

September 2, 2010

## **Why having a wingman is vital in business**

By Wallace Immen

### **Fighter pilot turned career coach Rob (Waldo) Waldman says executives who fly blind leave themselves and their companies vulnerable to attack**

Flying an F-16 on a strike mission over Serbia in 1999, Rob (Waldo) Waldman was unaware that two surface-to-air missiles were streaking toward his jet, because the rockets were coming from behind. But he eluded death because the pilot in the jet beside him, who was watching his blind spot, yelled on the radio "Break right - now!" and he made an evasive maneuver.

"The real threats come from where we can't see them. That's why we never fly solo. To survive in battle you need wingmen monitoring your moves and communicating about threats. You have to count on their judgment, because if you don't listen and respond immediately, you're dead," said Mr. Waldman, a retired U.S. Air Force lieutenant-colonel, who now is a Georgia-based leadership consultant.

While threats in business may unfold more slowly, the results can be just as fatal. "Without developing a net of trusted wingmen who are looking out for you, and looking out for them in return, you risk being blindsided. Respond too slowly and your career, your sale or even your company is vulnerable to a fatal blow," he said in an interview about his new book *Never Fly Solo: Lead with Courage, Build Trusting Partnerships and Reach New Heights in Business*.

#### **Why do many executives fly solo?**

After I retired from the Air Force 10 years ago, I got an MBA and started consulting with companies. I realized that a lot of executives tend to be lone wolves. My combat experience taught me how essential it is to develop alliances you can count on. But in the business world, a lot of people don't feel comfortable counting on others, asking for advice, or calling mayday when they need help because they think it shows weakness. They're afraid to admit they don't know it all or fear they will just be bugging others by asking for help.

## **Why is a wingman - or wingwoman - essential?**

This isn't about being macho and being "top gun" fearless. Knowing with certainty that there will be someone there for you unconditionally to give you the guidance you need and give instant warning of a threat helps build an enormous sense of confidence, especially now when there are a lot of missiles being launched around us. That's what you need to stay on track and avoid the risk of not taking action when you need to take action.

## **What makes a good wingman?**

Someone who will be totally honest and will give you what you need to hear, not what they think you want to hear and is willing to risk the relationship in order to do what is right. They are not going to judge you but [they will] be objective about both of your best interests. Think of the kind of friends who will take your car keys if they decide you are too drunk to drive. Good wingmen aren't always easy to find. A lot of people today are trying to save face and not ruffle feathers and they are not brutally honest. Ultimately, that means that they're letting down their team and their organization.

## **How do you build that kind of trust?**

To get one, be one. You must embody the same qualities you expect of your wingmen. As the wingmen in your life are watching your back, you must watch theirs, and the more present and helpful you are, the more on-the-spot they will be for you.

It's important for you as an individual to develop the core characteristics of a wingman - to build integrity, commitment, discipline and focus, and prepare before you ask others to watch out for you. When I see you putting in the labour and the time to become a better leader and understand the business better, I am more willing to be there for you.

## **Do you need more than one?**

It's wise to develop a flight crew. I suggest identifying the 10 people you work with who most directly influence the outcomes of your job. And look not just in your organization but outside as well. Find wingmen in your industry, organizations, and [among] acquaintances, and build relationships when times are good so you've got strong backup when the missiles come. Whenever possible, you should connect with these people informally, one on one over a meal or coffee. You want them to know you as a person and not just a co-worker or boss.

Right now you may be saying, "I know my wingmen and they already know me. They know I care." That may be so, but it's important to connect continuously and not take any relationship for granted [especially in tight job markets]. Relationships need continual nurturing and reconnection.

## **What are the worst blind spots?**

There are blind spots you know, such as the tail of your aircraft. But there are other things you may not be noticing in the heat of the moment that a wingman can pick up on.

There is the point where you are task-saturated and at your breaking point. I was once faced with landing my plane without an engine. I had to be at perfect air speed and pitch to stay on a glide path and I only had one shot at landing. I was so focused on all the instruments and the runway, my wingman was essential to check my blind spots and point out damage. I may be thinking things are great, I'm going to make it, but my wingman might say, "You're on fire - you've got to bail out now."

Good wingmen are good communicators. Even when things seem to be going fine, they check in all the time, not only with warnings but also words of encouragement and honest feedback on any changes in your behaviour or performance that may be signs of a potential threat to the mission's success.

One of my best wingman stories is about a time I was late for a flight briefing and was grounded because of it. The squadron leader's name was Psycho, but instead of chewing me out, he came up to me and said, "That's not like you to be late. Is there something going on I can help with?" I hadn't realized I was too stressed out to do a good job and needed to take a break. It's important as a leader or co-worker to walk the flight line and find out what is going on in the lives of those you work with, so you know what's normal and when they may be facing problems that can impact the team.

## **How do you recover when you mess up?**

Integrity is vital to keeping a wingman level of trust, and it's not just about being honest and committed, it is about being willing to admit when you screw up.

Once as a cocky rookie captain, I wanted to take my jet to its limits. My Cessna T-37 trainer was designed for a maximum of 6.6 Gs and I pushed it to seven. For a split second I felt a sense of victory and my first instinct was to reset the G-meter and land as though nothing had happened. But I realized that by going past its limits, I could have caused structural damage to the plane. I thought, what if my brother were to fly the jet tomorrow and I had damaged the plane so it broke apart in flight? I declared an emergency and landed immediately, and faced some pretty harsh discipline.

I've found that when you are courageous enough to accept the consequences when you mess up, people will always forgive you. You are showing you have the courage to do what it right. But people have long memories if you fail to own up. Look what's happened recently to the athletes and politicians who covered up because they were afraid of the consequences. If you don't own up to the small cracks, they become bigger with time and the results can be disastrous.

## **What gives you the right stuff?**

From watching Hollywood movies, you get the impression that being a fighter pilot is all about attitude, but that's not the case. You don't want to fly with the loud, obnoxious hothead; you want a quiet wingman who is always on time, on target and committed. It is a very focused mental game when you are flying in a jet, and when you are on the ground you have to stay calm and fully prepare for missions. Those traits are keys to success in a workplace as well.

*Rob "Waldo" Waldman, **The Wingman**, is the **New York Times** and **Wall Street Journal** bestseller of **Never Fly Solo**. A former combat-decorated fighter pilot with corporate sales experience, he builds team unity within organizations as a high-energy leadership and inspirational speaker. Waldo's been featured on Fox News, CNN, and Success Magazine, and his clients include Aflac, Nokia, Marriott, and Home Depot. To download Waldo's Top Gun Motivation briefing, visit [www.YourWingman.com](http://www.YourWingman.com), e-mail [info@yourwingman.com](mailto:info@yourwingman.com) or call 1-866-925-3616.*