



**BY RICHARD MCSPADDEN**

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# Difficult conversations

**When it's time to speak up, and when it's not**

**A FRIEND AND I WERE STANDING** on the edge of the grass runway at Johnson Creek, Idaho, admiring the scenery. We noticed a Cessna 182 on final. It dropped low, then accelerated in a high-speed, low-altitude fly-by north-bound up the runway.

We looked at each other with raised eyebrows. The act was so clearly out of place—and potentially dangerous—in that peaceful backcountry. My friend Andrew Simmons asked, “Should we say something?”

We briefly discussed doing so as we watched the pilot pitch up to downwind, land, and taxi up to his waiting family. But we decided against it, justifying that we didn’t want to be confrontational—we didn’t want to embarrass the pilot. Mostly, I think, we didn’t want to disrupt the pleasurable atmosphere of an enjoyable, sunny day out flying.

I regret our inaction. We had an opportunity to strengthen the GA culture, and we let it slip by. As general aviation pilots, we own our culture. It’s a rich culture that has developed through decades of camaraderie, passion, and mutual support. We are better, safer pilots than we were decades ago, in part because of this culture. Through the years, I’ve benefited from pilots who took time to ask a probing question, offer a suggestion, or deliver a private rebuke when appropriate.

These kinds of conversations can help pilots, yet having them can be awkward, requiring careful consideration beforehand. I’ve had to ask myself, is the time right? Is the pilot receptive? Am I confident in broaching the subject? Knowing when to have a dialog is tricky since we rarely understand all the facts in a situation. Often there are gray areas; there may not be a clear right or wrong.

That day, the pilot of the 182 did nothing illegal, but the fly-by was misguided and out of place in that backcountry setting. As a general rule, if something looks odd, feels wrong, or just seems strange, it’s probably worth a conversation. A lot of times, the assessment of another pilot is helpful in determining whether a situation warrants discussion. Our simultaneous raised eyebrows confirmed our personal instincts.

How you approach a fellow pilot can result in making a positive influence or making an enemy. In the U.S. Air Force fighter community, we used a blunt-force, direct frontal assault method. We could. Flying was our job. We were forced together day in and day out in a military

setting. There was no option to “disengage.” This style is inappropriate for GA, where most of us fly part-time and for recreation. We can separate from people or situations we find unpleasant. As humans, we typically respond to confrontation in a fight-or-flight manner. Handled poorly, we can expect a fellow pilot to respond with hostility, or to politely shut down and walk away.

Having difficult conversations is an art. Know that your perspective isn’t the only or “right” perspective. Approach the situation with an expectation that you may very well be the one who is enlightened by the exchange. Start with a question and continue a series of questions, seeking to understand thoroughly. Author Stephen R. Covey said, “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” These conversations are typically better held one on one. By engaging in a series of questions to understand the situation and the pilot’s thinking, you help them think out loud, and they end up admonishing themselves. Being criticized is unpleasant, yet people yearn to improve and get better. It’s more effective when people reason themselves to a correction, rather than have one thrust upon them.

Andrew and I have always regretted that we missed an opportunity to help a pilot look at a situation differently, and perhaps enhance safety.

A few years ago, the AOPA Air Safety Institute was asked to hold a safety session for a community that experienced an inordinate number of mishaps and then a tragic accident. The disappointing finding during our visit was that several in the community witnessed the accident pilot perform misguided, unsafe actions in the past—yet no one ever confronted him. The community now deeply regrets their inaction.

I’m not advocating that we become a collection of critical and confrontational pilots, constantly on the prowl for someone to correct, like a Dwight Schrute (from the series *The Office*) of the airport—paranoid, narrow-minded, poised to critique and correct. I’m talking about addressing the dangerous or inappropriate behavior we occasionally see. The manner in which we say something to fellow pilots about their flying and how to do it can be an art—an art worth developing. We own the GA culture. The actions of each pilot reflect on all of us. Go fly.

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