



Business author, leadership speaker and Air Force fighter pilot Lt. Col. Rob "Waldo" Waldman is in the cockpit with his wingman flying alongside. Wingmen are critical to one's business, he says.

## Biz Voice

# Walking the walk on the flight line

**Your 'wingmen' should get your appreciation.**

If they feel served and respected, they'll put up with changes, workload.

By **Rob 'Waldo' Waldman**  
For the **AJC**

It's rare for the commander to meet you at your jet after a training mission. So when I saw my lieutenant colonel approaching my F-16, I knew something was up.

"Waldo, we need to talk," he said as I climbed down the ladder from the cockpit.

"Yes, sir," I replied, and waited, a little uneasily, for what was coming next. Had I messed up? Was something wrong at home?

"Waldo, Airman Tyler told me about what happened before you took off this afternoon." His tone was serious.

Just a few hours earlier, I had reprimanded my 22-year-old crew chief for shorting my jet

"Every executive and entrepreneur needs this book."  
—Bridget Price, Chief Learning Officer, Marmon International, Inc.

## NEVER FLY SOLO

Lead with Courage, Build Trusting Partnerships  
and Reach New Heights in Business



Lt. Col. Rob "Waldo" Waldman

F-16s were safe to fly.

Without them, the mission wouldn't happen.

And despite what I thought I knew about their job, the experience painted a clear picture of what really went into giving me a jet that was "MR"—mission-ready.

Before this experience, I was

Jim clearly had the respect of his staff because he showed them respect.

Unfortunately, Airman Tyler lost respect for me because I didn't show him that I valued or appreciated him. I turned from a wingman to a wing nut because I failed to check Airman Tyler's six.

## Checking six

Checking six is about cross checking your wingman's blind spots and providing mission critical perspective.

It's also about appreciation and respect. When people don't feel that their six is being checked, they check out.

They become complacent and detach themselves from the mission. I couldn't afford to have Airman Tyler (or any of my crew chiefs) check out. After all, they had my life and the success of the mission in their hands.

Are your wingmen giving 100 percent effort to support the mission, or are they checking out and risking the life of your business? If you don't check your wingmen's six, they too may check out. When you get com



reprimanded my 22-year-old crew chief for shorting my jet 500 pounds of fuel. Not a huge amount, but enough to cut my training mission short. Although atypical, sometimes the wing tanks won't fill up completely, and there is nothing the crew chief can do. I was frustrated and needlessly insulted the young crew chief for being complacent.

"Waldo, do you realize how hard our troops work so we can have mission-ready jets to fly?" He continued, "I'm taking you off the flying schedule tomorrow. Dig out your oldest flight suit and report to the maintenance hangar at 6 a.m. You're going spend the day on the flight line with the troops."

The next day was one of the longest in my Air Force career. I was up at dawn and spent the day fueling jets, inspecting engines, and moving 55-gallon oil drums. By the day's end, I was exhausted. My hands were caked with grease and I smelled as if I'd been dipped in jet fuel.

Despite the negatives, the experience was still rewarding. It gave me the rare opportunity to walk in the shoes of some of the wingmen who were vital to the mission of my squadron. I got to know the crew chiefs as people instead of soldiers.

I listened to their complaints, empathized with their frustrations, and grew to appreciate the things they did to make the mission happen. Like me, they had to deploy to remote locations, work long hours, and deal with demanding supervisors.

They were the ones who performed the exhausting labor behind the scenes to make sure the

Before this experience, I was basically ignorant to the real efforts of the maintenance troops. I truly didn't appreciate their sacrifices nor did I treat them as wingmen. I was wrong.

A day on the flight line changed my perspective forever.

## Who's on your flight line?

Connecting with your wingmen is critical as a leader when it comes to accomplishing the mission. When was the last time you took a few minutes out of your routine to "walk the flight line" and connect with your employees and co-workers?

Are you taking advantage of opportunities to get to know them on a deeper level, and do you appreciate the sacrifices they make in accomplishing the mission?

A few years ago, I went on a memorable tour of the federal judicial offices in Atlanta and was escorted by the chief clerk of court, James Hatten.

He introduced me to the 15 members of his staff and called them by their first name.

But he also knew how long they had been with the organization, their current projects, and the names of their children. When he approached them, they smiled. Jim knew how to walk the flight line.

He later told me that his job was to serve his staff, and not the other way around. If he wasn't committed to serving them, then how could he expect them to put in the long hours and go the extra mile for him?

True leaders command respect. They don't demand it.

ness: If you don't check your wingmen's six, they too may check out. They may get complacent and fail to double check their paper work, extend extra efforts in their customer service, or put in a few more hours to meet a critical deadline.

Conversely, if your wingmen feel served and respected by you, they will put up with the extra work, massive change, and cost-cutting that is common in today's workplace.

So, spend some time with your IT staff to see what their day looks like. Walk the factory floor and talk to the quality assurance inspector about the challenges she may be facing. Spend a day with your channel partners and join them on a few sales calls.

Walking the flight line is a core tenet of wingmanship and an indispensable practice you should adopt to build trust as a leader. It's a great way to let your wingmen know they aren't flying solo with you on their wing. When you take the time to appreciate your organization's wingmen, you'll transform relationships into partnerships.

Not only will you be able to work together more effectively to handle challenges as they arise, but you'll also create more fulfilling interpersonal relationships and add greater meaning to your mission as a leader at work.

Lt. Col. Rob "Waldo" Waldman is the author of "Never Fly Solo: Lead with Courage, Build Trusting Relationships and Reach New Heights in Business." He is a decorated former U.S. Air Force fighter pilot, sales manager, and professional leadership speaker.