In Defense of Company Procedure

A corporate pilot presents his argument that company procedures for flight operations are necessary in order for all the flight crew members to be communicating clearly. It seems a reasonable and simple guideline for operating a company aircraft, or any multi-crew aircraft. Yet, in the real world, the author points out, pilots often feel procedures are unreasonable and complex. And they don't follow them.

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by

Donald Wilson

Professional people often do not respond well to procedural restrictions. There is a certain creativity required in many professional pursuits in order to get the job done. Professionals are not task doers, they are problem solvers. They apply their talent, education, training and experience to subjective issues that confront them routinely. It is understandable that they feel limited if they are required by some authority to apply a predetermined method to everyday problem solving.

At the same time, every human being, no matter what he may do for a living, wants to believe himself capable. One of the barriers to learning in adults is that once one begins to feel he has a grasp on the critical knowledge required to deal with an issue, he begins to resent further instruction. The degree of this resentment is proportional to the amount of experience a person gains with respect to that issue. This is not a character flaw, it is just a characteristic of the healthy adult psyche.

Professional pilots are no less independent. Though some tolerate it with more grace than others, few of us are particularly fond of having someone else tell us how to conduct every single aspect of our flights. After all, we are properly trained and experienced, so no one needs to hold our hands; it often appears that our superiors keep trying to do that. They bind our creativity in a tenet labeled "procedure."

There is a tendency to become resentful and irritated because of what we perceive to be a loss of freedom — freedom of action and freedom of expression. The burden of operating manuals, procedure memos and check rides is no fun either. In other words, they are taking the enjoyment from our work and leaving only the work. We begin to dislike the expression "company procedure."

Some pilots responded to this by rebelling and deliberately choose the opposite way, just to show that they can do the job without adhering to somebody else's methodology; and they are right, they certainly can.

I believe that among aviators, a little deeper thinking is needed about this. I suggest that the word "procedure" has more than four letters. That is, there is more to it than we're giving it credit for.

First, procedure itself is not the problem. Procedure is something we all use every day. The dictionary says that it is a way, form or method of conducting affairs or achieving a result. Almost every move we make is in accordance with some procedure.

Aside from simple rebellion, I find that there are two root causes for the irritation I generate in my colleagues when I suggest they may not be practicing correct company procedure. One is that, although they may agree with the procedure, they find it burdensome to be asked to apply it in every case. This is a kind of mental laziness. They know, as I do, that it's not always needed and they would prefer to go to the effort of using it only when necessary.

I agree that this would be nice if it was possible. The truth is that procedure is the maker of habit. As I have suggested, there is no such thing as not using a procedure. If you disregard one, you use another in its place. Whichever one is used most is the one that will likely become habitual. If the safer and more professional procedure is not your habit, something less will be, and that opens the door to error. The following is an example of how procedure can lead to habit and how the importance of this was impressed upon me.

I gave initial operating experience to a very experienced jet transport captain who was new to the organization. It was at night, and we were cleared to taxi to the active runway, which of course means that runways en route (other than the active) may be crossed without further clearance. The new left-seater checked and responded to checklist items in a professional manner until, without warning, the aircraft came to a jolting halt that challenged the tensile strength of our shoulder harnesses. I sat up on the jump seat and I saw a heart-stopping, close-up view of a jet airliner beginning its rotation on a supposedly non-active runway! Our Falcon Jet rattled in its wake.

Shocked, the captain looked at the first officer, who was guilty of saving all our lives, and protested, "I was cleared all the way to the runway!"

He was right. But for the alertness of the first officer, dead right. I suggest that what prevented disaster that day was procedure.

Why procedure? Sounds more like we were very lucky that the copilot saw something the rest of us didn't. But in discussing the incident with him, I learned that it was more than simple luck. What saved us was a habit, a simple, almost unconscious practice that he had developed.

He said that it had been impressed upon him in his training that he should guard against tunneling his attention while taxiing. He had trained himself to feel a slightly higher level of alertness whenever he approached a runway environment and it was his habit to look both ways at intersections.

Why? Where did the habit come from? Why did the first officer have it while the more experienced captain did not? The answer is simple. The habit came from years of disciplined procedure. Procedure is habit in the making. The best habits come from the disciplined use of the best procedures, day-in-and-day-out. Using less complete or less reliable procedures when the best procedure is not really needed only frustrates the habit-making process.

When necessary, procedure can also substitute for habit where it is not likely to exist. Fortunately, there are a number of things that arise in the process of flying aircraft that happen too infrequently to become habitual. Emergencies would be an example. We memorize the immediate action items but we are not in the habit of dealing with them. That's why we have emergency procedures.

More often we have to deal with little things that arise outside of the normal parameters of our habits. We have all seen this happen countless times, such as forgetting to compute landing numbers and discovering it on short final, or finding the automatic oxygen deployment system turned off at flight level 350, or forgetting to reset the altimeter passing through 18,000 feet, or dozens of other little things. Usually these things don't cost us much, but they can.

Several years ago I found myself in the middle of a heated discussion — the kind where armchair hindsight is applied to some other chap's misfortune. It seems that one of our crews had managed to burn up three out of four ignitor plugs, and were trying to figure out how to get home.

Days later, when all the facts were known, it became apparent what had happened. The captain had elected to use ignition during the takeoff roll because it was raining. (It was procedural to use ignitors only in rain or gusty winds and the crew was not accustomed to having them on for takeoff.) They just didn't get around to turning them off. When they shut down two hours later, there was only one lonely "pop-pop" sounding off on the right engine, attesting to the durability of the equipment.

How did this happen? You guessed it; the improper use of procedure.

It had been a dawn departure and the crew had tugged the aircraft out onto the ramp to run the checklists. Because it was still dark, all the cockpit lights were dimmed. The takeoff was routine and after a short climb, the ship broke out into a bright sky. As the copilot began the after-takeoff checklist, the cockpit was bathed in sunlight. The dim integral "ignitor-on" lights were overlooked.

The copilot ran his checklist in the usual way; being careful, but not calling the items clearly — more or less he was tending to it in private. The captain was busy flying. He wasn't paying attention and one item was overlooked.

A procedure was in place that would have prevented this expensive and embarrassing incident. Both pilots knew that it was company procedure for the pilot-not-flying to read each checklist item clearly and loudly enough to allow the pilot-flying to consider and respond to it. But neither of these experienced professionals particularly liked this company procedure. They had been flying together for several years. It was ridiculous to be sticklers for procedure.

What happened was due to "pilot error." Their humanness got them. That's the whole point of procedure. It protects us from our humanness. Where there is no habit in place to protect us, procedure substitutes. The crew was not in the habit of turning off ignitors after takeoff, but had they complied fully with company checklist procedure they would have turned them off.

The second root cause is that a crew member may not agree that a given procedure is the best one that could be in place. She may honestly and thoughtfully believe that her procedure is safer and more appropriate, and she attempts to use it whenever she feels she can.

This addresses the area that makes an organization tick and how a responsible individual behaves. In other words, although a pilot may be completely right in her assessment of a company procedure, is it safer and more reasonable for her to comply with it, or to go her own way? I contend that, with rare exceptions, it is more reasonable to comply and to comply consistently.

When a pilot faces a bad company procedure, she has a decision to make: How bad is it? She obviously feels that it is less than optimum, but does it fall short of her own personal minimum safety standard. If not, it becomes her responsibility, as a member of the organization, to comply with it. A reasonable person would agree that trying to go her own way in a multiple-crewmember environment is a detriment to safety. Of course, if she feels that the procedure needs changing, she is responsible to make every effort to convince management of the value of her position.

If the company procedure is unsafe, and she sees that it will not be changed, she is faced with the hard decision to apply her skills elsewhere.

How many times has each of us thought, as we climbed into the cockpit, "Let's see now, this guy likes that kind of procedure, so I need to use it." This presents the opportunity for confusion, and confusion prevents effective communication. Crewmembers must expect to use the same consistent procedures; it is a communications blessing that enhances safety. ♦