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How to Develop Safety Intervention Strategies

We discuss safety regularly in the aviation industry. We promote safer operations, discuss previous accidents, and help pilots make self-evaluative decisions intended to make them safer pilots. But what is our communal role? Do we as pilots have a greater responsibility to intervene when we see a fellow pilot about to do something that might affect safety?

A Cause to Pause

Not long ago I sat in a meeting of senior aviation leaders and one of them asked the question, "How many of you have known a pilot who died in a general aviation aircraft?" About half of those in the room raised their hands. He followed with, "How many of you know a general aviation pilot who you think will kill himself in an aircraft?" Every hand went up.

This result gave me pause and I sincerely hope you had a similar reaction. If we all know a pilot who is likely to kill himself in a general aviation aircraft, what can we do to stop it?

If you think the answer is "nothing," then let's change the scenario. Imagine you are a bartender. The patron at the end of the bar who has had a few too many drinks tonight picks up his keys and heads to the parking lot to drive home. Do you stop him? Most of us — all of us, I hope — would not hesitate to say yes, because we all know too much about the dangers of drinking and driving.

Now let's consider some comparable aviation scenarios:

- Imagine that you are an FBO owner. Standing before you is a 250-hour pilot who hasn't flown in more than two months. He wants to rent your Cirrus on a day when the ceiling is 500 feet overcast and the surface temperature is 34 degrees Fahrenheit. Would you agree that handing over the keys is tantamount to letting a drunk driver get behind the wheel?
- What if you see your hangar neighbor rapidly preparing the plane to depart just ahead of a major squall line of thunderstorms? Would you say something, or let him go? What if he tells you he knows he can get ahead of the storm, but you know better?

How far would you go to stop him? Physical restraint? Calling the FAA? What is our role in the oversight of a fellow pilot's decision to fly in weather conditions when we have questions about his or

her ability to handle them? If we see someone going flying in an aircraft under conditions that have a crosswind component greater than we think they should fly in, do we confront them? When weather minimums are below the prescribed approach minimums for the airport, if icing potential exists, or if there are other hazards, what should we do? What if we overhear that the pilot is going to take the aircraft to an airport with a runway shorter than we think the individual's skills can handle? Where does the line get drawn, or does it get drawn at all?

You probably agree, at least in principle, that almost anything is better than letting a fellow aviator die. As is regularly demonstrated on the *What Would You Do?* television show, though, we are all conditioned by culture to live and let live — to mind our own business. I would argue, however, that those of us who are pilots — and especially those who have instructor qualifications — have a duty to overcome such inhibitions when we see a fellow pilot taking a course of action likely to endanger someone's life. We are a community, and we need to help each other.

While it is correct that pilots should be able to make their own decisions for flight safety, it doesn't mean that they can't seek help from others. The key is to remember that to some extent, we are all student pilots who have more to learn, often from one another. So let's look at some concepts that could help you frame the conversations — or safety interventions — you might have in your role as your fellow pilots' keeper.

Going Above and Beyond

I can't think of any FBO whose aircraft rental agreement doesn't include operational guidelines and limitations. There may not be formal guidelines and limitations for the use of privately-owned aircraft, but there's no reason that you can't suggest the development of a "rental" agreement with appropriately conservative provisions. If you need a model document to serve as the baseline, get one from the nearest FBO. Or, go online to find a sample, since most of today's FBOs make rental agreements available online.

Now consider the pilot checkout. There can be a real difference between "current" by FAA minimums, and being "proficient" or "experienced enough" to fly in some conditions. Many times the lines between these considerations are very subjective and vary widely between individuals. Most FBOs therefore have minimum requirements for pilot qualifications (e.g., certificates and ratings), experience (e.g., flight time), and currency (e.g., time acquired in the last 90 days). FBOs, flight schools, and collegiate or academy flight programs all have specific guidelines to help determine whether the customer is qualified and current for the flight operation he or she proposes to make. In

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Photo by Adrian Eichhorn

Photo by James Williams

turn, these guidelines give the FBO or school a solid basis to intervene when a customer proposes to take an aircraft into conditions that he or she may not be trained for, proficient in, or safe enough to handle.

Crucial Conversations

How do these practices apply to you as an individual pilot or instructor who sees an owner/operator navigating into conditions that may be beyond their skills or their aircraft's capability? Written personal minimums for aircraft operation and pilot qualification and currency correspond to FBO rental and checkout agreements. You might therefore start the conversation by asking a pilot in peril — someone about to embark on a poor aeronautical decision — how the proposed flight aligns with his or her personal minimums. Even a blank stare provides an opportunity for a safety intervention that might save lives.

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An important point to make is that it isn't just about what is "legal" in terms of the CFRs, or what "meets the minimum" for insurance purposes. As good aviation citizens, we need to think about what is safe. We need to engage — courteously, but actively — fellow pilots about risky flight operations.

Let me close with a story that helped shape my views on this topic. I vividly recall a soggy, low-overcast winter day when I owned an FBO. We had a customer who wanted to use one of our aircraft. It was a day that experienced pilots recognized as having a strong likelihood of icing. One of our instructors happened to be at the airport when the customer arrived. The instructor talked with the would-be renter and declined to dispatch the aircraft due to the adverse weather conditions. At another airport nearby, there wasn't an instructor or other pilot willing to say no to a different renter. Our customer was unhappy, but alive to fly another day. Do I have to tell you what happened to the other FBO's customer?

It's not easy to overcome our ingrained "mind your own business" approach, but when it comes to aviation safety and to cutting the appalling GA accident rate, I think it is essential. As a community, and as individual pilots and instructors, safety demands that we change our mindset to one of courteous, proactive concern for the welfare of our fellow aviators. I hope we can come to the day when we can have these discussions with each other, welcome others to question us, and be willing to question others.

One thing is for certain. Never again do I want to sit at an airport, watch a plane fly off to the horizon and think that's probably the last time I will see that person alive. I am my fellow pilots' keeper — and so are you.

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