

# PROFESSIONALISM COUNTS

BY JOHN ALLEN



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All pilots are trained to be diligent and precise. We are trained to use checklists and to follow rules to the letter. If we advance to commercial service, we wear professional uniforms that indicate to our passengers that we are the people responsible for keeping them safe.

Regrettably, we've seen a number of instances over the last year or so in which professionalism was wanting. People who should have known better — who were trained to know better — allowed themselves to become complacent, or even worse, cavalier. Too often, we hear of pilots who allow themselves to lose focus and flight discipline, especially below 10,000 ft when idle conversation should cease.

The passenger sits in the cabin comfortably, knowing that the men and women up front are solely focused not just on getting there but on getting there safely. Passengers trust that the well-trained and experienced pilots flying the plane take their jobs seriously and are acutely aware and prepared whenever they enter a cockpit.

That's where professionalism enters the picture.

We use checklists not because we're afraid we'll forget or overlook. We use them because they form the backbone of precision — precision that means we take a task that we've done a thousand times and treat it like we're doing it for the first time.

We know about redundancies and back-up systems, and we mentally flip through alternate scenarios and contingencies all the time. Even if we have never experienced an unusual event, we run through what we'd do if one occurred and plan for the unexpected. And flight instructors and check pilots introduce scenarios such as an engine-out on takeoff, even though such events may never occur in a pilot's lifetime of flying.

There can be no argument on this point. The only way for us to step up to the next level of safety is to intensify the practices and procedures that have brought us this far. But there is one particular skill that's not mentioned in any of our logbooks or in the rules for general aviation or air carriers.

I'm talking about a transfer of experience — mentoring. If you're a long-time veteran, you need to go out of your way to impart wisdom to the ones just coming on line. As I've said on more than one occasion, this needs to be stamped on our foreheads. It needs to become part of our DNA.

The primary requirement for mentoring is that you speak up. If you've got experience and you're keeping your mouth shut, you're doing a disservice to our profession. This is not the time to be a person of few words. New pilots need to hear from you. This is about safety, and safety is about saving lives.

I learned from professionals that you have to work at professionalism, and that takes discipline. The real professionals among us always have time to do things the right way at the right time every time. They lead by example, and they always have time to explain what they did, why and how. They study, they practice, and they take notes on their own performance. They know how they've done, and they're willing to share those pearls of wisdom.

Now I appeal to you to make sure that you do the same. Lessons learned need to be transferred to your younger colleagues. Everyone makes mistakes, but the experienced pilots among you are in the position to prevent catastrophe and to breed in professionalism.

It's with this same approach in mind that I ask you to embrace the advances that are coming on line with NextGen, our plan to modernize the system. I want you to take particular notice that I did not call it "FAA's plan," because it is not that in any way, shape or form. NextGen has been designed specifically with you in mind. We have reached out to industry, manufacturers, line pilots, engineers, mechanics, dispatchers, and even an attorney or two.

The result is an upgrade — a sweeping overhaul, really — that quite literally will change how we fly.

For those of us who remember the days before the traffic-alert and collision avoidance system (TCAS), this change will be along those same lines. It very well may be a transformation on the same order of magnitude as the introduction of radar.

NextGen uses the latest computer, software and satellite firepower to give us a level of situational awareness we've never seen. While it's true that we've got a system that's humming along quite nicely, something better is coming online as we speak. There's no need for trepidation. I can remember as a line pilot having my doubts about CAT II [Category II instrument landing system] auto land — until I made my first one at Frankfurt International Airport.

Moving from the analog world into the digital environment will be easier to handle than we realize. Giving up the "control" to a machine wasn't easy for me, but it made the system safer and gave me another tool in the cockpit, with the human still playing an essential role.

But in both cases — professionalism and NextGen — the primary element for success rests with you. I'm counting on you to help make it happen. In the meantime, fly safe. 🛩️

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