

Time out for safety

Listen to the little voice, not peer group pressure.

Matt Thurber



As Chuck poured the power to his re-engined Piper Malibu, my heart jumped into my throat. I didn't feel so good about this post-engine change test flight. On board were not only Chuck, but also Bill, the mechanic who had installed the engine, his assistant, and a local pilot, all invited along for a "fun" ride.

The test flight went fine, but I couldn't help wondering what I would have done if an accident had happened. Suppose that engine had failed on take-off? Sure we had double-checked the fuel lines and the mount bolts and the wiring and the controls, then ground-run the engine, then triple-checked everything. But did it make sense to have so many people join Chuck on that test flight?

Silence: Probably not. The big question however, is not whether it was safe to fly this test flight with passengers on board, but why I never said anything.

"This isn't safe." Why didn't I just say that? This isn't the first time I've stood silently by while safety measures were violated. It's a basic human characteristic not to say anything to change the direction a group is going. This happens even if individual members wouldn't think of doing by themselves what the group proposes.

Management expert, Jerry Harvey, has even named this, calling it the Abilene Paradox in his 1989 book of the same name. Long before air-conditioning was the norm, Harvey was sitting around with his family during a hot west Texas summer. Someone

suggested they drive to Abilene, about 100 miles away, for lunch. The family decided to go, and off they went driving 100 miles on rutted dirt roads with no air-conditioning - back then a three-hour trip.

In Abilene, they ate lunch, then immediately returned home, another three hours of driving torture. When they got home, they each discovered that no one, individually, had wanted to drive to Abilene for lunch.

Speak up: In aviation we see this manifested in situations like a group of mechanics talking themselves into cutting an inspection short so the boss can fly the aeroplane. What we need is a way to encourage individuals to voice their safety concerns.

Consider what I call: "Time out for safety". When I start hearing that little voice in my head saying maybe this isn't the safest way to do something, I need to stop what I'm doing. I need to think about what is happening, then interrupt the course of action by asking for a time out, a time out for safety.

Is it safe? Imagine the Malibu scenario: as the group started volunteering to go flying, when that voice told me that this was not safe, I would hold up my hand and say: "Hold it. Time out for safety. Let's think about this situation and decide whether it's safe."

Perhaps after discussing the proposed flight, we would have decided that it was safe. Maybe not. But at least we would have consciously explored the issue and not allowed the group to make an unformed decision, or even no decision.

Another situation where "time out for safety" can come in handy is when events seem to be accelerating out of control.

After a stressful three-day aeroplane delivery, which was supposed to take one day, I landed and taxied up to the shop. As soon as I shut down, my anticipated relaxing arrival was interrupted by a cacophony of semi-emergencies and noise.

One of our owners had just test flown his overhauled engine, only to have the new oil filter burst on downwind. Luckily, he was able to land his Cessna 152 safely. Naturally, he was the first person waiting outside my aeroplane when I shut down. There were two other urgent situations occurring with the fleet, which Bill, the Malibu mechanic, was busy trying to brief me on, in between the excited ranting of the 152 owner. I wasn't even out from under the wing of the aeroplane I had just flown from Montana to California, the long way, because of bad weather.

Calm down: Before things got too crazy, I finally asked everyone, including all the mechanics, to calm down, stop what they were doing and meet inside the hangar. First we calmed down the 152 owner, then dealt with the other problems. Then, relaxed and mentally refreshed, we went back to work.

The beauty of "time out for safety" is that anybody can use it, from pilot to line person to mechanic to manager. They can even use it when alone, as a method to force a pause and a rethinking of a course of action, which may break a link in the chain that leads to an accident.

"Time out for safety." Think about it. Give it a try. And pass it on.

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