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BEFORE THE DOOR CLOSES: READING THE EARLY SIGNS OF CREW DISTRESS

Dola has worked the same gates for six years and knows most of the crews by sight. She knows that Lynn, a flight attendant with a decade of seniority, usually arrives early, teases her about the coffee, and asks for the passenger load before anyone offers it. Today Lynn walks up without a greeting. She asks for the count, and two minutes later asks for it again. When Dola mentions a late wheelchair request, the answer is short and sharp. Lynn's jaw is tight. Nothing she has done would justify a report, and in forty minutes she will be responsible for a full cabin.

What Dola cannot see is the last two days: a passenger who screamed at Lynn on Tuesday's final leg, a short overnight with almost no sleep, and a schedule change that cost her a day at home.

Lynn and Dola are hypothetical. The situation is not.

The crew carries a stack too

In "Before Conflict Takes Flight", I argue that a passenger incident is the last visible step in a process that has been building for hours. I describe that process through the Passenger Conflict Evolution Framework (PCEF). The same is true of the people in uniform. A crew member who has been through a frightening incident and has not recovered brings a raised baseline to the next flight. An ordinary frustrated passenger looks more threatening than he is, and the response creates friction that would not otherwise exist. Burnout starts this way, as a slow erosion: a shorter fuse, less empathy, disrupted sleep, a low dread before each trip.

Our systems tend to act at the visible end of that process, and the people best placed to speak up earlier have reasons to stay quiet. For pilots, the reason is the medical certificate. The Air Line Pilots Association says the FAA's process can keep a pilot who seeks mental health treatment grounded for more than a year. Congress is acting on it: the House passed the Mental Health in Aviation Act in September 2025; the Senate passed its version unanimously on September 24, 2026; and, at this writing, that bill was awaiting action in the House. The FAA itself says most treated conditions do not disqualify a pilot, and that avoiding early treatment often means more time out of the cockpit. Flight attendants have no equivalent certificate at stake, and their unions run confidential assistance and peer support programs. Still, a professional culture of the calm face keeps many from using them.

Reform will lower the cost of asking for help. It will not notice Lynn at the gate. A colleague has to do that.

PCEF, pointed at ourselves

PCEF follows a developing problem through six stages. Each one has a counterpart in a crew member reporting for duty. *(See Chart below)*

Two points from the book matter most here. The first is baseline. A cue is only a change from how that person normally behaves, so the people who can read it are the ones who know what normal looks like. Dola saw the change in Lynn because she had seen her fifty times before.

The second is the prevention window, the period in which a small intervention can still change the outcome. With a passenger, it closes when a position hardens in front of an audience. With a crew member, it closes with the aircraft door. On the ground there is time, a supervisor, a phone and possibly a reserve. In the air there is very little.

A cue is not a diagnosis. Fatigue, grief, a bad morning and a serious problem can all look the same from across a podium. The framework asks an observer to notice a change and check on it. It does not ask anyone to draw a conclusion.

Who is in a position to notice?

No single employee sees the whole picture, which is why this cannot be left to the crew alone.

- Gate agents see the same crews week after week and are often the last ground employees to speak with them before the door closes.
- Crew scheduling and operations see the conditions: who had a short overnight, who was reassigned twice, who was working the flight that ended with police at the gate.
- Captains and lead flight attendants see everyone together at the pre-departure briefing.
- Fellow crew members see each other in the van, in the crew room and on the jet bridge.

Aviation already expects crews to share what they notice about a technical threat. The same habit applies here.

PCEF stage	What it looks like in a colleague before departure.
Conditions	Short rest, a disrupted schedule, a hard incident on a recent flight, pressure at home. It is rarely one thing. It is the stack.
Meaning	What the crew member believes speaking up will cost: "I'll be pulled," "I'll look weak," "I'll let the crew down."
Cues	A departure from that person's normal: a shorter fuse, flat or clipped answers, the same question asked twice, no interest in the usual banter, visible tension in the jaw and shoulders.
Decision point	The observer's choice: let it pass, or find a private moment and say something.
Trajectory	Toward support (a conversation, a break, a swap, a referral) or toward concealment and a crew member working at reduced capacity.
Learning	What the station and the airline record about the times someone spoke up and it helped.

Two flights, two windows

Two real flights show where the prevention window sits, and how different it can look.

JetBlue Flight 191, March 27, 2012. The captain, 49 and twelve years with the airline, arrived late at JFK and missed the crew briefing, according to the FBI affidavit. During the climb, he made a remark about being evaluated that his first officer did not understand. About three hours later, he was talking incoherently about religion and saying the flight would not reach Las Vegas. The first officer got him out of the cockpit, locked the door, brought in an off-duty captain, and landed in Amarillo while flight attendants and passengers held the captain down. A court later found him not guilty by reason of insanity, and the medical cause has never been established.

The first officer did nearly everything right, in the air, with very few options. The better options were on the ground. A senior captain who arrives late and misses the briefing has departed from his own baseline, and the briefing is the one moment when the whole crew sees each other. Lateness proves nothing, and no one at the gate could have predicted what followed. But a private "You're never late. Everything all right?" from the first officer or the lead flight attendant costs thirty seconds, and at that point a duty manager and a reserve were a phone call away. It is harder to ask that of a senior captain than of a peer. That is the reason to make the question a routine part of every briefing, so that no one has to find the nerve.

Flydubai Flight 1073, September 30, 2026. This case is of a different kind, and the investigation is still open. Early reports say the first officer attacked the captain with the cockpit crash axe on a Dubai to Tel Aviv flight, and UAE prosecutors describe it as a planned attack. The injured captain unlocked the cockpit door, a deadheading pilot took the controls, and passengers restrained the first officer. All 180 people on board survived.

A kind word at the gate does not stop a planned attack, and the crew that morning is not known to have seen anything they could have acted on. If the early reports hold, the window was open months earlier and belonged to other colleagues. A previous airline had reportedly suspended the first officer from flying over extremist material, and his new employer checked his criminal record but not his prior employment. People who had worked beside him knew something that the crew of Flight 1073 did not. The lesson for crew members is the last rule in the next section: statements or posts that alarm you about a colleague should be reported to the security reporting channel in writing and not stay in the crew room. The lesson for airlines is that a concern recorded at one carrier must be passed on to the next.

One caution belongs here. The cue is never a colleague's faith, nationality, or prayer. It is a change from that person's baseline, or specific words about harm.

Both aircraft landed safely because another trained pilot happened to be on board and passengers were willing to act. That is luck. Noticing earlier is the part we can plan for.

What to say, and what not to

The tools that work with a tense passenger work with a colleague, and for the same reasons.

Make it private. Never raise it at the podium or in front of the rest of the crew. For a pilot or flight attendant, being steady and fit for the job is part of who they are, and a public question about it lands as a threat to that identity.

Acknowledge before anything else. Describe what you see without judging it: "You don't seem like yourself today. Rough week?" Then listen. You are trying to learn what they think is happening and what they believe it would cost to say so.

Offer a small choice. "Do you want ten minutes before boarding? Would it help if I got the lead?" A choice returns some control to a person who may feel they have none.

Keep the exit dignified. If a crew member needs to step back from a flight, that should look like routine crew management to everyone watching.

Know the pathway before you need it. Every employee who works around crews should know who the duty manager is, how to reach peer support, and where the Employee Assistance Program number is posted.

Do not hold a safety concern alone. If you believe a colleague is not fit to operate and they wave you off, take it to the captain or the supervisor on duty. That is the same obligation as reporting a fluid leak under the wing. PCEF does not make a gate agent a clinician, nor does it ask anyone to stay silent.

What the airline has to build

A gate agent's good instincts are not a program. Five things turn them into one.

Train the ground, not only the cabin. Most training in reading behavior goes to flight attendants and is aimed at passengers. Gate agents, operations staff, and schedulers should learn the same cues and opening lines.

Put people on the briefing. The book recommends adding three minutes to the predeparture briefing to name the human threats on that flight. Add one question about the crew itself: "Is anyone coming off a rough one?" The lead answers first.

Make stepping back safe. If the first crew member to say "I'm not right today" loses pay or gets a note in a file, no one else will say it. The response has to be non-punitive, and it has to be seen to be.

Build recovery in after hard flights. The book describes a decompression routine with three parts: physical movement to clear the stress response, a few minutes of private writing, and a specific person to call. Crews should have it ready before they need it, and schedules should leave room for it after a serious incident.

Record the saves. Reporting systems capture incidents. They capture nothing when a colleague speaks up, and a flight leaves with a rested crew. Those non-events are near misses, and they show what works.

Before the door closes

Dola waits until the podium is quiet. "You're not yourself today," she says. "Rough couple of days?" Lynn tells her about Tuesday and the two nights since. Dola asks whether she would like the lead to know, and Lynn says yes. The lead calls the duty manager, a reserve works the trip, and Lynn goes home with a peer support contact and nothing in her file. The flight leaves eleven minutes late.

The question I ask crews to carry about passengers works just as well about each other: What is changing in this person, what do they think will happen if they say so, and what options do we still have while the door is open? TSI

About the Author

Frederick Reitz is an aviation security and emergency management executive and the author of Before Conflict Takes Flight. He has more than 25 years of experience in aviation security, emergency management, and regulatory compliance across domestic and international airline operations. He is a doctoral candidate in Conflict Analysis & Resolution at Nova Southeastern University, where his research examines aviation passenger conflict.