

GO AROUND.

Knowing when the conditions aren't right.

Most of us have been on an airplane, but I imagine very few of us have experienced what pilots call a go-around. That's when a pilot makes the decision not to complete a landing. Instead, they climb back into the air and make another approach. It's not something that happens on every flight, but it's a normal procedure that pilots train for and are prepared to execute when necessary.

Something I find pretty interesting is just how much goes into getting an airplane off the ground and safely back on it. I think most of us have become so comfortable with flying that we don't really consider everything happening behind the scenes. The technology is incredible, but think about everything pilots have to account for. Weather, wind, fuel, aircraft weight, air traffic, speed, altitude, and the constant adjustments they're making throughout the flight. There's a tremendous amount of planning involved in something most of us probably don't give much thought to.

And even with all that preparation, with the runway directly in front of them, a pilot can still decide not to land. Maybe the wind has changed. Maybe another aircraft hasn't cleared the runway. Maybe they're approaching too fast or too high. Whatever the reason, the pilot recognizes that continuing could create unnecessary risk. So they go around. A pilot does this because the objective is never just to land the airplane. It's to land it safely. And if the conditions aren't right, why force a landing simply because you've already committed to the approach?

There's a lot we can learn from that as Company Officers, especially when it comes to having difficult conversations with our people.

As Company Officers, we're going to have difficult conversations. We're going to address performance issues, establish expectations, and hold people accountable. Sometimes those conversations are going to involve lots of friction. But that is part of the position. Avoiding those responsibilities isn't really an option. But I think sometimes we get so focused on having the conversation itself that we lose sight of what we're actually trying to accomplish.

For me, the objective isn't simply to get something off my chest, prove a point, or tell someone they're wrong. I want the conversation to be productive. I want there to be some understanding. Some clear expectations. Some path forward. Ultimately, I want the conversation to accomplish something that benefits all of us involved.

And just like landing an airplane, I think the conditions matter. Think about how often we approach difficult conversations without considering what's going on around us. Maybe we're frustrated. Maybe the firefighter is having a difficult day. Maybe we're trying to address something in the middle of a busy shift with people coming and going. Or maybe our own ego is getting in the way, and we haven't taken enough time to understand the situation ourselves. Just because we're ready to have the conversation doesn't necessarily mean the conditions are right for it to be productive.

This is where I think discretionary time becomes so important. In the fire service, we understand that some situations require immediate action. If there's a safety concern, serious misconduct, or something that requires intervention, we have a responsibility to act. But not every difficult conversation is an emergency. Sometimes we have the ability to slow down, and gather more information. Allow emotions to settle, or reconsider how we're going to approach the conversation.

This can happen in the middle of conversations too. Maybe the firefighter becomes defensive. Maybe we're not communicating what we intended. Maybe we're both getting frustrated, and the conversation is moving further away from what we were trying to accomplish. At some point, I think we have to recognize that continuing to push might actually make things worse. Maybe we need to go around.

I'm not suggesting we ignore problems, and choose not have these conversations. But I do think we need to recognize when our approach isn't working. If we have the discretionary time to make an adjustment, why wouldn't we? There's a difference between being committed to an outcome and being committed to the approach we originally decided to take.

Pilots don't abandon the destination because the first approach didn't work. They recognize that something needs to change before they can safely accomplish what they set out to do. And I think we owe the people we lead that same consideration. We're not always going to get the timing right, and we're certainly not going to communicate everything exactly the way we intended. But we can get better at recognizing when the conditions aren't supporting the outcome we're trying to achieve.

Sometimes, we just need to go around.