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The Other CRM

The qualifications are table stakes. The crew is what makes the difference.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

01
Crews that fly together make fewer errors than equally qualified strangers. A NASA study found tired crews who had just flown together outperformed rested crews meeting for the first time.

02
Aviation's Crew Resource Management taught crews to brief, speak up and cross-check. Captain Al Haynes credited it with saving most of the passengers on United Flight 232.

03
Fractional support often adds up to a crew of strangers. C-Suite Resource Management keeps the same senior team on the work, so context builds and problems get raised early.

In aviation, crews that regularly train and fly together perform better than crews of strangers with the same qualifications. It's a given that everyone in the cockpit knows the procedures. What changes is how easily they communicate and how much they trust each other. The co-pilot knows how the pilot-in-command thinks, and everyone, from the mission commander to the crew member who pulls the chocks, speaks up when something looks wrong.

The data backs this up. A NASA study[1] in the 1980s found that crews who had just completed a trip together made fewer errors than rested crews who were meeting for the first time, even though the experienced crews were tired. A later NTSB review[2] of major accidents found that most of them happened on a crew's first day flying together.

01 Crew Resource Management

Aviation learned this the hard way. In 1978, United Flight 173 ran out of fuel over Portland while the captain focused on a landing-gear problem. Other crew members were aware of the fuel state, but their warnings weren't forceful enough, and the captain didn't take them in. The aircraft was working and the crew was qualified. What failed was the communication between them.

The industry's answer was Crew Resource Management, or CRM. It trains crews to use everyone's eyes, experience, and judgment, not just the captain's. CRM teaches crews to brief expectations before the flight, state concerns plainly, and cross-check each other. It also gives the most junior person in the cockpit permission, and an obligation, to say "I don't like this."

It works. In 1989, United Flight 232 lost all hydraulics over Iowa. Captain Al Haynes and a crew that included an off-duty instructor pilot improvised a way to steer a crippled DC-10 to a runway in Sioux City. Haynes later credited CRM with the fact that most of the passengers survived.

02 Customer Relationship Management

Business has its own CRM, built on a similar idea. Customer Relationship Management recognizes that a transaction is not **the** relationship. Companies that remember their customers' history, anticipate what they need, and keep the same people on an account outperform companies that treat every sale as the first.

The software that carries the name tracks contacts and pipelines. But the principle behind it is older than any database: people do business with people they trust, and trust builds through continuity.

03 C-Suite Resource Management

At Nonlinear, we think a third CRM matters to growing companies: C-Suite Resource Management. It's a way to bring senior finance, operations, and strategy leadership into a company without adding full-time executive headcount, and without losing what makes a leadership team work.

Most companies that need fractional support end up with a flight crew of strangers. A bookkeeping service handles the ledger, a freelancer builds the model, a consultant writes the strategy deck, and none of them talk to each other. Each is qualified. None know how the CEO thinks, and none

have earned the standing to say "I don't like this" before the board does.

C-Suite Resource Management applies what aviation learned to the leadership team:

- **Brief before you fly.** Before any work starts, we align on the mission, the constraints, and what success looks like: the runway target, the raise, the contract milestone.
- **Same crew, every flight.** The people you meet are the people who do the work, month after month, backed by a team that knows each other. Context accumulates instead of resetting.
- **Speak up.** We're brought in to tell you the forecast is optimistic, the hire is early, or the pricing is wrong, clearly and early, while there is still time to act.
- **Cross-check.** Finance, operations, and strategy check each other's work, because in a small company one decision touches all three.
- **Debrief and hand off.** Every engagement ends with systems your team owns and a clean handoff to the full-time executive when you're ready to hire one.

04 Why it matters now

Growing companies in defense, energy, healthcare, and advanced manufacturing operate in high-consequence environments. A missed DCAA requirement, a botched regulatory filing, or a cash crunch in the middle of a production ramp is the business equivalent of a fuel emergency. These problems rarely come from a lack of intelligence. They come from information that stayed in one person's head, or from a warning nobody felt free to give.

Tools help. Dashboards, modern finance platforms, and AI make a small team far more capable than it was ten years ago. But a dashboard can't speak up in a meeting. Judgment still comes from people, and people perform best when they have worked together, trust each other, and share a clear picture of the mission.

The qualifications are table stakes. The crew is what makes the difference. ■

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