

# Wingman Leadership

How to harness the power of your team to achieve results.

{ BY ROB "WALDO" WALDMAN }



Strapped into the cramped cockpit of my F-16, I nervously wait for the ground controller to clear my formation for takeoff. Soon, we will be hurtling through the night sky a hundred miles into enemy territory. The enemy is waiting. Anti-aircraft artillery and surface-to-air missiles are everywhere.

I run through my pre-flight checklist to ensure I haven't missed any items and then mentally review the flight plan. I've rehearsed this a hundred times and know the maneuvers inside and out. If an emergency happens or the enemy strikes, I'll be ready.

I look down my wing line at the other F-16s in my formation. Yoda, Trigger and Pigpen are the pilots. They are my wingmen, and will back me up and support me on this stressful flight. I will do the same for them. My fear turns to courage, knowing we're one team. I may be flying by myself, but I'm not flying solo.

*Wingman flight, cleared for takeoff!*

I push up the throttle to maximum power and say a quick prayer. My courage turns to confidence. I'm mission ready. I release the brakes and 30,000 pounds of thrust propel me forward.

It's time to perform.

**Mutual Support:** *Wingmen Cross-Check Your Blind Spots*

This exact scenario happened dozens of times during my Air Force career as an F-16 fighter pilot. While every mission was a challenge, the one factor that contributed to my success more than any other was the wingmen I could count on during every flight. In the fighter pilot world, we call this mutual support.

Fighter pilots never fly solo. We always fly as a team because in the heat of battle, where stress and fear are overwhelming, our ability to survive and win is maximized when trust and teamwork are at their highest.

Here's how we do it. Every wingman "checks each other's six o'clock"—the



.....  
**To build unity and develop  
future leaders, you must create  
a strong sense of mutual  
support in your organization.**  
.....

location directly behind us. This is the most vulnerable position and where the enemy normally attacks. When strapped into a jet with barely any room to move, it's impossible to look over our shoulder and cross-check our own six. This is where our wingmen can help because they can often see the threat that we cannot.

Perhaps your business has taken such a priority in your life that you've neglected your nutrition and are not getting enough sleep. Or maybe you're great at presenting your opportunity to a prospect, but have poor attention to detail and follow-up. Maybe you're spending just a little too much time socializing, and aren't as committed

to success as you say you are. You need a wingman—someone you trust and who has your best interests at heart—to coach you through and help keep you on track.

Do you have blind spots that often go unchecked? Are the people on your team serving as your wingmen and checking your six? Are you a wingman for them? This is what



mutual support is all about. Ultimately, what determines the quality of this support is how well you and your wingmen communicate.

**Break Right: Mission-Critical Feedback Leads to Proper Performance**

In my career, I flew several missions where I never saw the missiles that were launched at me. The wingmen who saw the missiles saved me because they were checking my six and then called out "Break right!" to make sure I maneuvered to avoid being hit.

When they called me to act, I never hesitated or doubted their judgment.

Nor did I ever respond, "Are you *sure* I should break right?" or "You break right! I'm too busy!" I always trusted that my wingmen were doing the right thing.

When creating a "check-six culture" of mutual support, being receptive to feedback from our wingmen and then *taking action* based on that feedback is the key. Sometimes, we may not like what we hear. But to truly grow and avoid the missiles of fear, doubt and complacency, we must often set aside our ego.

You as the leader must be courageous enough to call out "break right" to your associates. Sometimes, you may have to tell them something they may not want to hear, but need to hear. There are times when you

need to be brutally honest with your wingmen to make sure they are on the right flight path for success.

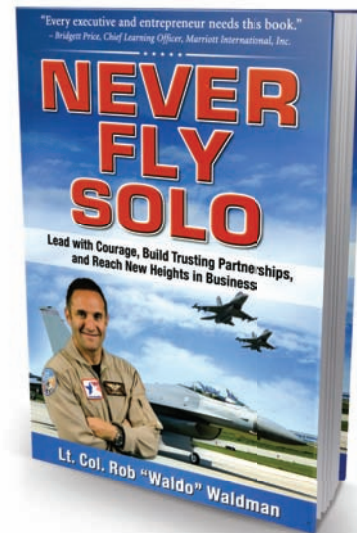
Do you care enough about your wingmen to tell them the brutal truth? The ability to speak honestly with your team requires a high level of trust. To build that trust, you need to appreciate your wingmen.

.....  
**To truly mentor the members of your team, you must stay connected with them.**  
.....

**Walk the Flight Line: See Your Associates as People First**

When I was a young captain, my commander reprimanded me for being disrespectful to a maintenance technician in my squadron. To help me appreciate what the enlisted troops did every day to keep our jets flying, he made me spend a day with them on the flight line. It was humbling; I got to experience firsthand all the hard work they performed behind the scenes to make sure the jets were ready to fly. More important, I





got to know the troops as people and not just as support staff. It made me *appreciate* how critical they were for the mission.

As a leader, make sure you get out of your office and walk the flight line with your associates. Accompany them on a presentation, take them to lunch, and spend a few moments connecting with them as people. Get to know their struggles and fears. Let them know you

.....

**The ability to speak honestly with your team requires a high level of trust.**

.....

care. Not only will this build trust and cohesion within your team, but it will also create a safe environment where they will come to you for help. When your team knows they can come to you for help, it opens the door to the coaching and development they may need from you.

Are you approachable? Does your team come to you for help? Or do they fear sharing their mistakes and challenges? To truly mentor the members of your team, you must stay connected with them.

**Lose Sight, Lose Flight: *Be Connected to Mentor Your Team***

Fighter pilots live—or die—by their ability to stay “visual” with their wingmen. By keeping our wingmen in sight, we are able to observe behaviors and actions, and also pass along the information and lessons that will help them become better pilots. On every mission, we remind the team that we need to stay connected if we want to survive and win.

With our hectic schedules, it’s easy to get overwhelmed and lose sight of our wingmen. To develop your team you need to “see” them and they need to “see” you. One way to do that is to use two powerful concepts from the fighter business: briefings and debriefings.

For example, hold a weekly team briefing where you cover a hot topic and use it to teach them new skills or improve technique. Solicit inputs from the team for the topics and encourage interaction. Additionally, hold a monthly briefing where you get the whole team together and use that venue to get to know each other better.

Debriefings are post-event or post-action reviews done either one-on-one or en masse. Debriefings provide a venue for constructive

(and often humbling) feedback and allow you, as the leader, to deliver individualized coaching and instruction.

Through regular and focused contact with your team, you can provide the information and lessons they need to grow and develop.

**One Team, One Mission**

On every mission I flew with my wingmen, I knew we had a common objective—to successfully accomplish the mission and *all* return home safely. This unified objective transcended any of our personal goals. That’s not to say we didn’t have personal motivating factors, but as long as we focused on the job at hand and on getting the team back safely, we *all* would win. Bottom line: If one of us didn’t make it back, the mission would be a failure.

In a network marketing business, where the missions are always challenging, it’s no different. The success of the group depends on the combined effectiveness of the team. To build unity and develop future leaders, you must create a strong sense of mutual support in your organization. When every wingman on your team is aligned with a common mission objective and supports each other to make it happen, real performance and growth occur.

Remember, winners never fly solo! **StH**

---

*Rob “Waldo” Waldman, The Wingman, is a professional leadership speaker and author of the New York Times best-seller Never Fly Solo. A former decorated fighter pilot, he has been featured on CNN, Fox News and in Harvard Business Review. To download Waldo’s Top Gun Motivation mission briefing, visit [www.YourWingman.com](http://www.YourWingman.com) or e-mail [info@yourwingman.com](mailto:info@yourwingman.com).*