

# PILOT PERSONALITY TRAITS

In going through old notes and “to do” lists to ensure that I had paid back all debts before returning to line flying, I found requests for excerpts from a presentation I had made in 1990 on pilot personality and pilot personality traits.

Many pilots had written to say that they would like to have a copy of the study “so that my spouse will understand why I am the way I am!” The studies I referred to in my presentation were compiled from clinical work that many researchers had completed over the previous 25 years.

All of the traits and characteristics in the study may not apply to you, or may apply only partly to you. While the traits fit none of us completely, most of us see ourselves in many of them. What’s likely is that many of us will know *other* pilots whom we believe display *most* of the traits. Be careful, however, not to make judgments based on these personality traits. Keep in mind that many of these traits fit pilots you know for a reason—the traits listed tend to be precisely the qualities that are needed and desired for people who fly airplanes.

## Likely pilot personality traits

- **Achievement**—Pilots are hooked on responsibility and have a high need to achieve. They also have a strong need to be recognized for the difficult job they do so well. They are product-oriented and want to be recognized for meeting standards and praised for producing. They want to be acknowledged as being successful professionals doing better than others a job that requires skill and effort and as doing their best.
- **Aggression**—Pilots usually don’t hesitate. They are decisive (but often decide things too quickly). They strongly promote their own opinions and points of views—they tend to criticize or “tell off” others, to get or plan to get revenge for insults or injuries, to become angry and blame others when things go wrong.
- **Dominance**—Pilots like to be in control of a situation. They like to argue and persuade others to adopt their point of view. Pilots want to be leaders. They generally enjoy telling others how to do their job, supervising and directing others.
- **Linear thinkers**—Pilots are practical, thorough, systematic, and precise. They are concrete linear thinkers and do not handle theoretical concept well. They rely on evidence that can be measured or verified to get information about their environment. They prefer logic to feelings when they are evaluating and making decisions. Pilots like things planned and orderly, rather than spontaneous; closed and settled, rather than left open.

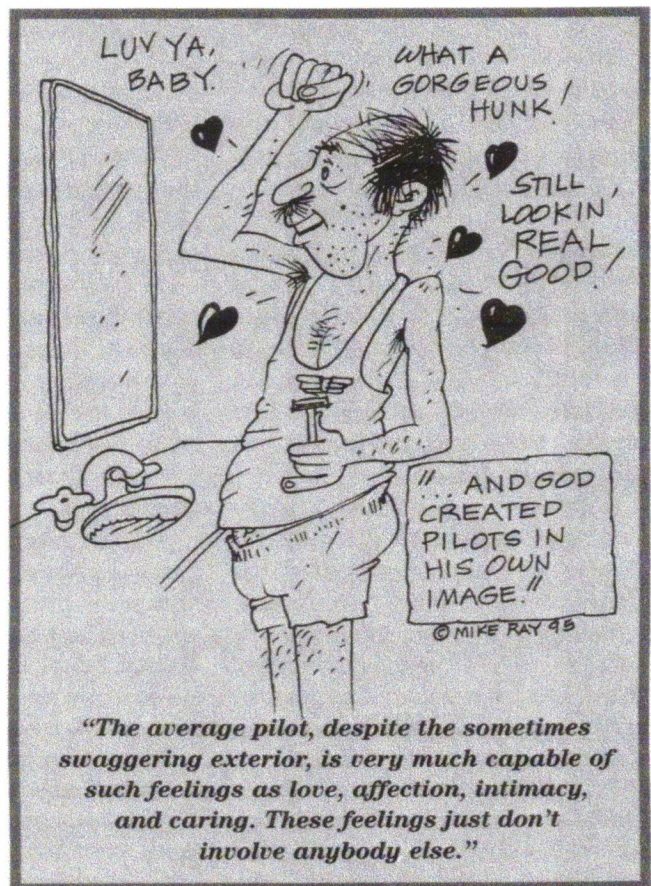
► Vic Britt, a B-747-400 captain, was director-flight procedures and training at Northwest Airlines until January 1994, when he returned to the line.

By Capt. Vic Britt (NWA)  
Cartoons by Capt. Mike Ray (UAL)

- **Change**—Pilots like doing new and different things: living in different places, having a changing daily routine, traveling. They can’t relax and need excitement (not content with a nine-to-five routine).

## Less likely pilot personality traits

- **Introspection**—Pilots typically don’t like to spend too much time analyzing their feelings. They avoid introspection, ignore and avoid inner feelings, (continued on page 38)



*“The average pilot, despite the sometimes swaggering exterior, is very much capable of such feelings as love, affection, intimacy, and caring. These feelings just don’t involve anybody else.”*

**“Pilots are well-organized, realistic, self-sufficient, responsible, loyal, steady, and dependable. However, pilots are not a good population to organize.”**

(from page 36) and are cautious about close relationships. They avoid revealing true feelings and are uneasy dealing with others' feelings. They are not comfortable trying to understand how others feel, how others view a problem, or putting themselves in another's place. They tend to avoid their own emotional reactions to events and frequently use humor to cope with anxiety. They don't like to analyze why people do what they do.

- **Affiliation**—Pilots have a lifestyle and an occupation that causes them to be alone, independent, and self-sufficient much of the time. They have difficulty sharing things with friends, co-workers, and colleagues or participating in groups. They are individualistic and have difficulty pulling together. Therefore, when events occur that affect all pilots or all employees, an airline pilot tends to believe and act as if he or she needs to handle it alone.

- **Nurturance and succorance**—Pilots tend to have difficulty in providing and accepting help, encouragement, support, and affection. Pilots have a hard time being emotionally open with others or expressing sympathy. They dislike others being sympathetic about their personal problems or feeling sorry for them. They especially dislike letting others help them. Apologizing is difficult for pilots.

- **Endurance**—Pilots tend to score low on the ability to keep at a job until it is finished, to stick to the problem until a solution is found, especially when they seem to be making no progress. They prefer short-term goals rather than long-range plans. They hate to wait, are impatient, and want short-term solutions to problems. Pilots who are faced with a bewildering assault on their careers and jobs need the ability to follow through with well-thought-out business plans in the face of mounting chaotic working conditions. Success is always tied to endurance.

- **Deference**—They don't practice this! Pilots are more concerned with modifying the environment than with changing their own behavior. Pilots tend to dominate and promote their own viewpoints and tend not to see alternatives. Deference is the opposite—listening to others, finding out what others think, accepting the leadership of others, letting others make decisions, accepting suggestions, respecting others' points of view.

- **Abasement**—Pilots don't like to give up or give in but prefer to fight to get their own way. They seldom make errors of fact and don't handle failure well. They have a low tolerance toward personal imperfections. However, they don't internalize things or blame themselves when things go wrong.

- **Order**—Pilots are well-organized, realistic, self-sufficient, responsible, loyal, steady, and dependable. However, pilots are not a good population to organize. With a group of pilots, arranging things so that they can run smoothly and one per-



son can be in charge is difficult. Pilots are not intimidated by authority; they tend to like to challenge any authority or power position and believe they can debate and win with any opponent. They are especially reluctant to listen to, or comply with, another pilot who happens to be in charge. Having his or her own point of view heard is more important to the pilot than reaching a consensus or a negotiated solution. They pay attention to rules and dislike making exceptions to policies, regulations, and rules. They are somewhat inflexible.

Pilots are perfectionists, extremely healthy, and are well above average in intelligence. They are energetic, courageous, and controlled.

My observation: They are also a lot of fun to be around!

Final note: I found the following definition of a pilot in the *U.S. Navy Times*: “The average pilot, despite the sometimes swaggering exterior, is very much capable of such feelings as love, affection, intimacy, and caring. These feelings just don't involve anybody else.”

See you on the line.