more serious incidents.

It's not just about the prospect of a dissatisfied passenger, but also the possibility of a claim and the impact on a company's professional reputation and financial health. Unresolved anger doesn't just disappear — it festers. If a frustrated passenger feels dismissed, they're far more likely to take their complaints public through negative reviews, social media posts or word-of-mouth. But, a well-managed situation can turn a frustrated passenger into a loyal one. 

UNRULY PASSENGERS

- Interfering with the duties of a crew member violates federal law.
- The FAA has civil authority, allowing it to impose fines. It does not have criminal prosecutorial authority, although passengers who engage in unruly behavior can still be prosecuted on criminal charges.
- As part of the FAA's Reauthorization Bill, FAA can propose up to \$43,658 per violation for unruly passenger cases. One incident can result in multiple violations. Passengers who engage in unruly behavior can be fined by the FAA or prosecuted on criminal charges.
- The FAA's database contains only those incidents reported to FAA. Reporting is at the discretion of the crew member.
- FAA regulations prohibit airlines from allowing intoxicated passengers to board and prohibits passengers from consuming alcohol on board that isn't served by a flight attendant.

