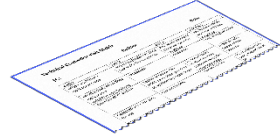


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Art byline: Lisa Turner

Hed: The Technical Counselor Visit: How to Communicate Bad News

Byline: Lisa Turner

Excerpt: “Communicating “bad news” or items that need correcting is one of the toughest jobs a TC has – but is probably the most important. Getting the details right can make the difference between safe flying and normal maintenance and risky flying and troublesome maintenance.”

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In the last article we talked about skills assessment. Getting your builder to consider their weaknesses and how to get more experience is a big step forward in shepherding a successful project through to flight.

Communicating skills gaps to your builder is not easy. In the last article we used a skills assessment form for the builder to fill out that can help you direct them to the discussion of skills they are lacking. The quiz is fun, and makes it easier for the TC to discuss strengths and weakness with the builder.

In this article let’s take this one step further: communicating bad news. This can involve a variety of situations that are uncomfortable for both the technical counselor and the builder. The situation that TCs dread is showing up to a project that is already half done, and most of it is wrong. This is what I call an extreme – a “rescue” situation where the TC is really put on the spot when the builder asks how his workmanship is.

The key to solving this problem is to not get into it in the first place. If you use the Visit Matrix from the beginning, you’ll have an ideal situation where trust and skills are established at the start, and then the communications are not difficult.

But if you’re thrown into a bad situation, here’s how to get through it.

From the beginning. If you discover at the outset that the builder “doesn’t know what they don’t know” and they have a lot of confidence in their skills, then you observe what things are going off the rails and then use the skills quiz to talk about what’s not right. I had a builder who tried to learn riveting at a workshop, but hadn’t mastered it. They thought their work was good, when in fact it was sloppy. Since it was at the beginning of the build, I was able to correct the deficiencies by bringing some material for the builder to practice on. With guidance, they finally “got it.” To communicate the errors, I had them do the riveting and then we talked about each rivet and why it wasn’t top quality. We’d already built up a rapport, and the builder trusted me, so this situation turned out ok.

From the middle. If you show up to a build in the middle or later and find extensive problems, this is where your communications and psychological savvy really come into play. None of us want to hear bad news, but your honesty and expertise can mean that this particular builder doesn't have to suffer an accident that can be prevented.

Ask the builder for permission to share your thoughts on workmanship. Even though they asked you to visit the project, they may not understand what needs to be done to make the work airworthy. If they are not willing to listen to your advice, then you may not be able to help them. Explain why you are bringing up the items you observe – it's all about having a successful build and getting in the air safely.

In nearly all situations, once you paint the safety picture and the importance of quality and detail in getting the craft flying, the builder will understand the importance of listening to your advice. Then it's a matter of explaining what things need more work and why. Showing how something is done, or having samples of work can help.

It's always helpful to balance the bad news with some good news if you can. Find the work that was done well and point it out. Give kudos and a pat on the back for work progress and fortitude. While as human beings we always seem to give more weight to the bad things, the good things will help us accept them.

Communicating "bad news" or items that need correcting is one of the toughest jobs a TC has – but is probably the most important. Getting the details right can make the difference between safe flying and normal maintenance and risky flying and troublesome maintenance.