

Walk the flight line

Communicating to team members that you appreciate and value them is the key to engagement, says **Rob Waldman**

When it comes to training, nothing is more critical than effective communication. It flavours every interaction and plants the seed for positive results. Connecting with co-workers and employees and establishing an environment that creates trust are the seeds that facilitate this communication.

In a rapidly changing and high-stress environment like a fighter squadron, training is everything. It determines mission effectiveness and even saves lives. The manner in, and consistency with, which leaders in a squadron train and communicate can make or break their ability to adapt to change and accomplish the mission.

As a young fighter pilot in the 79th fighter squadron at Shaw Air Force Base in South Carolina, I learned a valuable lesson about communication and how important it is when it comes to training. It not only changed the way I connect to others in business but had a great impact on my personal life as well.

Every mission starts with a briefing and ends with a debriefing. It's where the majority of our training takes place and the sessions are always held in a secured briefing room. So when I saw my commander, Lieutenant Colonel Dodson, approaching my F-16 with a stern look on his face, I knew something was wrong.



“Waldo, we need to talk,” he said as I climbed down the ladder from the cockpit.

“Yes sir,” I replied and waited, a little uneasy. Had I messed up? Was I in trouble? Was something wrong at home?

“Waldo, Airman Tyler told me about your conversation before you took off this afternoon.” His tone was serious and, unfortunately, I knew exactly what he was referring to.

Just a few hours earlier, during my after-engine-start checklist, I had reprimanded my crew chief (Airman Tyler) because my jet was shorted 500lb of fuel. Not a huge amount, but enough to cut my air-to-air training mission short by at least ten minutes. Although atypical, sometimes the wing tanks don't fill up completely and there is nothing the crew chief responsible for fuelling the jet can do about it. But I was frustrated and I had needlessly insulted the young crew chief. I was disrespectful and my sharp remarks stung.

“Waldo, do you realise how hard our crew chiefs work just so we have mission-ready jets to fly? Do you know how many hours they spend on the flight line?”

I was speechless. I had acted unprofessionally and there was no excuse. The Colonel continued: “I'm taking you off the flying schedule tomorrow. Dig out your

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oldest flight suit and report to the maintenance hangar at six am. You're going spend the day on the flight line with the troops.”

The next day was one of the longest in my Air Force career. I was up at the crack of dawn and spent the day fuelling jets, inspecting engines and moving 55-gallon drums full of used oil.

By the day's end, I was exhausted. My hands were caked with grease and I smelled as if I'd been dipped in jet fuel.

Yet, despite the physical challenges, the experience was immensely rewarding. It gave me the rare opportunity to walk in the shoes of the wingmen that were a vital part of the 79th Fighter Squadron. I got to know the crew chiefs as people and not just as soldiers. I listened to their complaints, empathised with their frustrations, and grew to appreciate all of the things they did to support the mission.

Like me, they had to deploy to remote locations such as Saudi Arabia, sleep in crowded tents and eat lousy food. They were the ones who conducted the detailed inspections and worked tirelessly behind the scenes to make sure the F-16s were safe to fly. Without them, there would be no mission. And, despite what I thought I knew about their job, this experience gave me a clear

vision of what *really* went into giving me a mission-ready jet.

That day on the flight line, I also learned how much the crew chiefs respected the fighter pilots. They looked up to, and admired, us. But I lost that respect from Airman Tyler because of how I had treated him. One thing was certain: he no longer trusted me. I went from being a wingman to a wing nut!

Even though I thought I knew a ton about leadership and communication, the fact was that I truly didn't appreciate the sacrifices the maintenance troops made for the mission. I didn't treat them as partners – as wingmen – and I was wrong.

That day on the flight line changed my perspective forever.

Who's on your flight line?

When was the last time you took a few minutes out of your daily routine to “walk the flight line” and treat your employees and co-workers like wingmen? Are you taking advantage of opportunities to talk with your team and get to know them on a more significant level? Do you appreciate the sacrifices they make in accomplishing the mission?

Are you spending some time with your IT staff to understand the hoops they have to jump through to make sure your website, computers and software are up to speed? Do you walk the factory floor and talk to the quality assurance inspector about her challenges? Have you ever spent a few hours with your channel partners and joined them on a few sales calls?

Walking the flight line takes time and effort. But the results are worth it.

Commanding respect

A few years back, I went on a memorable tour of the federal judicial offices in Atlanta, Georgia, and was escorted by the chief clerk of court, James Hatten. He introduced me to the 15-20 members of his staff and called



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them all by their first names. He knew how long they had been with the organisation and the names of their children. When he approached them, they smiled genuinely. Hatten obviously knew how to walk the flight line.

He later told me that he felt his job was to *serve his staff*, not the other way around. If he was not committed to serving them, how could he expect them to put in the long hours and go the extra mile for him?

True leaders command respect. They don't demand it. Hatten clearly had the respect of his staff because he showed them respect. Unfortunately, Airman Tyler lost respect for me because I didn't show him that I *valued* or *appreciated* him. I failed to check Airman Tyler's six. Checking six is about cross-checking each other's blind spots, providing mission-critical perspective and appreciating each other. It builds loyalty and improves productivity.

But guess what happens when people don't feel that their six is being checked? They check out. They become complacent and detach themselves from the mission. In combat, as well as in business, complacency kills. I simply couldn't afford to have Airman Tyler or *any* of my crew



chiefs check out. After all, they had my life and the success of the mission in their hands.

Get your wingmen in formation

In the fighter pilot world, we have formations composed of several jets. Each formation has a flight lead responsible for leading the mission, but all the jets are manned by fully accountable and focused fighter pilots with specific roles. They work as a team to get the job done and, if one fails to do his job, the whole mission is apt to fail.

But the team doesn't stop there – maintenance crews, intelligence officers, tanker pilots, weather forecasters and many others are also part of the formation. Guess what happens to the mission if just one of them fails to do their job? The whole thing fails!

In the corporate world, people may have well-paid positions and be highly trained but if they haven't emotionally bought into the mission (or the leader), they will become apathetic, complacent and make mistakes. They won't take their training seriously. If your wingmen don't care whether your company or shared endeavour survives in this tough economy, they won't go above and beyond when you really need them to.

William James, the great 19th century psychologist, said that the *desire to be appreciated* is one of the deepest drives in human nature. One study of a number of large corporations revealed that the number one reason people quit their jobs was, as they put it, 'no one appreciated what I did'.

So are *you* appreciating the efforts of your wingmen and treating them like members of a formation? Remember, communication builds connections and, when you connect, you prevent complacency!

Knowing that our contribution is valued gives us fuel to crank our engines to afterburner when the heat is on and trouble comes our way. It gives us the power to thrust forward through change, failure, rejection or challenging times.

You don't have to be a supervisor or a C-level corporate officer to walk the flight line and communicate with your wingmen. Anyone can do it. You just have to extend a hand and connect with people one-to-one.

Flight line checklist

The following is a checklist to help you create the habit of walking your flight line. These activities should be part of your routine whether or not you're in a formal leadership role.

- Determine the ten people you work with who most directly influence the outcome of your job. This is your flight line
- Whenever possible, share a meal with one of these wingmen. Each week, take one person

out to breakfast, lunch or coffee, even if from a department other than your own. Ask them about their families and their passions. Share a little bit about yourself as well. Not only is it a good way to connect informally but it will allow both of you to open up and see each other as people, not just as co-workers

- Schedule an (unannounced) 'squadron tour'. Visit your various offices and randomly (in a way that doesn't put anyone on the spot) interview your wingmen. Ask what their biggest challenges are and how you can help them
- Sit in on a strategy session with your marketing team or a weekly budget update with a project manager. Share best practices with these groups. Ask for suggestions. Be open to change. Step outside your silo. Think outside your cockpit.

Perhaps if I had done more of this type of communicating when I was in the Air Force, I would have been able to connect more with fellow soldiers like Airman Tyler.

Naturally, we all have our bad days and 'wing nut moments'. We're going to say things and act in ways that rub people up the wrong way. But sometimes the best thing to do is say the words that are absolutely essential to building and maintaining wingman relationships. Those words are 'I'm sorry'.

Apologising isn't an easy thing to do and it won't necessarily fix the problem or gain back someone's favour, but it's a start at mending a relationship. It can also do wonders for mending your reputation as well.

Right now you may be saying 'look, Waldo, my wingmen already know me and I know them. They *know* I care'. That may be so but it's important to connect and communicate continuously and not take any relationship for granted (especially with all of the turnover that's going on today).



Relationships need continual nurturing and reconnection. This holds true for your best employees as well as your top customers. The last thing you want is for your best customer to check out because you haven't stayed in touch. Remember, *'lose sight, lose fight'*. You have to walk the flight line of your customers, too!

Communication is an ongoing investment. If you are not staying connected, you'll never know if there's a missile launch – a family tragedy, a personal challenge, a supplier issue or a quality-control problem – or when there is a big win to celebrate.

Relationships are about *relating*. If you don't spend time relating with your team, there *won't be* any relationship.

Are your wingmen passionate about supporting the mission? Do they take their training seriously? Or are they checking out and risking the life of your business? If you don't check your wingmen's

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six, they too may check out. They may become complacent and fail to double-check their paperwork or put in a few more hours to meet a critical deadline. Conversely, if your wingmen feel served and respected by you, they *will* put up with extra work, cost-cutting and all the challenging aspects of today's typical workplace.

Walking the flight line is a core tenet of wingmanship and one of the most essential practices you can adopt in your training

programmes to build trust in your organisation. When you take the time to communicate with, and appreciate, the members of your team and recognise their contributions, you'll transform relationships into partnerships. Not only will you be able to work together more effectively to handle challenges as they arise, but you'll also create more fulfilling interpersonal relationships and add greater meaning to your mission as a leader at work and in your personal life. ■

Lt. Col. Rob "Waldo" Waldman is a decorated, former combat fighter pilot. He is now a leadership speaker and consultant and author of *Never Fly Solo – Lead with Courage, Build Trusting Partnerships, and Reach New Heights in Business*. You can download his Top Gun Motivation mission briefing at www.YourWingman.com