



Reasonable Voice

Checklists Valuable for Flying and Life

It's 4:15 am and I am having trouble sleeping. Nearly every morning I am scheduled to fly I wake up early, full of anticipation, anxiety, and excitement. It's been that way ever since I began this flight journey a few years ago. I hope the feeling never goes away.

As an older first-time pilot, I sometimes wonder if I'm alone with this ceaseless excitement; however the majority of my pilot and instructor friends tell me that it's nothing more than a sign of the addiction that comes from the passion to be in the sky. And I've got it bad.

As I've gone through this journey, I've been amazed at the continued parallels I find with being a private pilot and running a business. As a consultant who works with CEOs and legal counsel on highly-sensitive matters, and as a college professor of ethics and crisis communications, I've come to realize that if I'm not a bit anxious with each project or class that I get complacent and far less effective. The key is to be prepared and execute with confidence, while constantly being alert for the unexpected.

It all depends on the checklist.

In the cockpit, the checklist includes dozens of items that pilots need to perform in the aircraft to assure a safe and successful conclusion to every flight. But there are key checklists that are needed by successful business leaders, too. Plans for strategy, budgets, marketing and operation enable us to think ahead and execute in an objective and controlled manner; and to utilize proven formulas and decision matrices as we go along. They help keep us on track and focused. Without them, a successful year in our business is really just dumb luck.

And that attention to the checklist is needed right up until the end of a new business cycle, fiscal year, or even lifespan of a business. It's no different than performing a stabilized approach to each landing. Establish the correct airspeed and altitude at the key position, employ flaps and small adjustments to pitch and power at the remaining downwind, base and final legs to continue a controlled descent, touch down at a certain speed, do a gentle flare and maintain the centerline as you brake. Sounds easy, but it's harder to do with any kind of consistency.

It takes practice.

And whether in business or in the cockpit, it's easy to slip into complacency. Even with all that excitement and anxiety. I try to remember to make each flight a perfect flight, and to constantly be aware of safety. Yet, despite this intent on preparation, I am surprised when I somehow manage to forget to set the brake during run-up, keep track of timing for fuel tank switches, or land without the fuel pump on. These kinds of things don't happen during every flight, but they do happen. That's why the checklist is so important. Fortunately, I haven't tried to taxi with the wheel chocks still in place, but I hear it happens.

There is a reason why your flight instructor drills into your head over and over that you need to have your checklist handy and refer to it often. We forget things. We get talking or thinking or looking, and lose track of the things we need to do now because we are moving at 2 miles or more a minute and we'll be "there" without having thought about things "here."

This same approach applies in business. You are moving fast and need to think ahead to be sure you plan now and take the steps you need to be successful leader later. Be sure you utilize a system to think through difficult and challenging decisions, and that you have a checklist to make sure you're not only set on your business strategy and operational goals, but also aware of your audiences, clear on your messages, sensitive to the timing, and prepared for any unexpected scenarios. And get together with a good "flight instructor" (or business mentor) on occasion, too. They will challenge you and keep you safe.

Have a good flight.

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July 2015