

# **Common Sense Leadership: A Perspective of Licensed Airline Pilots**

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## **Abstract**

This study is a part of an on-going series of academic discussions about common sense leadership and different professions. This qualitative study was conducted from March, 2015 through June, 2015 involving 284 participants that identified themselves as a licensed airline pilot. The conclusion of this study indicated that common sense correlates to three specific factors: (a) experience, (b) one's knowledge and (c) a combination of professional experience and knowledge. The authors conclude that common sense is not defined by a single factor, but really focused on one's training and proficiency as a professional airline pilot.

**JEL classification numbers:** M1

**Keywords:** Airline Pilots, Common Sense Leadership

## **1 Introduction**

What is common sense? Recent research and analysis of common sense has become more communal as the focus to understand common sense has shifted from a static definition to one that seeks to understand what specifically influences others to behave or perform in a certain way. Zhao (2009) found that common

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sense encompasses three components: (a) knowledge in the form of good judgment; (b) wisdom, “the ability to make sensible decisions” (p. 441); and (c) common beliefs based on what a majority of those in an environment believe are common.

Over the past three years, 2012-2015, several research studies have been completed in an attempt to define the meaning of common sense and to identify specific examples of what demonstrates common sense. In 2012, Webber, Goussak and Ser (2012) measured the beliefs of 26 senior level U.S. business executives from throughout the United States and in 2013, Webber, Goussak, Ser and Yang (2014) studied 15 business leaders from Mainland China in an effort to identify a single definition of what common sense means and to understand if any differences existed between U.S. executives and Chinese executives. Both the U.S. business executive study and the Chinese business executive study failed to determine a single definition of common sense. One of many conclusions of these studies indicates that research needs to narrow the search for a common definition of common sense by studying specific groups or types of individuals with common traits or features in order to better understand their beliefs of what common sense means.

In 2014, Goussak and Wilson (2015) took the initial step towards narrowing the research universe to more specific groups or types of participants. In this case, a group of 45 individuals identifying themselves as either artists or musicians were identified and asked to describe, based on their lives as artists and musicians, the meaning of common sense and to provide lived examples of what these individuals believe is demonstrating common sense. Goussak and Wilson determined that regardless of the participant’s purpose in their self-described fields, amateur or professional artist or musician, that certain similarities were indicated in the survey results. Primarily, artists and musicians indicated that common sense fell into one of or a combination of three categories: (a) the environment in which the artist or musician originated; (b) the knowledge level of the respective field of the artist or musician and (c) specific instincts of the artist or musician which helped mold their craft.

## **2 Literature Review**

As determined by previous studies on the concept of common sense leadership, a single definition is not possible but a pattern of traits and behaviors are starting to emerge. For example, U.S. business executives indicated that three traits directly related to daily activities represent common sense. According to Webber, Goussak and Ser (2013), these traits included “goal setting, decision making and employee motivation” (p. 2). Webber et al. further theorized that a leader

demonstrating common sense utilized a combination of these traits in his or her behaviors and no single trait was found to be the sole indication of common sense leadership. Webber, Goussak, Ser and Yang (2014) found a contrast in the trait approach with their study of Chinese business executives because China business follows a less static approach to performance because successful leaders and managers focus less on task completion and more on relationship building. According to Webber, Goussak, Ser and Yang (2014), “Chinese leaders believed that the environment was critical to success and that a link between providing personal attention to the team, creating a harmonious work environment and providing personal recognition of team members” (p. 11) was the basis for leading with common sense. Task completion would inevitably results when the team and its members were convinced that their leader valued their performance.

In order to confirm if a useable definition of common sense is based on the idea that individual traits and behaviors is the catalyst, further research must continue to focus on narrowed groups and types of individuals with something specific in common but this commonality is not exactly the same for all participants. The premise of this paper and study seeks the opinions of U.S. licensed airline pilots. This group was chosen because of the structured path followed by airline pilots in the performance of their responsibilities. In the case of airline pilots, the decisions made by these individuals have direct life and death ramifications based on their common sense beliefs, values and performance. Secondly, one of the co-authors of this study is herself a license private pilot creating a personal interest in the topic. Although this relationship could cause a research limitation, the authors were careful to maintain the necessary independence when the qualitative results of this survey. A total of 569 individuals signed the Informed Consent document with 284 participants actually submitting responses to the qualitative questions of what common sense means to a licensed pilot and what practical lived experiences represents common sense from a pilot’s point-of-view.

Early leadership research alleged that individuals that are leaders exhibit specific qualities that are not necessarily found in the common man (Bass, 1990; Burns, 1978; Hernez-Broome & Hughes, 2004). This concept is referred to among scholars are the *great man* theories. Although a gap exists in the definition among the meaning of leadership and more specifically about common sense leadership, there are many similar beliefs about these concepts. Bass (1990) found that leadership is ever changing from one paradigm to another as the values of the environment continue to change. According to Chung and Lo (2007), leadership consists of a process that is made up of certain traits that actually are influential over people working together towards accomplishing goals. Another thought is that leadership is a complex process that requires an understanding of individual situations within a unique environment (Van Wart, 2004). “Leadership involves, among other things, an array of assessment skills, a serious of characteristics

(traits and skills), which the leader brings to a leadership setting, and a wide variety of behavioral competencies” (Van Wart, 2004, p. 174). The study of leadership and more specifically the study of common sense leadership begin with clarity of individual characteristics and the environment. Leadership history has evolved through different theoretical periods that begun with trait theory, moving towards behavioral, situational and contingency theory into today’s period of transformational leadership. In the modern era of leadership, the multiple components of Full-Range Leadership Model including the Bass (1990) transformational leadership theory.

Leadership has transitioned from one period to another based on the flexibility of the environment (Van Wart, 2004). Leaders that are involved in this transition process must be able to acclimate by focusing on individual and professional experiences, the ability to analyze situations and the use of creativity and common sense (Sternberg, 2003). In order to synthesize this transition, the leader must follow a five-step process: a) analyze the total environment, b) identify certain skills present, c) apply the specific style, d) understand the certain behaviors of the leader and e) conduct a self-evaluation. The first step in the process is to analyze the environment. Quality leaders must understand not only how the environment operates but what knowledge actually is present within that environment. This analysis is critical before a leader can implement an action plan that follows the logic of common sense. It is critical that a common sense leader separate out the ambiguous from the specific. It is at this step in the process where a leader’s creativity can begin to influence the action plan for leading (Van Wart).

The second step of the process begins with a clear understanding of which skills are present and how those skills are being implemented. The earliest research of leadership focused on traits and skills and the ability to differentiate between these skills helps to identify leadership qualities from non-leadership qualities and common sense for a lack thereof. According to Sharlow, Langenhoff, Bhatti, Spiers and Cummings (2009), effective leadership is a group effort requiring an innovative approach to dealing with complex issues. To better understand this concept, the Leadership Development Initiative (LDI) was developed focusing on the “Four Pillars of Leadership: a) clarity of vision and purpose; b) act with integrity; c) inspire others to do their best and d) foster mutual understanding” (p. 321).

Steps three and four of the process correlate with one another because leadership styles and behaviors are similar in most contexts. Northouse (2007) equates leadership style to performance results and behaviors to how leaders will perform. Behaviorists believe that leadership is divided into two categories: (a) task behaviors and (b) relationship behaviors (Bass, 1990; Yukl, Gordon, & Taber, 2002). This belief is similar to the results of the artists and musicians study

indicated two of the three categories defining common sense leadership tied to one's knowledge (tasks) and one's instincts (relationships).

The final step in the process engages the leader in a self-evaluation of one's performance and how that performance affects the overall organization. According to Schneier and Marks (2004), one example of being self-evaluative involves the concept of Enterprise Risk Management (ERM). ERM emphasizes three mechanisms: (a) consideration of risk, (b) the factors of risk and (c) risk mitigation (Schneier & Marks). A leader can consider the factors of risk begins when risk is first recognized as a possibility and how that risk can affect the stress levels of both the individual leader and those that follow that leader (Pradel, Bowles & McGinn, 2005). According to Pradel et al, the primary risk factors that create risk and the related stress is ambiguity and uncertainty. This is a logical outcome affecting common sense leadership because regardless of position be it a business executive or artist/musician, when one is not certain in how to perform because of inexperience or education, the likelihood of failure increases. In certain instances, the lack of knowledge or experience is the result of a lack of creativity for the artist and musician and the loss of money for the business executive. Related closely to common sense leadership is that of contingency leadership. Successful contingent leaders are able to minimize uncertainty thus reducing risk and stress levels. One benefit of the contingency paradigm is the flexibility that is created when different alternatives are considered and used to guide or lead the organization. This is especially true for common sense leaders in positions of responsibility over the lives of others such as the case with airline pilots.

There are a number of different views of what common sense leadership means. The literature continues to indicate that a gap exists with a single definition of what common sense means, but it is becoming clearer that common sense is influenced by one's culture, environment or profession. Western styles of leadership follow a more classical or traditional approach to common sense guided by such theories as Taylor's Scientific Management Approach or Gilbreth's Administrative Theory. Evolving through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, theorists found that leading from a common sense approach migrated towards a behaviorist and away from a trait or task completion approach. For example, Barnard's Executive Function and Mayo's work in the Hawthorne Studies found that when people were involved that common sense depended on specific reactions based on experiences and behaviors. Towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more constructive work was completed by Fletcher (1984) and Goodwin (2009) when environmental factors directly influenced how common sense was applied to leadership roles. The idea that the environment and individual behaviors lead to such thinking of Hersey, Blanchard and Johnson (2007) and their Situational Leadership Model creating the belief that common sense was based on experience but experience required a level of flexibility. This was clearly demonstrated in this study because of the variety

of practical examples enumerated by airline pilot participants that defined common sense in their world but leading to a single end goal of safe performance resulting in the saving of lives entrusted to their care.

### 3 Data and Methodology

This qualitative study utilized SurveyMonkey.com to collect data on the opinions and beliefs of licensed airline pilots about the meaning of common sense and how pilots practically demonstrate common sense in their performance. Data was collected between March, 2015 and July, 2015. Participants were recruited via various means including social media (e.g. FaceBook), personal contacts from word-of-mouth emails and follow up emails to known individuals of previously engaged participants. A total of 567 potential participants signed the Informed Consent document of which 284 actually completed the survey questions. Demographically, participants self-identified as: (a) a 135/121 pilot, (b) commercial pilot, (c) private pilot or (d) no answer. Figure 1 indicates a breakdown by self-identified demographic category. Ten participants failed to self-identify the type of pilot's license that was maintained. The survey asked participants to respond to two qualitative questions. First, based on your background as an airline pilot, how would you define the concept of common sense? Second, please provide examples of what you believe is common sense based on your lived experiences as a pilot.

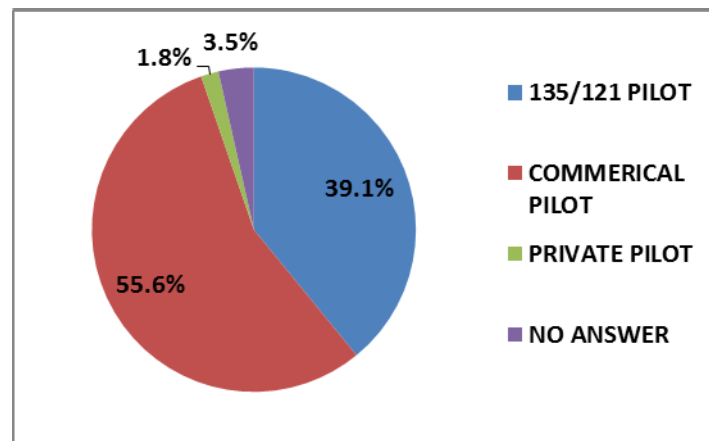


Figure 1: Demographic Breakdown of Participants

## 4 Findings

“Aviate (fly the plane), navigate (point the plane) and communicate (tell other where you are going); the credo of how airline pilots perform” (P60). Unlike businessmen and others that have participated in previous common sense research studies by focusing their perceptions on normal daily performance, airline pilots responded from a point-of-view of performance in abnormal situations. Pilots were very willing to share information about their perceptions because they believed that they are a part of a brotherhood and that the sharing of information could one day save the life of a passenger or fellow crew member.

Airline pilots’ defined common sense in a very similar manner as indicated in the Goussak and Wilson (2015) study of artists and musicians. Although, the terminology and references were quite different the qualitative analysis indicated similar traits. As found with all of the previous studies on common sense leadership, a single category does not define common sense, airline pilots did identify that pilot knowledge, professional experience, and a combination of knowledge and experience defined common sense of airline pilots. Figure 2 indicates a breakdown of airline pilot beliefs of what defines common sense.

It is interesting that airline pilots defined common sense as two separate components: (a) book knowledge and (b) practical experience. Sixty-seven percent (67%) of participants believed that the pilots that incorporate both of these components into what is meant as common sense. The real challenge is how a common sense pilot synthesizes both of these components into their performance while protecting the souls of those on board his/her aircraft and being as productive as possible. In the end, commercial pilots are a part of a very large industry that exists primarily for the purpose of making a profit. Sternberg (2003) believed that a well-rounded and complete leader integrates three traits into their behavior: (a) wisdom, (b) intelligence and (c) creativity often referred to as the *WICS model*.

There is probably no argument, regardless of leadership theory or belief, that a good leader is a wise leader and that being creative provides for a more interesting way to lead. The foundation of the WICS model is the intelligence trait. Sternberg separates intelligence into two subcomponents: (a) academic intelligence and (b) practical intelligence. Academic intelligence refers to one’s ability to analyze a situation based on established rules and procedures. Airline pilots participating in this study believed that academic intelligence equates to pilot knowledge. Pilots are some of the most extensively trained and educated professionals in the world because their decisions directly affect the lives of those they are charged to serve and protect. Unlike the common sense study of artists and musicians conducted by Goussak and Wilson (2015), the way that artists and

musicians define common sense does not have life and death ramifications. Although many of the results of common sense research studies may seem similar, the reality is that the rhetoric may appear identical but the practicality is vastly different. Whatever common sense means to those expressing their opinions must be taken into appropriate context.

In contrast, practical intelligence is based one's individual experiences. Participants believed that common sense leadership and performance is based on the professional experiences of an airline pilot. Although a certain amount of book knowledge is required to earn and maintain a pilot's license, pilots correlate common sense with experience. From a leadership theory point-of-view, the difference between academic intelligence and practical intelligence is analogous to the difference between transactional leadership theory and transformational leadership theory. According to Sternberg, leaders who focus solely on resolving problems in contrast to leaders who take a proactive approach based on professional experience follow a more transactional leadership approach.

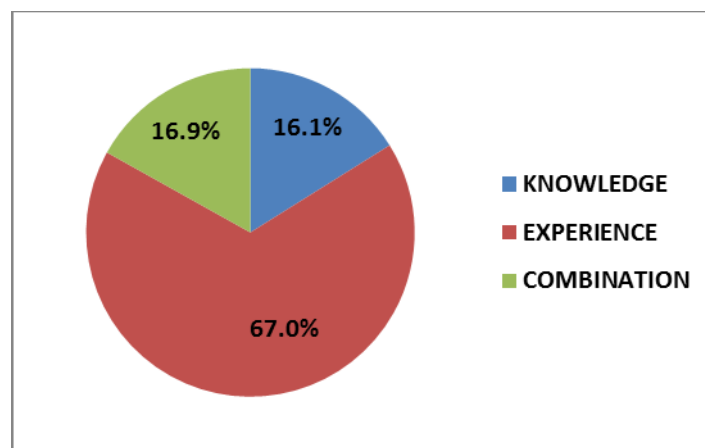


Figure 2: Breakdown of Participant's Definition of Common Sense

#### 4.1 Pilot knowledge

Of the three characteristics that encompassed the meaning of common sense by licensed airline pilots, pilot knowledge was the lessor of the three characteristics. Participants correlated the meaning of common sense to how pilots are trained and the standardized process followed through federal regulation and company policies. The focus of pilot knowledge was more than how to operate a plane under normal conditions but more importantly how to operate a plane under abnormal circumstances. The ultimate goal is more than a successful flight but a safe and successful flight. P120 believed that "if your wife and family were on



board and they felt uncomfortable with the flight, then common sense dictates that you made the wrong decision regardless of what the regulations say”.

A significant majority of participants that listed pilot knowledge as a key characteristic of what defines common sense is that pilot knowledge is more than one’s initial training, but includes the continued training pilots receive especially with current updates about the condition of equipment and environmental issues like weather reports. Figure 3 provides a breakdown by pilot self-identification of pilot type identifying pilot knowledge as a characteristic that influences common sense.

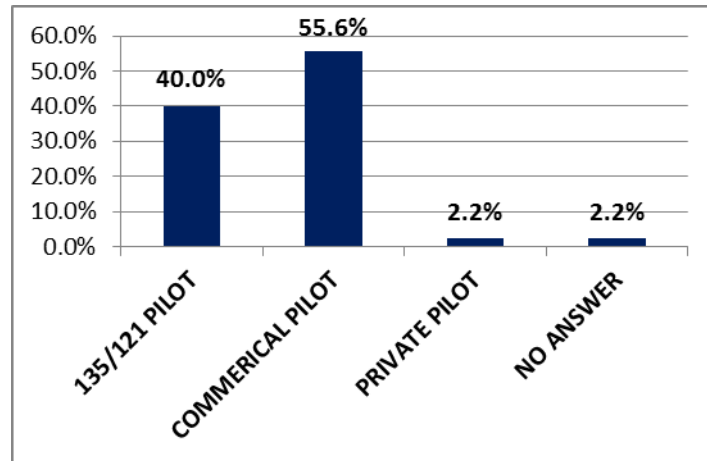


Figure 3: Breakdown by Participants Relating Pilot Knowledge to Common Sense

#### 4.2 Professional experience

Pilot participants in this study believed that professional experiences was another characteristic that defined common sense. The idea of professional experience defining common sense among licensed pilots equates to Sternberg’s *WICS Model* in that practical intelligence helps to guide how one makes decisions in their performance of responsibilities. Because the focus of pilot perception was on how pilots dealt more with the handling of abnormal situations, P154 believed that “a superior pilot uses his superior intelligence so he doesn’t have to demonstrate his superior flying skills”. Figure 4 provides a breakdown by pilot self-identification of pilot type identifying professional experience as a characteristic that influences common sense.

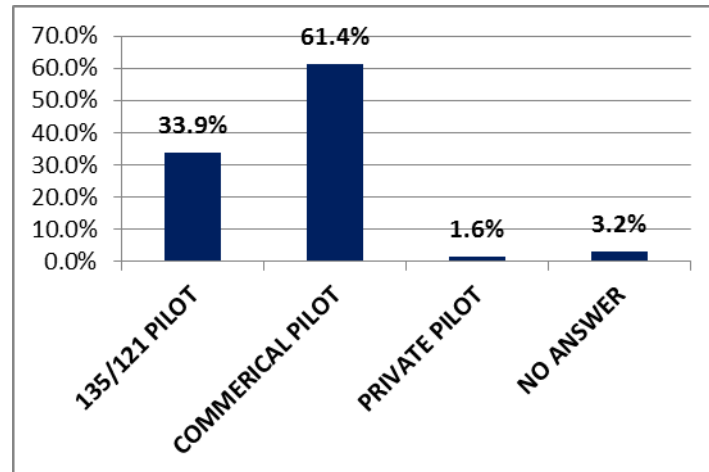


Figure 4: Breakdown by Participants Relating Professional Experience to Common Sense

### 4.3 Combination of pilot knowledge and experience

Overall, 67.0% of participants believed that common sense requires a combination of both pilot knowledge and professional experiences. In relation to Sternberg's *WICS Model*, wisdom and creativity correlates to both academic and practical intelligence to form a cohesive unit that demonstrates both common sense behavior and performance. Airline pilots first and foremost consider the safety of one's passengers, crew and aircraft the highest priority in regards to common sense. Because most of the study's participants are employed in a multi-billion dollar industry that places priority on making a profit, there is a fine balance between how one performs to make a profit and how one performs to safely operate an airplane. P285 said, "a pilot should minimize your exposure to harm and prioritize your activities to handle what is important. There are old pilots and bold pilots but no old and bold pilots". Figure 5 provides a breakdown by pilot self-identification of pilot type identifying a combination of pilot knowledge and professional experience as the primary characteristic that influences common sense.

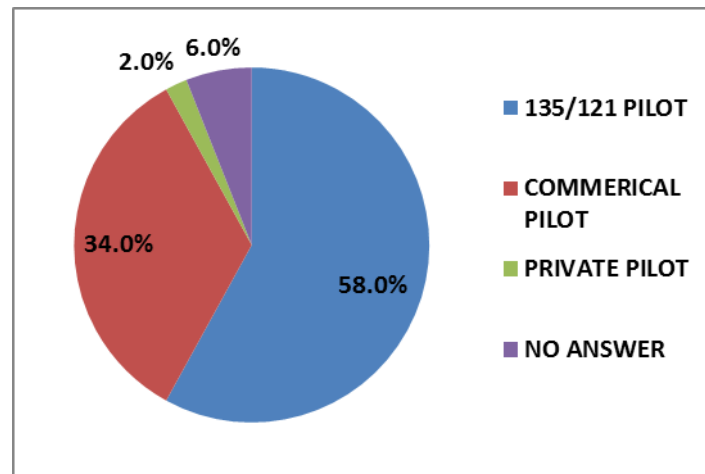


Figure 5: Breakdown by Participants Relating A Combination of Knowledge and Experience to Common Sense

## 5 Conclusions

As determined by a variety of recent studies about common sense by Webber, Goussak and Ser (2012, 2013), Webber, Goussak, Ser and Yang (2014) and Goussak and Wilson (2015), a single way to define or even describe common sense is not possible, but some level of commonalities are beginning to become apparent. Business executives from throughout the United States and China found that common sense equates with certain traits (e.g. goal attainment, decision making and employee motivation). This correlates somewhat to the traits believed by the artists and musicians that common sense relates to one's instincts and knowledge. Airline pilots, although not necessarily as creative in their performance as business executives and artists/musicians, rely on their training and past experiences for safety and success in operating an aircraft. Creativity, as a component of the *WICS Model*, takes a different perspective from that of an artist by focusing on practical experience than instinctual experience. According to P533, "Coach John Wooden (former coach of the UCLA basketball Bruins) said that failing to prepare is preparing to fail".

### 5.1 Future Research

The researchers believe that the study of common sense is critical in the 21<sup>st</sup> century not just from a business perspective of profitability but from a creative or safety perspectives as indicated by the studies of artists and musicians and airline pilots. Although certain commonalities are beginning to appear, the lack of a single definition demonstrates the need for further research. The continued study

of specific disciplines and professions will help further delineate which traits are common or not common of common sense leaders. These individual profession or discipline studies will eventually lead to an overall comparative analysis that hopefully will provide a much clearer definition or description of what is common sense.

Future research should continue with studies of the opinions and behaviors of medical doctors, lawyers and even sports fans in order to gain the largest possible environment of potential common sense leaders. The general question of what or how individuals define common sense and specific examples of what demonstrates common sense is still somewhat misunderstood. Once a wider variety of professions and other groups have been studied, a logical comparative analysis of these results with the already existing results will be possible hopefully resulting in a meaningful definition or description of what is common sense.

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