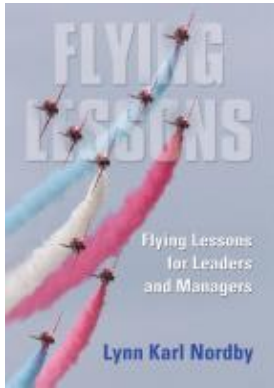




FLYING LESSONS

Flying Lessons
for Leaders
and Managers

Lynn Karl Nordby



Flying Lessons for Leaders and Managers is an engaging series of essays based on the author Lynn Nordby's nearly 40 years of public service. The author uses his gift for storytelling and humor and his own experience and observations from coming of age in the home of his city manager father to give anyone in a leadership or management position in the public or private sector lessons to take away that will help make their organizations fly.

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First Edition

Flying Lessons for Leaders and Managers

I've always been fascinated by powered flight. From the earliest days of aviation to the heroes who pushed the boundaries of technology or braved combat high above the earth, it has been a lifelong interest. I think every manager can use some “flying lessons” on the ground or in the air.

Fly the Plane

A friend of mine, a commercial airline pilot, described the circumstances of an airliner crash from a National Transportation Safety Board accident report. The investigation revealed that during the landing approach the entire cockpit crew had become fixated on a warning light that seemed to be on for no apparent reason. The aircraft had been set on autopilot at a fixed rate of descent and flew itself into the ground while both the pilot and co-pilot were distracted.

The lesson: somebody has to remember that their job is to “fly the plane.” Even the most flat, participatory organizations ultimately have someone who has to make the final decision.

A continual search for more and better information can result in the “Paralysis of Analysis,” overshooting the optimum point of decision making and resulting in a less desirable outcome. If you’re in charge, you can’t be distracted by operational details to the point of failing to lead. You need to understand what’s going on around you and contribute where you can, but don’t lose sight of the overall situation. Maintain situational awareness.

Set Priorities

The late U.S. Air Force Brigadier General Robin Olds, a World War II and Viet Nam “ace” fighter pilot, described what it was like in the cockpit of a jet fighter on a combat mission:

Your senses were being assaulted by sights and sounds conveying information vital to your status, both offensively and defensively. Multiple audio signals told you your missile’s radar was alert and whether your enemy’s radar was trying to track you. At the same time, your eyes had to scan your instruments and the air and ground. Suddenly, surface to air missiles the size of telephone poles could be seen rising at supersonic speed toward you. Instinctively, you wanted to start weaving, hoping

they would all miss. But, the best way to avoid them was to systematically pick the most threatening one, dodge it, and then dodge the next one, and so on.

The lesson: set priorities, whether it's a threat you're dealing with or a project to manage. Avoid multi-tasking. Even though we all try to do many things simultaneously, every study of multi-tasking says it only makes us think that we're being more efficient. The fact is it's an illusion. Avoid being "shot down" by working from priorities you've set for yourself.

Don't Panic

In *The Right Stuff*, Tom Wolfe described the calm nature of the pilots who "pushed the envelope" in aviation. Flying untested aircraft that were often at the bleeding edge of technology, they were responsible for monitoring everything going on around them and being able to describe it by radio and in writing without benefit of the sophisticated digital equipment of today. When things went wrong, as they often did, only their systematic reporting provided clues for fixing the problem and for advancing the frontier. Wolfe described Chuck Yeager, the first man to break the sound barrier, as the archetype with his mellifluous southern drawl never

sounding stressed, even when things around him were not going according to plan.

The lesson: as a leader, others will look to you to exhibit leadership qualities. In a crisis, your attitude alone can have a positive influence on those around you if you remain calm. This calmness also makes it easier to set the priorities necessary to organize the response to the situation.

Instincts Are Good—Training Is Better

Early aviation pioneers didn't have the benefit of instruments for flying at night or in bad weather; even an unexpected cloud bank could prove fatal. Relying on instincts and senses alone, many pilots died when they couldn't see. Instinct may serve as an early warning radar that something is wrong, but it doesn't necessarily tell you what to do. Training can. One city attorney I worked with for many years had been a naval aviator during the Viet Nam War. He related that, during pilot training, the seemingly petty requirement about maintaining your footlocker in the barracks didn't sink in until later when you were sitting on the aircraft carrier catapult. Then you realized that it wasn't about how you rolled your socks, it was about attention to detail.

The lesson: often your instincts will tell you when something “just isn’t right.” That’s fine; but how do you know what to do? Whether it’s an ethical question or a technical issue, you need training to know what to do about it. Merely reacting instinctively can make a bad situation worse. Training is available from many sources, often at no cost, through professional associations, risk management organizations, your agency’s insurance carrier, online, or through the resources of MRSC. Through self-evaluation, you can identify areas where you may want additional training, and then look for it.

Do You Feel Lucky?

Pilots will probably tell you that in spite of all the training and experience, sometimes you’re just plain lucky.

I wanted to reorganize my staff into what I believed would be much better alignment, making the best use of their abilities and reducing the number who directly reported to me. Unfortunately, among other things, it would require the demotion of one long-time, loyal, and capable manager. I didn’t know how she would react, and I expected some resistance, or at best, hurt feelings. On the morning I’d decided to explain the plan to the staff, I found a letter on my desk from the affected manager announcing her decision to

retire. There was no way she could have been aware of what I was planning. It was simply good fortune that allowed me to announce that with her retirement I would be making several changes in our organizational structure. Because I was prepared, I could capitalize on the opportunity without causing the pain I wished to avoid.

The lesson: be prepared. Even with a “Plan A” and a “Plan B,” the unexpected may happen. If you’re lucky, and it’s a positive turn of events, so much the better. If not, you’ve got a better chance at organizational survival.

Perhaps these flying lessons can help you develop some of “the right stuff” for leadership.

Getting What You Want Through Foresight and Creativity: Part 1

You can't always get what you want . . . but I have found that sometimes you can, by using a little foresight and creativity.

Trees from Concrete

When I was city administrator, my city received some Federal Block Grant funds to extend sidewalks across a former railroad right-of-way. The intention was to improve pedestrian access and safety and encourage new development along a state highway running through town. We matched the Block Grant with our own funds from various sources to extend the project several additional blocks. We had no funds to include street trees in the project, but I asked the contractor to include square concrete sections, slightly thinner than the rest of the sidewalk, every thirty feet along the curb. These squares could be easily knocked out if we got the opportunity to plant trees at some later date.

Within a few weeks, I got a call from the Chamber of Commerce president asking what the “little squares” in the new sidewalk were for. When I told her, she said, “I thought so. Let me work on it.”

She soon called to say that she had been seeking donated trees. Through her public-spirited efforts and others in the community, dozens of flowering cherry trees were donated, a local contractor provided the topsoil, the power company used a power pole auger to dig the holes, and volunteers from the Chamber of Commerce and Rotary Club planted the trees. All I had to do was have the city crew break out the “knock-outs” and cut a few more holes in some older sidewalks downtown.

On a single Saturday morning, the volunteers planted dozens of little cherry trees that have now grown and beautified the community for more than twenty years—all from just a few “knock-outs” put in the concrete when we had the chance.

The Fighting Seabees

On another occasion, the city received a grant for a community/senior center. The grant barely covered the purchase of a vacant building with a little left over for vinyl flooring and a small kitchen just to get the center started.

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However, the city retained an architectural firm to prepare a long-range plan for more extensive renovations as soon as funds became available.

The young associate assigned to the project was very enthusiastic and developed a simple but pleasing plan. He mentioned that he was in the Naval Reserve, using his professional skills in a construction battalion (Seabee) unit. Sometimes they needed small indoor projects during the winter. He suggested I call his commanding officer.

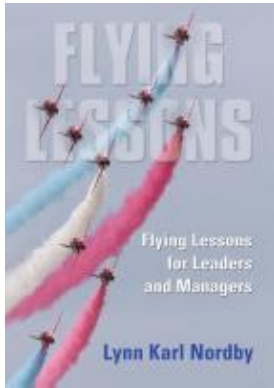
I followed up as he suggested, and learned that they were looking for something right then. All I needed was a release from the unions that might otherwise have been involved in the project. This turned out to be surprisingly easy.

The end result was that we got all the wiring, plumbing, and framing (and most of the sheetrock) done by the Seabees for just the cost of materials. We were able to complete the project and provide a much more complete and functional community/senior center than we thought would be possible when we began the project.

Sometimes you need foresight and creativity to set up an opportunity; sometimes you need to take advantage of an opportunity presented to you. Either way, be the facilitator.

Lynn Nordby

Great satisfaction in public service comes from seeing what foresight and creativity can do for your community.



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