

# Stick The Landing: An Interview With Sully Sullenberger

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Can you turn a crisis around in 208 seconds?

In times of intense pressure it can be difficult to remember the leadership skills you've learned throughout your career. When a catastrophic situation strikes, we go into 'fix-it' mode, and often forget to step back, keep calm, and bring in other opinions. As leaders it's important to remain unmoved through chaos, and to be the rock your team can gather around. So how do you react when things go south? Do you look for runway or... face the river?

[Captain Sully Sullenberger](#) pursued his childhood love of aviation and learned to fly at age 16. He graduated from the U.S. Air Force Academy, served as a fighter pilot in the U.S. Air Force flying the legendary F-4 Phantom. After leaving the Air Force, he became a commercial airline pilot and received international acclaim on January 15, 2009 when he and his first officer and flight crew safely guided US Airways Flight 1549 to an emergency water landing in New York City's Hudson River. This, after it lost both engines to a bird strike. 155 lives were saved that day, and he would later be portrayed by Tom Hanks in the film version of this amazing event.

He has conducted keynote speeches around the world, teaching people how to achieve the highest levels of performance, reliability and safety through effective crisis management and continuous learning and leadership. He is a *New York Times* bestselling author of two books, his second book was called *Making A Difference: Stories of Vision and Courage from America's Leaders* and his first book was his autobiography *Sully: My Search for What Really Matters*. I recently interviewed Captain Sully for the [LEADx Podcast](#), where we discussed the importance of leadership and teamwork in times of crisis.

**Kevin Kruse:** What's the reality of being a commercial airline pilot these days?

**Sully Sullenberger:** Well, like many industries, it's cyclical. In the '60s and the '70s, it was a pretty good job and we had good benefits and pay. But starting with the deregulation of schedules and fares in 1978—the deregulation of the airlines—this economic tsunami of change began. It started gradually at first, and then by the early 2000s and certainly after 2001, the September 11 terror attacks and subsequent downturn in flying hit to the economy. There were multiple airline bankruptcies, SARS, two wars, the .com bust, and all that together was a huge hit to the airlines, and of course, consequently we took huge pay cuts. I took a 40% pay cut in the early 2000s.

Our first officer in the Hudson River flight, Jeff Skiles, because he was forced from the captain's seat into the first officer's, he then took the pay cut on top of it, lost about half of his pay. Almost every airline employee in the country has lost their pensions and had it replaced by a PBGC guarantee pennies on the dollar, with little time to make it up. I'll never be able to make up everything we lost. We were the working wounded, we had been folded, spindled and mutilated. So it was a big challenge in terms of leadership every week, as a captain, when I would fly with people, many of whom I'd never met before because there are so many pilots and flight attendants so we fly with different people all the time, it was a real challenge to motivate them. To remind them not only what to do and how to do it, but why we must do what we do, especially in such a safety-critical industry, and for whom we owe this dedication. Of course, our passengers.

Every week, part of what we would do is after the introductions are made, try to align goals and try to convince people that we needed to work together as a team, and that was something that was very dear to my heart and I had worked on for many decades. In fact, years ago at the airline, I helped to develop, implement, and then teach the very first such team-building leadership course in my airline. I taught the very first one. You know you're in the leading edge of culture change when you have to try to convince the Pilot Union Safety Committee that a safety initiative is a good idea and not just a threat to pilots' authority or autonomy. These were human skills that we would be able to teach them, that would give them greater abilities and help them be better and more effective leaders.

We changed the cockpit culture from the old days where it was autocratic and arrogant and people didn't listen to each other and didn't build a team, and the accident rate reflected that. Now we teach them how to take a team of experts and create an expert team, and those are different skills. Those are the things I've done throughout my career and I've cared about.

As a result of the famous flight, I've proven in the most dramatic way possible that all these things I worked on for so long really work in the real world, even in the most extreme emergency.

**Kruse:** What kept you motivated to help those individual passengers when so many gave up on the system?

**Sullenberger:** Well, injustice just makes me mad, it pisses me off, and it always has. I didn't want to be a bystander, and I talk about this in the book; "showing up for life." Throughout my life, I knew that whether you've got a big job and a fancy title or not, whatever your station in life is, whatever you're doing, there is some sphere of influence that you can control, even though we get overwhelmed by the enormity and the complexity of the problems and issues of life, sometimes it feels like we're trying to empty the ocean with a teaspoon. There is something in some part of our lives, of our world that we can control, and when we choose to try to make our little part of the world better—and it's a choice that we have to make every single day—we can make a difference.

When I would go to work, I wouldn't just go through the motions and just try to survive, just try to endure; I would try to get some personal satisfaction out of having done a good job. A personal satisfaction out of having helped one person, looking for opportunities to do something that was worthwhile. When you do that, it goes a long way toward providing a life that then has a purpose. When you can derive satisfaction and purpose, and perhaps meaning, from what you do every day, it just doesn't get any better than that.

I would try to make my little part of the world and—especially as captain when I was leader of the team and I was, by federal statute, responsible for every aspect of the safety of the flight from start to finish—I had the authority to make things right. It was my job. Every time I get to work on a four-day trip of flights, to try to make each of the flights safe, comfortable, efficient, right, good, pick a word. When I could do that, then it gave me a professional satisfaction. It was my way of fighting back, my way of resisting the inequities of the world.

**Kruse:** You can always go back to personal meaning, personal purpose, mission, and to what you can control.

**Sullenberger:** It is a two-sided coin, I talk about this in the first book, also that sometimes if you go too far out of your way, if you go too far out of the normal balance of your job, then at some point you are engaged in enabling behavior in an organization. A company, for example, that always uses the cheapest subcontractors and they do the least training and don't devote the right resources to certain functions and don't hire enough staff. If you're constantly spending your entire day compensating for the inadequacies of the system, you allow it to continue. I had to pick and choose my battles and try to fight the system from within to make sure that they hired enough staff, to make sure they had done enough training, to make sure they had devoted enough resources to do the job so that we weren't being distracted from being pilots all the time, trying to do everything else that wasn't being done, but we had to do what we could.

**Kruse:** I have a feeling there were 154 people on that flight that thought they might die that day, so how could you be so confident at that moment?

**Sullenberger:** Well, the crew had their jobs to do and the first officer, Jeff Skiles, certainly did, and he was my partner throughout this whole episode. I couldn't have done it without him. In fact, had he been a lot less experienced, had he not had the 20,000 hours of flying time that he has like I do, had he not been a captain before and understood how to collaborate with me wordlessly by knowing his roles and responsibilities so well, because we didn't have time in those 208 seconds to have a conversation about what had happened, I didn't have time to direct his reaction.

The passengers, of course, didn't know the full story. They weren't in control, they weren't experts at this profession, but I was and Jeff was, so even though we never trained for this, even though it was a novel event that we had never anticipated, we took what we did know, adapted it and very quickly applied it to solve this novel problem.

I had to very quickly come up with a paradigm of how to solve even this problem, and the startle effect was *huge*, especially after almost 30 years of routine airline flying where we worked so hard never to be surprised by anything, that I had never been so challenged in an airplane for 42 years that I doubted the outcome, but this was very different and it happened so suddenly, it was shocking.

The first thing we had to do was to force calm on ourselves, to have the mental discipline to both compartmentalize and focus clearly on the few most important tasks at hand, and then have the discipline to ignore everything we didn't have time to do as being only distractions. We boiled the problem down to the essential essence and then began to solve it one at a time, until finally, we had solved each problem at the

very end. But we didn't have time to do everything, and much of what we did, we had to do later in the flight because there wasn't time to do it earlier in the flight. But we flew the airplane, we began to take the first two remedial actions, within two seconds I had turned on the engine ignition and started the APU, so we reacted very quickly. I knew inherently there were only three options, two runways that might be reachable but turned out with reaction time were not, and the only other place I knew from experience where we could even attempt to land an airliner was the Hudson River.

**Kruse:** I also learned from your book that you can become a commercial airline pilot with as little as 1,500 hours, is that right?

**Sullenberger:** Yeah. Actually, a bit less than that if you've done certain things. If you're a former military pilot, you have credit for some of that time, you can have less than 1500 hours if you go through some of the accredited aviation university schooling and training, you can get some credit for some of that. But the overall requirement now is 1500, which is up from the unbelievably, insanely-low previous minimum of 250 hours.

But even now, some in the regional airline industry are lobbying hard in Congress to try to weaken even those minimum standards to provide credit for other non-aviation activities, things like watching videos in a hotel ballroom or going to a non-aviation college and getting a degree of some sort. But there's no substitute for *actual* flying experience in the real world. It's through that real-world experience that one develops the judgment and this paradigm I'm talking about; how to set priorities even in unforeseen situations and how to solve any problem in an airplane. That's really the ultimate challenge in being an airline pilot is never knowing over a 30-year career, when, or even if, you might face some ultimate challenge or what it would be or how you would handle it if it's something that's never been done before. That's the mastery that must be present in every pilot seat and on every flight on every day.

**Kruse:** If you took 100 other US Airways pilots and put them in that same situation, I can't imagine that all of them would have made the same decision.

**Sullenberger:** There's no way to know, but I'm confident that many of my colleagues would have done something similar, would have found their own way to solve this problem. But we can't unring the bell, we can't go back before this event happened and now that it's happened and now that we've seen at least one way to do it, I think, that influences people's thinking about it, so that's an unanswerable question. Other than this, I am confident that aviation professionals have that same skill, that same dedication and could find a way.

**Kruse:** The most amazing part of that recording happens at 3:30:21, you ask a simple three-word question.

**Sullenberger:** I'm very impressed that you picked that out. You see, that to me is one of the more noteworthy things about this whole episode, this whole flight. Right before the landing, I asked Jeff a question, I said, "Got any ideas?" Now, some reading that think it was a flippant remark. Although, people who know me well probably doubt that I'm even capable of a flippant remark, but what I was asking him, and Jeff understood clearly in that context, I was saying essentially, I've done everything I can think of that will help us, is there any other action we can take? Is there anything else you can think of that would help us be more successful even by a fraction? Jeff's answer was, "Actually not." But it wasn't that he was being insouciant, it was not that he was resigned to some ineluctable fate, far from it, we were fighting to the very end to save the life of everyone on board. He answered that way because he knew that we had done all that we could.

The fact that we could have that exchange right before the landing is one of the most remarkable things about this flight and this crew, and it's an indication of how deeply internalized our, not just the technical flying skills, but the human skills, the leadership and team skills that I used to teach to use all of your resources, to ask everyone involved, if there's time, what are your thoughts? What can we do to make this better? What can we do to solve this problem? To innovate, to not just rely upon my own thoughts, my own experience, but to draw upon on his as well.

**Kruse:** You don't like the term 'soft skills,' so tell us even more about that.

**Sullenberger:** These skills, to my knowledge, are not being taught very much, certainly not in our business schools, and I've talked to a lot of medical audiences too. These soft skills—these human skills I would say—have the potential to do even more good than technical skills can. It's all about creating the proper environment. Leadership is responsible for creating a culture in which we all can do our best work; it's a matter of setting priorities, it's a matter of checking your ego at the door. Left unchecked, even though the ego can be a powerful force, a driving energetic force for good, left unchecked you run the risk of walling yourself off to the communication, the innovation of others, and having to rely only on your own thoughts, your own ideas.

Part of what a leader must do is make it psychologically safe to be able to raise important questions, and leaders must make sure that we understand how to convince those we work with and who work for us that we not only need to hear the unvarnished truth, we *want* to hear the unvarnished truth. We really need to change our idea of the nature of news in our organizations, we need to tell everyone through our actions to model this behavior, that there's no such thing as bad news. That really the only bad news is news that is not acted upon effectively in a timely fashion and, as we would say when I was teaching the team-building course at the airline, even the most junior flight attendant should be able to speak up to a captain about an important safety issue. And it's not only his or her right to speak up, it's his or her responsibility to the team, to the mission, to the crew, and to the passengers, to speak up. And we make it not about who's right, but about what's right that's important.

What we do is help to create a shared sense of responsibility among all the team members for the outcome that everyone can participate in, so we flatten the hierarchy to a more appropriate level. We open channels of communication, we encourage input—time permitting—and those are skills that each of us can learn no matter what you're doing, whether it's at business, work, at school or at home, each of us can learn these techniques. They're transferable. Much of what we've done in aviation is transferable to other domains, and I've talked to a variety of professionals around the world as diverse as nuclear power operators to financial risk managers, health care givers, and others. The more I do that, the more I learn about other domains, the more similarities I see because what we're all trying to do is to improve human performance in these organizations that all involve inherent risk.

**Kruse:** I always challenge our listeners to become a little bit better every day, so I'm hoping you'll give us a challenge.

**Sullenberger:** Well, I'm actually going to give you two challenges. In this fast-paced world in which it seems like the pace of change is only accelerating on a daily basis, often we are tempted just to respond immediately to whatever is in front of us, to just react. But if we as leaders and team members set aside some period of time every day, perhaps half an hour or an hour, to free ourselves of distractions, to open our minds, to maybe even go outside for a run during lunch and not just react to whatever is immediately in front of us from email to a text. We have the ability to tap creative reserve, and when we have a creative reserve and are not just fully committed to whatever is right front us, not just reacting, we can sometimes come up with the insights, the framing of a question in such a way that we come up with a solution we wouldn't have thought of otherwise. That's certainly been true for me.

If I get outside and just change my environment, get away from my desk and broaden my perspective and not just focus on what's right in front of me, I can often think of some unique thought, some creative way, some innovative way of doing something I wouldn't have come up with otherwise.

The second challenge I would give you is a more important and a more immediate one, also, because of our electronic devices and our perceived need for immediate responsiveness in our world today. We respond *immediately* to our electronic devices anytime they send us a stimulus, and we should not do that when we drive. Right now, for the first time in decades, traffic deaths are on the increase. I'm convinced it's largely due to distractions from personal electronic devices while we're driving.

The single most effective thing that each of us could do right now, today, to stop that trend is to turn off, to mute, to put away our phones when we drive. And do what we did 10 or 15 years ago, wait until we get there to find out what's going on. Put our own needs aside, delay our gratification, delay responding to our need for curiosity for a few minutes, and that little gift of civic virtue would save thousands of lives in this country alone every year. We don't have the right to put others at unnecessary risk for our own convenience. It's a civic duty not to do that.

*Kevin Kruse is CEO/Founder of [LEADx.org](http://LEADx.org). [Click here](#) to get actionable advice from the Top 50 Leadership Experts in the world.*