

Integrity First: Living the Honor Code

Sometimes the toughest job of a Top Gun Leader is disciplining your employees when they mess up. Will you stand up and take action?

by Waldo Waldman

Integrity First. It's core value #1 of the U.S. Air Force—embraced by our leadership, taught in our training programs, and a symbol of the commitment and character of the men and women serving our country.

I learned a valuable lesson about the true meaning of integrity only after serving several years in the Air Force. It wasn't on a combat mission flying an F-16. It was during a training sortie I flew as a brand-new instructor pilot, and I learned it flying solo.

It was a rare occasion for an instructor pilot to get to fly solo, but this was my lucky day and I was going to make the most of it. I had finished my maneuvers in the military operating area (MOA) and was performing my last touch and go's in the pattern before landing. Feeling really fired up, I pushed the throttles to full power, gained airspeed, and decided to see how many G's I could "pull" in the pattern. The structural G-limit on the rugged and reliable Cessna T-37B twin engine jet trainer was 6.67 G's, and I was about to see how close I could come to hitting the limit. You see, I was doing what we call in the Air Force "hot doggin' it." In other words, I was asking for trouble.

I accelerated to 225 knots, banked it into 90 degrees, and pulled. 5.7 G's. One more time, 6.4 G's . . . again . . . 6.8 G's! I looked down and did a double take. "Wow," I thought to myself, "I just over-G'd the jet!" My first instinct was to reach over and punch off the G-meter (zero out the meter, sort of like setting an odometer back to zero). After all, I had seen other, more experienced pilots do it before, and,



besides, the T-37 was tough as nails. What was .127 G's going to do to the jet?

I was faced with a difficult choice: zero out the G-meter and act like nothing had happened, or immediately land this damaged jet, admit my mistake, and accept the

had to present a briefing to the squadron on the maintenance procedure to inspect the jet for structural damage. The cost of this inspection was \$25K of our taxpayers' hard-earned money, and the plane (a critical training resource for our squadron)

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consequences. I cringed as I pondered what my fellow wingmen would think of me. And then I thought to myself, what if my twin brother were to fly that jet tomorrow and the wing fell off? My choice became instantly clear.

My commander wasn't pleased, to say the least. My actions were irresponsible and showed a lack of discipline. Not only was I severely reprimanded; I was grounded from flying for two weeks and

would also be grounded for two weeks. Fortunately, the inspection revealed no damage to the aircraft. Nonetheless, I had cost my fellow wingmen valuable training.

Actions Have Consequences

Have you ever been in a situation where your integrity was tested? Have you ever been given a choice where admitting (or not admitting) a mistake would affect your reputation, the safety of others, and even

your career? There are several lessons that can be drawn from my experience:

■ *Your integrity (or lack thereof) affects everyone.* For me, failure to turn myself in and admit my mistake could have caused a major accident or a potential loss of life. For you, it can be a safety accident, a lost customer, and also a lost life. Your actions have reach outside of your cockpit.

■ *Integrity should not be a choice.* It should be instinctual, and we should

up. Will you stand up and take action? If you don't, then who will?

The way you can help to create an environment where your wingmen will live and work with integrity and admit their mistakes is when you honor your integrity and have the courage to admit your mistakes. This is the foundation of creating a culture of courage. Integrity is contagious, and it has to start from the top down. Moreover, when you shift the focus off yourself and, instead, focus on your

foundation of integrity. It gives you the thrust to make the correct choice and do what is right, despite the consequences. What's more, you will be able to sleep better at night. ■

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Will you make mistakes on the job? Of course. But will you have the courage to confront others and hold them accountable?

always strive to do the right thing, no matter what the cost. And it doesn't start and end at work: Integrity should be honored 24 hours a day. Your wingmen are watching you.

■ *Rank has its responsibilities, as well as its privileges.* As an officer in the Air Force, I had (and still have) a responsibility to comply with the flying regulations and standards of my squadron. It's called being a professional. As an employee with your company, you, too, must be responsible to comply with its regulations and standards of behavior.

When leading your wingmen on the factory floor, at a hospital, or in the office, you can't afford to breach your integrity, and you also can't make exceptions for others. The costs are too high and can be measured in injuries, worker's compensation claims, lost man-hours, and your reputation. OSHA regulations, safety/patient care procedures, and operating instructions exist for a reason: They keep people safe, prevent accidents, and help save money for your company by reducing operating costs.

Will you make mistakes on the job? Of course. Will you also bear witness to others making mistakes? Absolutely. But will you have the courage to confront them and hold them accountable, or will you be more concerned with being "a nice guy" who doesn't ruffle feathers? Sometimes the toughest job of a Top Gun Leader is disciplining your employees when they mess

mission and how your actions affect your co-workers and customers, you become a more trusting wingman.

Courage builds character. It is the

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