

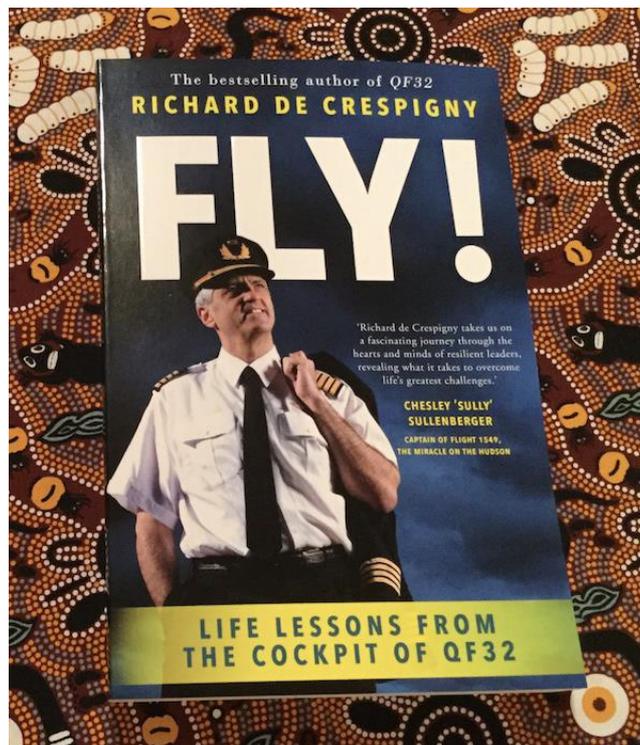
Real-life learning about dealing with a crisis

Interviewer: [Gareth Byatt](#) – Principal Consultant, [Risk Insight Consulting](#)
Interviewee: [Richard de Crespigny](#) – Captain, [Qantas](#) and Best-selling author

April 2019

Richard,

Thank you for making the time to talk with me about your experience in managing crisis events. I have learned a lot from reading your books, [QF32](#) and [FLY!](#), both of which provide valuable guidance for dealing with a crisis event, and good advice for building resilience into our lives.



For readers who are not aware of the “QF32 crisis event” – it occurred on November 4th 2010, when a Qantas A380 being captained by Richard took off (as scheduled) from Singapore’s Changi airport, carrying 440 passengers and 29 crew, and shortly afterwards [suffered a critical mid-air engine explosion](#). This crisis event was extremely well managed by Qantas and ended with a good, safe outcome, with everyone disembarking the aircraft back at Changi airport. There is a very interesting [interview with Richard](#) with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and there has been a lot of positive press reporting [written about the event](#).

Gareth: In FLY!, you share experiences and learnings that you have built up through your 43 year career in the high-pressure environment of military and civilian aviation on aspects including leadership, decision-making, teamwork, managing risk, managing crises, and how to be resilient in life.

What was the genesis for writing this book?

Richard: In QF32 I describe WHAT happened (in that crisis event of November 2010). I wrote FLY! afterwards to describe “the HOW” and “the WHY” of QF32, so everyone can learn to be resilient, at work and in their personal lives.

FLY! focuses on elements of resilience that you can learn and apply in many situations. I provide lessons learned from events and case studies from around the world, good and bad – gleaned from lots of people and corporations who have faced challenging events.

The Elements of Resilience that I describe in FLY! are:

- Knowledge
- Training
- Experience
- Teamwork
- Leadership
- Crisis Management
- Decision Making
- Risk

No person is born with these elements of resilience. But they can be learned. I provide my thoughts on how to acquire these skills in FLY! I also include chapters for neuroscience and post-traumatic stress. An [enhanced index is available at FLY-theBook.com](#) that provides a useful guide to its contents.

Gareth: I’d like to focus, if I may, to discuss the realities of managing crisis events, and the application of these elements to businesses, large and small.

In the book chapter on surviving crisis situations, you describe a set of interrelated actions that people who are appointed to lead crisis teams can learn and should practice, which you encapsulate into an 8-point checklist:

1. You have more time than you think
2. Accept your reality
3. Manage threats
4. Invert the logic
5. Don’t freeze looking for perfection
6. Communicate
7. Imagine the unimaginable
8. Remember you’re not the only one affected

Could YOU expand a little on these points.

Richard: *The first thing I would say is that if you find yourself in a crisis situation and you do not know what to do – for example, if you have no expertise in dealing with the situation that you find yourself in, follow the instructions from people in charge. That is the safest and best option.*

If you are a leader and you are charged with responding to a crisis / emergency event, you need to have appropriate skillsets. The eight points you mention link up in a way that we can all use and adopt if we are to lead teams in such a situation. Leaders of crisis (management) teams need to be skilled at responding quickly to events, and they need to be trained and to have practised what to do so that they can respond appropriately and confidently. They need to be able to handle a situation that demands quick and effective responses.

Let's consider neuroscience for a moment. Understanding how our brain works is important in understanding how we respond to a sudden crisis event that is thrust upon us. We need to understand how our "fast brain" and our "slow brain" work together. As studies from people like the eminent psychologist and economist Daniel Kahneman show, our brain is an automatic "exceptions handler". It filters things without us realising it.

Relevant experience and training creates habits and intuition that enable complex decision-making processes to be managed quickly and subconsciously, freeing mental space in your mind, helping you to stay calm, giving you time to manage a situation and give you time to lead, act and delegate. A leader of a team in a crisis event needs to sit back and give themselves the time and keep a clear head to enable focussing on absorbing information, making/reviewing decisions –whilst many things are happening at the coal face.

The "exception handling" capability of our brain assists with building intuition. Intuition is the ability to make complex decisions quickly, often in the presence of sensory "noise". Intuition requires knowledge of the subject matter (often including technical knowledge and formal learning). We build intuition when we remember the experience of making complex decisions. I write about this in more detail in FLY!

For example, the people in fire-fighting services build their intuition over time. It's through their experience and understanding of situational events that they gain this skill. Intuition is not guesswork, it's the compiled result from making and remembering many complex decisions in difficult circumstances. Intuition enables firefighters to make decisions quickly, take on high risks and deliver expertise, often in situations where others "freeze" in fear.

*In FLY! I present the pilots' mantra, "**Aviate, Navigate, Communicate**" that are the initial priorities when responding to emergencies. This is a process covering what to do in the initial, brief period after such an event occurs when we must prevent the fear response (in our fast mind) of "fight, flight or freeze". We must act habitually to stay alive and maximise the chance of survival, while at the same time, and in the background, giving our "slow" brain time to catch-up and synchronise with our senses before it engages to take over the decision-making processes. These two processes occur over the first 30 seconds of a crisis when the risks from acting on our instincts may harm us.*

In an emergency, the most critical time is the first 30 seconds when the slow mind has not fully perceived its senses-responses and the fast mind has control. This is the most dangerous time when an instinctive decision could have fatal consequences. The fast mind serves alligators, rabbits and horses well to run from and survive crises. But in our complex high-tech world, the fast mind produces impetuous responses that generally reduce our chances of survival.

The aim of crisis management is to survive the first 30 seconds and when your slow mind has caught up, engage it to best solve the crisis. The checklist at the end of the crisis management chapter is designed to guide you through the toughest situations. This checklist is designed to be actioned by your slow logical mind, NOT your fast and emotional mind.

Gareth: Clear leadership and a clear understanding of responsibility and accountability and roles in a Crisis Management Team is critical when responding to a crisis, isn't it.

Richard: *Most definitely. I provide a lot of examples of leadership and its importance in FLY! In order to be an effective manager or leader, you need to know who you are responsible to (in my case, the passengers of my airplane) and accountable to (in my case, the airline that I work for).*

Regardless of whether you are a company director, CEO or worker, you cannot lead and you will have troubles making good decisions in a crisis if you do not know who you are responsible to. I cannot underestimate the importance of having this awareness.

This is a fascinating topic, because most people from clinicians to company board members do not know who they are responsible and accountable to. Clinicians are responsible to their patients and accountable to their managers. Directors on a board are responsible/accountable to the company/shareholders respectively.

When I think about what happened to flight QF32, which has been called a "[black swan event](#)", two things were immediately known to me:

- 1. I knew that I was responsible for the safety and care of the passengers. I assumed unlimited authority to fulfil my role.*
- 2. I knew that the Qantas Crisis Management Teams were responsible for things around me, outside my control, and after the passengers left my care. They had an initial authority for \$20m. So this networked group were not just responsible, but were also authorised to act in their areas of expertise.*

QF32 is a story of team excellence, where each and every team focussed on doing their job and leaving others alone to do theirs.

Gareth: Related to these points that you have just described, I'd like to talk about the formation and training requirements of people in the Crisis Teams (or Crisis Management Teams) of their businesses / organisations. In FLY! you talk about how "practice makes habits and intuition."

I have seen first-hand the value of ensuring that training and practising how to respond to a crisis event is maintained on a regular basis, for the primary people in such teams and their back-ups. Do you agree about this?

Richard: *Absolutely. Any person can be trained to proficiency. But training is not enough. The best trained person can become useless when dumbstruck by the fear response in their first crisis. Mike Tyson said it best, “everybody has a plan...until they get hit”. The best pilots are the ones that have been “case hardened”. The safest pilots are the ones that have been scared.*

Experience is the key and you cannot have competence without experience. Training and practice are fundamental to developing skills to manage crisis events well. For teams that are assigned to deal with a crisis, proper, real-life and indeed stressful training, and follow-up learning and absorbing lessons from this type of training, will serve them in good stead.

In FLY! I detail the ultimate training to produce expertise on demand in stressful situations. I call this training “Stress Proof Deliberate Practice”.

Training must be given to not just the primary team but also to every support team. The crisis centre was active 24 hours a day for seven days after my QF32 event. All successive teams were immersed in the events.

Professional training is a mandatory part of jobs in many industries.

Pilots are re-certified seven times a year to ensure they remain competent for all aspects of their jobs. When I sit in the Captains seat, I have complete confidence in all members of my flight and cabin crew. I know the stressful training these people undertake every few months. I know they are tough, disciplined and competent. I have absolute trust that they will perform well in a crisis.

When, in your business, you know that the people who are in your Crisis Management Team have undertaken appropriate and good quality training and they have been involved in simulations, then everyone on the team will know how to perform the tasks for the roles they have been given, and they should be able to perform their roles in a synchronised manner (under pressure). Things will not be perfect as events unfold – in such situations, there is no such thing as perfection. What you need in these situations is good risk and decision making skills. General George Patton said, “A good plan violently executed now is better than a perfect plan executed at some indefinite time in the future.”

In FLY! I provide a few insights into the high-pressure environment of how NASA coordinated the first landing on the moon, which took place on July 20th 1969. I recently had the privilege of spending time with Gene Kranz who was a Chief Flight Director of the Apollo Space Program.

I have documented a lot of Gene’s and NASA’s resilience in FLY! The first moon landing by Neil Armstrong and his team was a hazardous event (I don’t have space here to explain it all, but it’s well worth reading about it at FLY! pages 152-6).

I asked Gene about the teamwork involved in accomplishing this massive feat and achievement together, and how they dealt with high-pressure moments. He explained to me how everyone (400,000 people) did their own jobs and they performed as a highly coordinated team.

The highlight of Apollo 11 was the very risky moon landing – when the Eagle crew led by Neil Armstrong was distracted by flight path errors, warning lights flashing, unknown warning messages and warning bells. Later in the approach there were increased risks from the auto-land system disconnection and imminent fuel exhaustion. The crew had trained so thoroughly that they had prepared for and expected the unexpected. They ignored the warnings, kept calm, took manual control until Armstrong said that world-famous phrase, “The Eagle has landed”.

The Deliberate Practice Neil and Buzz conducted on Earth paid dividends for humanity.

Gareth: I’d like to talk now about the sheer speed with which we have to deal with issues and unfurling events in a crisis, and the impact on “brand management”. I fully agree that members of a Crisis Management Team need to have time to think, but the way events can take place, and also be reported in the blink of an eye through social media nowadays, doesn’t give a crisis team much time to get on the front foot with communications internally and externally, does it.

Richard: *It’s a balancing act, and it relates again to your ability to respond quickly. In FLY! I describe an old rule called “The Golden Hour” (a term borrowed from the military-medical profession). The Golden Hour represents what used to be the amount of time that you had to respond to a crisis event, to control and survive a situation. Well, the Golden Hour does not exist nowadays – our response time has been reduced to minutes in today’s world of instant social media. So, parts of the crisis team need to immediately be ready to take control and respond in an appropriate way.*

It’s not as hard as you imagine to take control in a crisis. That’s because in 61 percent of occasions a company expected a crisis because in 83 percent of those events, they caused it. If you created the crisis and have information at hand to disclose, then it’s better to take and keep control and disclose the facts rather than let others take control by breeding rumours and inuendo.

Gareth: And this is particularly relevant for internal and external communications, I am thinking.

Richard: *Yes, the way you communicate information, and do it quickly, is critical. In a crisis event, things are happening at multiple levels and very quickly.*

Every person has their own perception during a crisis that can vary from reality. During a crisis, every person with a phone is a journalist. And trained people in your company can take control and extinguish rumours on social media.

The aim is to meet people's fears, doubts and uncertainties with facts, empathy, care and a single point of contact.

You need to respond to them quickly, at multiple levels. I use the NITS acronym (FLY! page 60) when disclosing information – it's a great aide-memoire.

One thing to bear in mind about anticipating how a crisis event could develop is this – if the event is something that has been caused on your premises / in your operations / under your control, you probably have information and knowledge about how it could potentially unfurl (note that I say “could”, as you can't know for sure). If so, this knowledge will be extremely valuable to you.

When the QF32 incident occurred, in dealing with my part of the crisis, I was concerned with ensuring that we cared for everyone on the airplane – which meant being truly authoritative, direct, informative, compassionate and considerate for the 468 people on board. We had to do this as one part of our tasks as a team. By achieving these goals, we prevented panic, kept calm. We protected the passengers' trust in us and as a consequence, we protected our brand.

I knew that back at Qantas Head Office the Crisis Centre in Sydney, which is organised into many layered teams, would be responding to the event and actioning the tasks associated with their varied roles, all in a coordinated manner, including clear communications between the many groups of interested parties, internal and external.

Having multiple teams of experts acting together leads to a positive short and long-term outcome for your brand. When it is working well, you are in essence operating to the principles of a High Reliability Organisation – where leaders defer to expertise.

I like Brian Duff's quote in FLY! on page 84, “When things are going well, tell the media everything they want to know. When things are going badly, tell them even more.”

With regard to long-term outcomes and brand management, an example that comes to mind with QF32 and the Qantas brand was our CEO's decision to [ground the A380 fleet](#) on the day of the event because of safety concerns. This was a courageous decision for our CEO to make. People remember this kind of action long after the event. For Qantas, it was a demonstration of our total commitment to safety.

Gareth: We talked earlier in this interview about the need to ensure there is “strength in depth” to a Crisis Management Team, with deputies in place for all members. These deputies need to experience the same amount of training and practice as Team leads, don't they. They need to be on hand and ready to get involved and they need to be just as strong in capability as those who are in the lead roles in the team.

Richard: *I agree, and this definitely includes their participation in training and simulations. When you train a crisis team, to do it well, simulate a handover team coming in, where the primary team hands over to their delegates, and practices this handover.*

Returning to NASA as an example, they can have 5 or 6 Flight Directors for a Mission, with one Lead (Tiger) Team with its Chief Flight Director allocated to be in command. They build resilience into their teams as a habit.

Gareth: On that point, about ensuring a smooth handover in a crisis simulation, I have seen how at airports, full-blown crisis simulations run for a period of time to ensure they are “real”, they are not wrapped up in a couple of hours.

Richard: *Yes, part of the value of full-blown simulations is in running them over time, perhaps days or a week, which is the reality of what happens in a real-life major crisis event, so practising these handovers and working through things over time is important. In a multi-day simulation, the aim should be to train one crisis team on one day and backup teams on subsequent days.*

Gareth: Could we unpack a little bit more what you mean about a team acting in unison to protect a brand during a crisis event? As an example of maintaining good brand management, I have experienced how a Crisis Management Team liaises with a Business Continuity Team – to ensure actions to manage a crisis are linked to keeping business operations running and dealing with full recovery of operations.

Richard: *I think one of the keys is to be open and honest at all times. When you are responsible for people who don’t know what’s happening in a crisis event, you need to be mindful of, acknowledge then allay these fears. Our fears, dread and panic are based on; confusion (no information), helplessness (no control), dread, no one is held responsible and there is no single point of contact.*

Those in charge can answer questions to allay these fears. At the same time, we need to make sure we do not compromise the business, and we need to keep operations running (with Business Continuity kicking in). In communicating to different stakeholders, we cannot tell everyone everything that is happening, but we can calm people’s fears and we can be quick to provide information on what we are doing to respond to the event.

For example, during the QF32 crisis event, I only spoke to the Qantas Crisis Management Team twice during the incident. I was fortunate that I had another pilot with me on the flight deck who was trained to deal with such matters (which is an example of good teamwork). This freed me up to focus on spending the time I needed to be with the passengers. I knew that some of the media might try to take a “negative angle” once the event was over, but this was not my driver for spending time with passengers. My driver was (and always is, on every flight) the concern and care for everyone under my stewardship when I am captain of an airplane. These thoughts are driven by my values. (FLY! p82)

After we landed back at Changi airport and disembarked the airplane (what happened is a long story – I hope people may find my account of it in my book QF32 of interest), I gave my phone number to all 440 passengers (FLY! page 81).

I did this because I wanted to give everyone a “single point of contact” for any follow-up that they might need. As it turned out, I didn’t get many calls – those I did receive were to see if we could catch up for a coffee at some point (which I really appreciated).

In doing this, I gave all passengers my personal guarantee and commitment – and the way I see it, there is no downside to doing this. This builds trust with people. This action I took that day wasn’t in a manual, or procedure. I did it because of my core values.

The media did not find anything negative from any passenger they spoke to. Reporting about the incident on the day and afterwards has been positive. We didn’t control this; we simply did our jobs and took responsibility for what we did.

On a personal side of things, I didn’t talk to my wife until much later in the day. She found out about the incident from one of my colleagues – I hadn’t had time to call her.

Gareth: What are some of the things you have learned from researching other crisis events, including the linkage to how a brand can be impacted, positively or negatively, in how a business responds to a crisis event?

Richard: *We can, and we should, learn from case studies and crisis events that have happened. Learn from the masters such as Richard Branson, and the poor performers such as BP in the Mexican Gulf. I learned lots from studying many crisis events.*

One crisis event I recall occurred to a British Airways Flight BA38, a Boeing 777 that crash-landed at London-Heathrow airport. Everyone survived the events because of the smart and quick-witted thinking and actions by the pilot of that flight, Peter Burkill. But the rest of that crisis was managed poorly by many groups on the ground. I recommend Peter’s book about that crisis named, “Thirty Seconds to Impact”.

Many other examples of crisis events exist that we can learn from. The [BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill](#) was a tragic event and provides many learnings in many ways, including brand management.

A good example of a leader being empathetic and proactive in a crisis is Richard Branson. After the tragic Virgin Train crash in February 2007 and the Virgin Galactic VSS Enterprise test space plane that exploded in October 2014, both times he went straight to the scene and met with people in a compassionate way.

As I describe in FLY!, learning from past crisis events is very instructive. For example, I remembered what happened to Captain Peter Burkill after he deplaned his 777 airplane at London-Heathrow. I insisted to the Singaporean police, in an authoritative manner, that they transport me to meet with the passengers who were then in the terminal.

Gareth: You dedicate a chapter in FLY! to the challenges of dealing with post-traumatic stress after a major crisis event. Do you think we pay enough attention to PTS, following a crisis event (knowing that the incubation timeframe for a PTS reaction can sometimes be lengthy)?

Richard: *PTS is an evolved, natural and vital response to abnormal events that occur. It builds persistent memories of dangerous places and situations well after the stress during the event has occurred. The symptoms we experience at first should fade once the situation is over. If the emotions do not fade, we are left with Post Traumatic Stress (PTS).*

After a major event, we should expect everyone involved in it will experience PTS to some degree. We need to ensure people who suffer PTS are given access to specialists who can help them. Remember, just as success can follow failure, there can be growth from trauma.

Gareth: Just on a personal observation about FLY!, I found the checklists at the end of each of the ten chapters very useful. I'm reminded by a quote from a manager at the NASA Johnson Space Center, who said to me during a discussion we had about risk management: "Astronauts use checklists, so should you." Are these checklists the key things you hope readers of the book will keep in mind.

Richard: *Well, I hope that readers of FLY! find the whole book of value. We all have different ways of learning and remembering things.*

Some people like checklists, others value summaries. Many people remember the aide-memoire's such as "Aviate, Navigate, Communicate" and NITS. Personally, I value the multi-dimensional index that I interlace into my knowledge management system. If you have another system to present knowledge, then please contact me and I'd be keen to investigate.

Whatever knowledge system works for you, I hope FLY! presents the elements of resilience in the "language" of your choice and that you remember the keys to not just surviving the next crisis, but also the keys to thriving in the good times.

Gareth: I'd like to finish by asking if you working on any new projects at the moment, and if not, do you have anything planned?

Richard: *I'm enjoying a six-month rest from writing after ten years of deep research and writing of the Big Jets (delayed by QF32), QF32 and FLY!*

I'll be busy for the next ten years. I am now starting to get back into the research and writing to finish my Big Jets book that will be an encyclopaedic reference for designing, building, certifying and flying big commercial passenger jets. Then I have one physics book to write that I started in the 1980s in honour of the scientist Professor Julius Sumner Miller.

Gareth: Thank you very much for your time, Richard. I wish you continued safe travels flying around the globe and I look forward to being a passenger on a plane that you are captain of again at some point!

A brief snippet from FLY! - “Strategies to Survive a Crisis” (page 42)

1. Stay alive – prioritise your initial actions in a crisis event
2. Create time – you have more time than you think (usually). Slow down or stop. Find your calm spot and build mindfulness.
3. Build your courage. A good posture pumps your senses (which can release serotonin – I didn’t know that), projecting confidence
4. Accept your reality – do not dwell on what has happened, look forward
5. Mitigate threats – have the awareness to identify, manage and mitigate immediate threats and avoid distractions
6. Assess your options – you DO have options. Gather information from multiple sources
7. Re-assess priorities – and recognise your decision-making biases
8. Don’t rush (you give the example of Brian Lugg, a military helicopter pilot in Egypt who created time during his crisis when his helicopter’s tail rotor failed)
9. Think for yourself and resist stampedes – fight the herd instinct to rush
10. Forget perfection – you cannot afford to be paralysed by indecision or waiting for the perfect plan to emerge; find the sweet spot between too little information and too much of it
11. Try inverting the logic. Don’t overload yourself with information. If the steps above aren’t working, you may have to ignore the rules and simplify things.
12. Communicate – even with everything going on. When you think you have communicated enough, then double it.