

I grew up around airplanes and even flew a bit myself. The business of flying is rife with life lessons and especially leadership lessons. So when colleague and fellow blogger Andrew Wargo offered to do a guest column on leadership and piloting, we were quick to seize the offer. We hope you enjoy his work as much as we do. – Wendi

Pilot Your Way to Success:

15 Leadership Lessons from Flight Training

By Guest Writer: Andrew Wargo



Like flying an airplane, leading an organization can be exhilarating, terrifying, and rewarding all at the same time. And many of the lessons for successful piloting well apply to leadership. Doing so won't guarantee success, but it certainly helps. Here are fifteen of those lessons, and in some cases the analogous leadership application. However, in most cases, I intentionally leave the connection open to creative interpretation, so you can apply the lesson to your unique situation.

1. **Understand the tools at your disposal.** From the flight planning and the pre-flight weather check, to unerring familiarity with the plane and the airports you will fly between, you must understand the purpose, strengths, and weaknesses of each. Misunderstand them, or use them incorrectly, and disaster can occur.
2. **Know the prevailing environmental conditions.** What's the weather like where you're departing, arriving, and in between? Is it likely to change? Are you qualified to fly in all of those conditions? Are you competent enough to say you shouldn't fly in that type of weather? Know your operating environment and the capabilities of your plane, as well as yourself. And make sound decisions that will increase the likelihood of success.
3. **File a flight plan.** Like setting goals, a flight plan tells people what you plan to do, and when to worry if things go awry. It also helps prevent conflict with other related flight plans. The stakeholders in your organization – employees, shareholders, and clients – will appreciate knowing where you plan to go and how you intend to get there.
4. **Use a pre-flight checklist.** Really. If a successful arrival really matters, you don't need to go anywhere in such a hurry that you skip the pre-flight check. And the routine of a checklist will ensure you don't forget



something critical if you do end up distracted by other events. Planning for strategic initiatives, critical presentations, or important meetings is like planning to fly. They will benefit from the calming, centering routine of a pre-flight check. And you'll lessen the likelihood of missing something important.

5. **Declare your intentions to the air traffic controller and other aircraft.** Don't taxi your aircraft to an active runway without declaring your intentions, and requesting clearance, if appropriate. When you're piloting what is basically a flying fuel tank, it's life threatening not to coordinate with other pilots and airport officials. Likewise, in your organization, synchronizing your efforts with your peers and superiors can be critical to success. Don't head off on your own without knowing where the traffic around you is headed and where you are in relation to it.
6. **Steer with the right controls.** Determination alone will not turn an aircraft (or a boat, or an organization, for that matter). You have to make sure you're using the right controls and at the right time. For example, if you're taxiing an aircraft without a steerable nose wheel, you can't just use the obvious "steering wheel" in front of your chest – you'll also need to use the rudder pedals in careful coordination. Learn what actions make things happen in the right way and practice until it's second nature.
7. **Ensure clear airspace.** You're responsible for ensuring your actions don't endanger other aircraft and your own. And you're responsible for warning others about dangers they may be unaware of.
8. **Take off using full throttle.** Attempting a takeoff at taxi speed will result in you driving off the end of the runway. And attempting a takeoff at 80% of maximum takeoff power will result in you running off the end of the runway even faster. Full throttle is required to ensure sufficient speed to generate lift at the right time. If you're going to commit to launching an aircraft, a project, or a product, have the vision to apply the required resources.
9. **Abort the takeoff when necessary.** Ending a takeoff rather than proceeding at undue risk is not a failure. It is a prudent safety decision based on instinct, training, and observation that often prevents disaster. I'm reminded of a time when, after commencing a full-power takeoff roll and nearing takeoff speed, my flight instructor told me to abort the takeoff due to wildlife running near the runway. Rather than debate whether my trusted instructor was being overly cautious, I immediately reduced engine power and taxied the aircraft off of the active runway. Could I have taken off safely? Perhaps. But the wildlife did veer directly onto my original takeoff path. My flight instructor and I had a productive discussion about why we each made the choices we did, and then we re-entered the takeoff queue to spend some very nice time in the air. A good leader knows when to abort an effort because the risks are too high. By avoiding a potentially fatal crash, you have the opportunity to try again.



10. **Select, and maintain focus on, your frame of reference.** You cannot safely taxi, navigate in flight, or land an aircraft by looking at a spot just in front of the cockpit window. You will get lost at best, and most likely crash. You can't make leadership decisions by focusing solely on what's under your nose. Look in front of you and to the sides. Maintain awareness of what's behind you. Always remain aware of the frame of reference you've chosen. And periodically reevaluate whether it's the right one.
11. **Respect the approved traffic pattern.** There is a prescribed traffic pattern at every airport. There is no "default" pattern that applies to all. Be sure you know what applies where you plan to fly. Everyone else will expect planes to take off, land, enter, and exit the pattern according to its rules. Failure to know this information will result in confusion for you and other pilots at best, and a collision at worst. There's a traffic pattern in organizations, too. There's room for different styles, just as there are allowances for different types of aircraft and their flight priorities. But when you enter, if you ignore the standing protocol – such as the way decisions are made, your ability to maneuver later or land safely might be very limited.
12. **Learn to manage multiple tasks.** You cannot fly an aircraft without multi-tasking – from constantly scanning your instruments to responding to changing conditions. There can be a lot going on at any point in time. Similarly, you cannot be a successful leader if you can't deal with issues as they crop up. You don't have the luxury of finishing the task you're working on before addressing urgent problems. At the very least, you need to quickly assign a priority level and immediate actions.
13. **Be prepared for the unexpected.** It happens all the time. Things rarely go as planned. In fact, the unexpected should be expected. By planning ahead, however, you can avoid being stunned into paralysis. You certainly can't envision every unexpected condition, but many can be anticipated, and many others can be effectively addressed if plans are made – and practiced – in advance to address deviation from expected performance.
14. **Know how to get where you're going.** This, too, should go without saying. But, plenty of inexperienced or harried pilots have lost their way when their navigational landmarks looked different due to weather or obscuring conditions, or when navigation equipment failed. Regardless of the flight plan, or your project, knowing the landmarks that indicate successful progress will enable you to proceed in your intended direction, while enabling course corrections along the way. Additionally, planning an alternate route to your destination can often save what would otherwise be a terminated trip.
15. **Learn how to land smoothly.** A beautiful takeoff and gorgeous day flying can easily be ruined – or can feel that way – due to an awkward, rough, or botched landing. A really bad landing can damage the landing gear and other critical parts of the plane, as well as the pilot's



authorization to fly. And, despite a beautiful flight, the landing will be what passengers and observers remember most. Likewise, a difficult flight can be eclipsed by a great landing. Bringing a plane back to the ground safely requires planning and sensitivity to the operating environment, advance knowledge of airplane's capabilities, thorough awareness of what can go wrong, and a great deal of practice. Regardless of what you're working on, effective leaders must know how to wind down a project, a difficult conversation, or any other delicate endeavor with skill and grace. Take the time to learn to "land" your leadership endeavors gracefully.

Great pilots are trained in specific skills, procedure, and knowledge. And they must be aware of changing conditions, monitor their instruments, creatively solve problems, and make spur of the moment decisions. As a leader, you can apply these flight-training lessons to ensure you reach your destination with success.

Andrew Wargo writes at [360 Minutes](#), where he shares his best advice on becoming more productive and effective, so you can gain the time to do the things that you love. Get his [RSS feed](#) directly, and take a look at his [Getting Started](#) page for ways to get your head above water at work.

