



Workplace Communication

Behaviors Affecting Safety

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My clients consistently find it challenging to handle what they consider “difficult behaviors.” They know deep down that each employee has value and that, 99 percent of the time, this person is an integral and contributing member of the team. There are times, however, when life gets the better of us and we succumb to the thoughts in our head. The mask of unfairness covers our eyes and colors our thinking. The result is behavior that is out of character, irritating, annoying or just doesn’t make sense. Any and all of these behaviors have a direct link to the safety of your operations.

We know accidents or incidents are simply a string of safety slips. In a 2011 accident, an FBO ground crew noticed a small oil puddle below one of the engines. They pointed this out to the pilots, who saw the oil yet did nothing about it. Was this out of character or normal for these pilots? We will never know. What we do know is that the NTSB’s findings determined the unlocked left engine oil filler cap contributed to this tragedy. What began as an apparent minor lapse in action ended with two deaths and seven serious injuries.

I am going to present four common behaviors and ask that you raise your awareness to those around you to identify any of these behaviors or any 'shades' of these behaviors. They may not be exactly as what is here, and they may not be obvious at first glance. Throughout the month, be aware of any of these behaviors. Do you see these in your hangar? Do you see any of these behaviors in yourself? The important thing is to recognize when one of your crew (or colleague, or even a family member) is not behaving as they normally do, or is behaving in such a manner that creates barriers between them and others, or causes others to avoid them. In next month's article, we will offer options on how to handle these behaviors. We will also project consequences for your actions.

Passive Aggressive

We will define passive-aggressive behaviors as those behaviors that are not direct or obvious, yet contradict what the person is verbalizing. Passive-aggressive individuals feel ill at ease expressing their true opinions, possibly because they don't like conflict or because they think theirs would be the lone dissenting voice. Their contrary actions are intentional and their response to any challenge is to deflect the intention of their behavior. ("I was only kidding," "I didn't mean that and you know it," or, "Can't you take a joke?") Passive-aggressive behaviors assure the individual they are still in control of the situation.

In a daily meeting, supervisor Stan is reviewing the schedule and timelines for the aircraft. Everyone updates their status and mechanic Mike is asked to help mechanic Tom. When the meeting ends, Mike complains under his breath about helping Tom. As he walks back to his work station, his face shows a scowl and he is obviously irritated. When Stan asks if anything is wrong, Tom replies, "No, I am just working out a problem in my mind," or something similar.

The "I'm too busy to ..." (could be a subset of Passive Aggressive)

These individuals hoard information, help, their time and even their efforts. Their behaviors can turn passive aggressive (saying they will help another, then procrastinating or finding excuses why they cannot). They can over-react to approaching deadlines and see these requests as ways to derail them and/or make them look bad.

Even though Mike agreed to help Tom, throughout the day Stan sees they are not working together. When asked, Mike apologizes and gives (seemingly valid) reasons why he cannot help Tom at this time, citing his current activities. He responds with "in an hour I should have this finished and be able to help Tom."

"That's just the way he/she is ... he/she doesn't mean anything by it"

This is a general response to one person taking offense to another's words, actions or voice tone. In other words, this person can be classified as a bully, and this response encourages those bully behaviors. The bully may feel insecure or lack confidence in his/her abilities. To compensate for being found out, they turn to intimidation as a solution to keep others at bay. They take pride in knowing they merely need to insert a caustic or sarcastic comment in the conversation to derail it, silence critics and disband the gathering. It's a control issue and a blatant form of emotional manipulation.

As mechanic Molly works on the plane, mechanic Vernon comes up behind her and says, "Aw, come on, you're using that wrench like a girl! Put some muscle into it!" He laughs and walks off, leaving Molly insulted and fuming with anger. When Molly tells supervisor Alan about it, Alan responds, "Oh, yeah, Vernon does that to everyone. Just forget about it. Vernon has always done that. He means it as a compliment."

Mr./Ms. Know it all

The know it alls have a response for every situation. They are similar to Cliff Claven on the TV show "Cheers." They feel compelled to share information and believe they are adding depth to any conversation. At times they will become loud and boisterous, insisting that their process is the correct one. Other times, they will recite facts, figures and proclamations to justify their position. They are often oblivious to the subtle signs of disinterest from others, going so far as following team members in an effort to complete their thought or provide additional facts.

In a team meeting, mechanic Dean explains a procedure he recently used. Mechanic Lionel chimes in with his commentary, interrupting Dean's every other word. Lionel proceeds to explain, in detail, the underlying reasons why the procedure works, the history of it and why other procedures don't work. The meeting runs later than scheduled, and less was accomplished than what was needed. Unfortunately, Lionel continues his sermon onto the hangar floor and throughout the day.

These actions, and managing these behaviors, drains both mental and emotional energy. The FAA recognizes three types of fatigue: physical, mental and emotional. How much time are you spending and how much energy are you expending on either having discussions with these individuals or ignoring their behaviors?

To be sure you are identifying a behavioral pattern, you can ask yourself these questions:

- What is the balcony view of the situation? Imagine standing on a balcony overlooking the activity in your hangar. Contrast that with standing on the hangar floor. Do you see the overall picture, or do you see a few actions (or hear a few words) from a limited number of people?
- Do the individuals involved have a history of conflict or disagreements?
- Could you have misinterpreted their words or their actions? Could you have taken what you heard or saw out of context? Did you hear or see the entire conversation, witness it as you were passing by, or catch just the tail end of the conversation?
- What possible reasons could they have for acting the way they did? Include both the rational and the logical (e.g., they are concentrating to the exclusion of others, they are long-time friends and joke around with each other frequently), along with reasons that don't make sense to you (e.g., they are concerned about their job when there is no indication of layoffs or firings, they think they should know the answer and feel embarrassed because they don't). They might feel threatened by a new hire, feel animosity for someone that just got promoted or a desired project, or feel that another person is either beneath them so they don't have a need to know, or above them and they should already know. Explore all possibilities and even the improbabilities.

Remember: the general approach we take to address any behavior is thinking based. We need to acknowledge the behaviors initially and acknowledge what the individual has on this or her mind. It validates their right to be concerned or worried, to feel frustrated or intimidated.

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