

# 'Fixing' Problem Pilots

*Find the solution from within (if possible)*

Aviation Week

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Sooner or later most of us will be faced with a problem pilot within our ranks, one who cannot work or play well with others. A pilot such as this can be a cancerous tumor, threatening to spread throughout the organization if left unchecked. At the very least, such a pilot can demoralize everyone else and even be the cause of a mysterious personnel turnover. But as bad as this sounds, it can be even worse. A problem pilot can lead to an accident.

Such a pilot is not necessarily unskilled or ignorant. The former can be trained and the latter can be educated. A problem pilot is one who lacks the proper attitude and respect toward the profession either through a set of temporary circumstances or a more deeply ingrained driving force.



**An inattentive pilot. Credit: Justin Serbent**

Working in military and civilian flight departments over the years leads me to believe many problem pilots can be categorized into one or more of the following types:

- (1) The alcohol- or drug-dependent pilot.

- (2) The emotionally troubled pilot who can no longer focus on the task at hand.
- (3) The “good pilot gone bad” who has become complacent and believes standard operating procedures (SOPs) are for lesser aviators.
- (4). The “imperious pilot” who regards other crewmembers as gratuitous appendages.
- (5) The “mission commander” who will bend rules and ignore crew warnings to achieve mission objectives at almost any cost.
- (6) The untrainable “know-it-all” who refuses criticism or play-acts one role when training and behaves differently when unsupervised.
- (7) The “casual pilot” who wants to make everything easy and dismisses standards as theoretical and unattainable.

Regardless of category, these problem pilots all exhibit forms of unhealthy behavior that can have a profound impact on flight safety. Aircraft accident databases are filled with case studies of perfectly good aircraft being destroyed by one or more pilots who were not flying at their best. We see this in small flight departments as well as in major airlines with thousands of pilots. Perhaps it is time to address these pilots more clinically.

The alcohol- or drug-dependent pilot is unfortunately a common type in our profession. Our industry has long recognized that a good pilot who abuses either substance needs medical treatment. We all know the signs. A change in attendance, appearance or performance. Mood swings or attitude changes. Withdrawal from responsibilities or social associations. Unusual patterns of behavior. A defensive attitude concerning the object of the addiction. Today, most of our organizations and local communities have proven, established treatment programs in place. Although unchecked substance abuse can be a career-ender for pilots, peers need to recognize they can be life-enders too. Ultimately, everyone’s safety and livelihood are affected.

Problem Pilot Type	Risks to Organization	Driving Force	Cure
Alcohol and/or drugs	Can lead to unsafe operations; can spread to other personnel; can demoralize peers; can lead to personnel turnover	Medical	Medical treatment
Emotional trauma		Personal issues	Counseling
"Good pilot gone bad"		Complacency/ego	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Learn humility (this is hard, everyone struggles)</li> <li>- Humanize training experience</li> <li>- Self-police (line observations)</li> <li>- Stop enabling behaviors</li> <li>- Preach outside the choir</li> <li>- Elevate</li> </ul>
"Imperious pilot"		"Nobody else has good enough" ideas/ego	
"Mission commander"		Mission first/ego	
Untrainable "know-it-all"		Unrealistic self-image/ego	
"I get along"/"casual pilot"		Insecurity/ego	

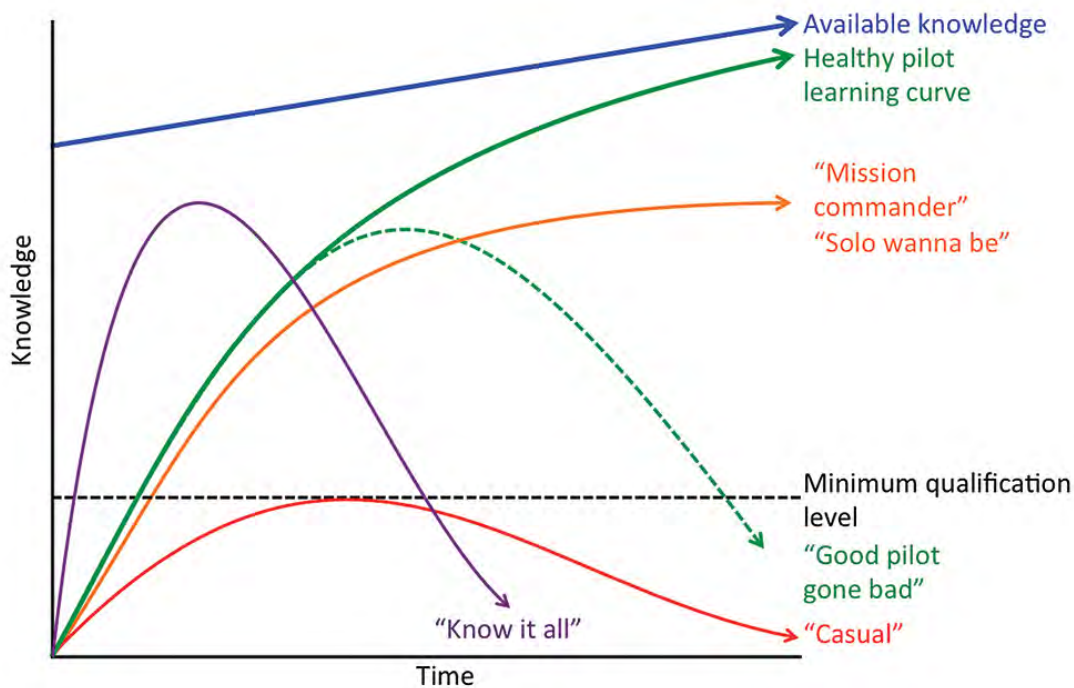
While it may seem trite to say these situations call for "tough love," failing to take action only prolongs the suffering of all involved. Fortunately, most flight departments or companies have some sort of anonymous safety reporting system, whereby one can signal a suspected substance abuse issue. Although this drastic step sounds callous, the sooner management gets involved the sooner the pilot can receive much needed help.

"Life happens." A pilot dealing with the loss of a loved one, divorce or other emotional trauma needs time and perhaps professional counseling to come to terms with, learn to live with, or work through these life-changing events or personal issues. Oftentimes our profession looks the other way and tries to forget that outside of flying, life happens. Babies are born, children need operations, couples get divorced and elderly parents pass away. Here, too, having upper management's help and support from human resources personnel can go a long way in helping the pilot make peace with these personal issues and return to the fold as a refocused, healthy pilot.

Our industry has come a long way with the way it treats alcohol and drug abuse; and we are starting to make inroads on recognizing emotional issues as safety risks. But we have barely scratched the surface when it comes to the ego-based problem pilot issues.

A common problem in some business aviation and private owner flight departments is the "mission commander," a pilot who will fracture rules and ignore warnings to get a trip done as scheduled. This type is commonly seen in small, active business flight departments where the airplane is used by one owner as a business tool. It is less frequent when the owner's money is

already invested and the airplane is used mostly for pleasure, and in larger corporate flight departments with a cadre of pilots.



### ***The learning curve.***

The “mission commander” is coerced by the owner, the system, or both. In small departments we often see a dichotomy with this type. In one case the behavior is driven by a strong, “get ‘er done” ego, which often appeals to the owner. In the other it is driven by a weak ego where a substandard pilot with limited employment options feels compelled to satisfy the owner’s risky requests out of fear. In either case, the behavior is the same: mission success outweighs other factors.

Yet another problem pilot is the “imperious” pilot in command (PIC) who, due to his or her real or imagined exceptional skills, believes the airplane can be flown better without assistance. This pilot relegates the crew to position-specific tasks, ceding all decision-making to self. When the PIC inevitably becomes task saturated, there is nobody left paying attention to save the day.

One of the more common routes to problem pilot status is reserved for “good pilots gone bad.” These are the ones who have become so good that SOPs become optional. This behavior is highly contagious and tends to infect entire flight departments into accepting intentionally noncompliant behavior as normal.

While less common, the untrainable “know-it-all” pilot can be especially problematic because, by all outward appearances, he or she appears quite capable and professional. These pilots tend to have breezed through training and easily attained every rating along the way. They become so confident that they start to tune out further education and can actually fail to

keep up with advances in knowledge. They can even lose the knowledge they had but refuse to recognize that they are no longer the wunderkinder of their early years.



***Orville Wright's first flight, Dec. 17, 1903 Credit: Library of Congress***

On the opposite end of the spectrum from the “know-it-alls” are the “I get along” pilots. These “casual pilots” feign a lackadaisical attitude to mask their shortcomings as aviators, either due to low self-esteem or laziness. Getting embarrassed by a lack of skill or knowledge at every recurrent is OK, they rationalize, because the “check the box” maneuvers and convoluted systems academics the schoolhouse teaches are not needed to fly airplanes in the real world. By accepting low expectations, these pilots demonstrate they are not interested in improving their skills or knowledge; they are not interested in raising the bar, even slightly.

Each of these problem pilot types may have different unhealthy behaviors and gone through different paths to arrive at their current attitudes, but each have issues rooted in their egos. We will forsake Sigmund Freud's definition of ego — that part of our psyche which moderates between basic urges (“id”) and a moral compass (the “super ego”) — and settle for a more pilot-centric idea: a mistaken belief in our own abilities and a sense of superiority that exceeds the bounds of confidence and ability.

The observed behaviors of the problem pilot types are symptoms of their underlying ego issues that are difficult to detect and can often be misdiagnosed. For example, a well-rounded

pilot can be forgiven for seeming to portray a “mission first” attitude, if that attitude is always moderated by a safety-first mindset. An easygoing pilot may actually be a very conscientious aviator when it comes to everyday performance. The healthy pilot can display problem pilot attributes and the problem pilot can masquerade as a healthy pilot. Fortunately, there is another symptom to aid our detection of these unhealthy pilots: knowledge.



***The author flies a snowy approach aboard the Savannah FlightSafety International Gulfstream G450 simulator.***

Healthy pilots display a continuous thirst for knowledge. They realize the amount of information out there for all facets of aviation is ever increasing. Because of this, they accept the fact that they will be students forever. Thus, the healthy pilot’s learning curve is asymptotic, it continues to climb and gets closer to the total available knowledge but will never reach it. This “knowledge gap” only motivates healthy pilots to try harder.

All aspects of unhealthy behavior distort the learning curve in some way.

The curve for the “mission commander” and the “imperious pilot” begins on a normal trajectory but levels off as normal precautions and the idea of crew resource management (CRM) start to impinge on their deeper desires to either be known as someone who hacks the mission or someone who can do it all alone.

The “good pilot gone bad” also starts a normal trajectory but can deviate from the healthy pilot curve at any time, usually due to complacency.

The untrainable “know-it-all” displays a steep learning curve that peaks early, indicative of an unusually talented pilot who grasped the fundamentals quickly and was widely recognized

as a gifted student. But the curve falls precipitously after the “know-it-all” decides to rest on those laurels and either forgo or ignore further training.

The “casual pilot’s” curve climbs slowly and barely achieves the minimum knowledge for qualification before sliding downhill. This is a special case where the original training was either very weak or the pilot was overwhelmed by first-rate but challenging training and decided to withdraw from the “race” and accept subpar performance as “good enough.”

In each case, the problem pilot could have begun on the healthy pilot track only to be derailed by a training event, the operational environment or a predisposed nature toward one of the behavioral problems. And in each case, the end result can end up at any point along the scale below the healthy pilot learning curve. Pilots can spend the remainder of their careers in a holding pattern, failing to take advantage of the expanding pool of knowledge. Or they can founder and end up below the required level of knowledge to be safe. In either case, their ailments require treatment.

## **Behavior Modification**

Just as it is hard to teach an old dog new tricks, it can seem nearly impossible to train pilots set in their own ways to adopt lifestyle-changing behaviors. Studies cited by the Harvard Medical School point out that a long-lasting change is more likely when it is self-motivated and rooted in positive thinking. Not, “do this or you will die.” Rather, “do this and you will become a better pilot.”

These studies also propose a five-step “Transtheoretical Model” which states that at any given time, a person is in one of five stages of change: precontemplative, contemplative, preparation, action and maintenance. In pilot-speak, we can think of these stages in terms of awareness:

- (1) Unaware the behavior is a problem.
  
- (2) Aware there is such a problem; unaware I have the problem.
  
- (3) Aware I have a problem; thinking about what to do about it.
  
- (4) Aware I have a problem; working on overcoming it.
  
- (5) Aware I had a problem; have fixed the problem; am on guard against a relapse.

Every pilot afflicted with one of the behavioral issues is at one of these stages. Those on the later stages realize something needs to be done and can be said to be on the road to a cure. The pilots with the biggest problem are at Stage 1 (oblivious) or Stage 2 (delusional). They can deny the problem exists and are unlikely to react positively when confronted. Our

problem, then, is with awareness. Why are we so reluctant to confront our unaware problem pilots?



### ***Revoked pilot's license.***

In a flight department with less than 10 pilots, we can't go more than a few trips before going through the entire flight roster. We will see these pilots again! Even in a large flight department, speaking out against another pilot is sure to generate friction. In some cases the bearer of bad news is labeled the problem. And we must all realize that today's copilot could very well be tomorrow's chief pilot. It is only natural that we would rather stay silent and hope the problem goes away on its own. But that rarely happens.

How do you get such pilots to self-motivate themselves to change when they are unaware change is needed? And how do you do that positively?

In his international best-selling book, *Ego is the Enemy*, Ryan Holiday cites example after example where famous leaders have replaced rational thought with bluster and self-absorption. "Pursuing great work is often terrifying. Ego soothes that fear," he says.

Flying airplanes for a living is not easy and having to keep abreast of the required knowledge and to keep proficient in the necessary skills can be a daunting task. Each of our pilot behavioral misfits is fleeing a shortcoming and their egos are allowing them to do that. At this point, a healthy pilot will ask, "What is there to be afraid of?" If honest, the ego-driven pilot will say, "Plenty."

From the dawn of aviation, achieving heavier-than-air flight was a superhuman feat. From the moment a pilot first takes off solo that individual has done something no human had done prior to 1903 and relatively few have since when compared to the total of humanity. How can you not have an ego when you defy gravity for a living?



Yet, Holiday observes, "When we remove ego, we're left with what is real. What replaces ego is humility, yes — but rock-hard humility and confidence."

Another way to phrase this issue is to replace the word "ego" with its cousin: arrogance. Are you an arrogant pilot or are you humble? Select one of the following choices and find out: (1) "I have flying mastered and will never have an accident for which I am to blame." Or, (2) "I will never have flying mastered, it takes most of my effort just to keep up in the world of aviation, and I will have to work even harder to keep things as safe as possible for every flight I have in my future."

Chances are you are in the second category and will not personally need many of the lessons that follow. But chances are just as likely that you will be sharing the cockpit at some point in the future with a pilot who believes the first answer applies, whether or not he or she would admit as much. You might benefit from a new approach to getting through to these pilots who don't respond well to training.

### **Creating Awareness: 'We, Not He or She'**

Approaching one pilot out of any size group of pilots singles that pilot out and sends the unmistakable message that "we" are not happy with "he" or "she" and are taking corrective action. Even the humblest and most self-critical individual cannot help but notice and become defensive as a result. Once that emotional armor is donned, the effort may be lost.

Another tack may be to approach the entire flight department as a whole with suggestions for "we" as a group. You may say the guilty party will see right through this charade and that may be true. But the ruse will allow the pilot to play along and at least rationalize that the corrective action is aimed toward all.

In one of my flight departments we had a pilot who always aimed for "brick one" when landing, making the rest of us a bit nervous when sitting in the right seat. He was arguably our most skilled and experienced pilot. We looked up to him and were willing to overlook the one chink in his armor. So none of us, his peers, ever spoke up. He inevitably planted the airplane in an overrun not authorized for landing, generating a "nasty gram" from the airport.

The chief pilot then sent a "memo to all pilots" that revealed only that "we," the flight department, had the landing incident. He made the case that "we," the flight department, had to make landing in the touchdown zone a priority. He even solicited our most experienced pilot to supervise the training effort. Our problem pilot became the most zealous preacher for the reasons the touchdown zone was so important. We never again had a problem with our former "problem" pilot.

The fact that this individual was a problem pilot in the first place defied all prediction. He was highly intelligent, had an uncanny air sense and was what many called the ideal combination of "hands" and "brains" in a pilot. He had a great sense of humor and could take a good ribbing on all subjects other than aviation. When it came to flying airplanes, he was

humorless and notoriously thin-skinned. For that the blame goes squarely on his military and civilian training history.

## **Encourage Humility**

Despite what you see in the movies, most military instructor pilots are quite empathetic and in tune with their students' inner psyches. You cannot train someone to fly fingertip formation in a loop while pulling 7 Gs without some sense of the student's abilities. But it is true that many military instructors believe "fear, sarcasm and ridicule" are valid teaching tools. Unfortunately, this carries forward to the civilian world in subtle ways.

In many type certification evaluations, the "make it or break it" maneuver is the heavyweight V1 engine cut. A mishandled rotation or imprecise pitch control at V2+10 can end in simulated disaster. And a simulated crash means a very real flight evaluation failure. While practicing the maneuver, failures are inevitable. But so, too, are the subtle digs from the instructor's position in the simulator. "You'll have to do better than that!" But even on easier maneuvers the digs can be just as penetrating. "Well, I've never seen that before!"

While there are civilian simulator instructors with chips on their shoulders only too happy to play with the ground speed on downwind or compound emergencies in an effort to fluster a hapless student, they are the exceptions. But some of this intimidation happens innocently enough without the instructor's intent.

Steep turns, for example, are a completely foreign event to most pilots who fly business jets and yet it remains a staple of simulator evaluations. Given a student's inability to perform the maneuver plus or minus 100 ft., many instructors are all too willing to show up the student while hand-flying the airplane effortlessly from the jump seat. They might as well be saying, "I can do better with one hand while still operating the simulator from back here; what's your problem?"

Our upbringing as "right stuff" pilots and our continuing indoctrination in what can be a hostile training environment tends to create thin-skinned pilots too afraid to admit to mistakes in public so as to encourage improvement. We know that we need pilots who are open-minded, hungry for knowledge, willing and wanting to improve, and not afraid to ask for help when needed.

Instructors can encourage this attitude by demonstrating a little "bedside manner." A simulator can be more difficult to fly than an airplane, unless you spend more time flying the box than the airplane. Then it becomes an electronic game. A simulator instructor can learn as much from the students in the front seats as the students can from the instructor. That should encourage some humility on both ends.

A simulator instructor must play evaluator at some point; that is part of the job after all. The learning experience can be enhanced if critiques are shaped to emphasize the positive, note the difficulty of a maneuver and suggest common solutions. (Common, meaning they are not alone with the particular trouble.) I once saw a mishandled rudder during an engine-out

missed approach critiqued with, "It looked like you couldn't make up your mind how much rudder you needed. I thought I was going to get airsick." After the critique was over I told the pilot, "I used to do that all the time! I finally figured out half the rudder gets you started and once the engines spool up you can figure the rest out."

## **Train If You Can; Elevate If You Can't; Ostracize If You Must**

When dealing with a problem pilot, your ultimate goal is behavior modification and if these "we, not he or she" techniques get the job done, great. If the simulator instructor is able to encourage the self-motivation process, that's great, too. But if the problem pilot is unwilling to change, it might be time to get upper management involved.

Seeing the boss about a problem is never easy and when dealing with personnel issues, it can be treacherous. The boss might already know about it or you may have just thrown his or her best friend under the bus. As the bearer of bad news, you might bear the brunt of the fallout. If the big boss doesn't take this kind of news well, you might consider the "we, not he or she" approach on a new level. "We are a great flight department," you can say, "and great flight departments encourage outside audits and observations to keep that leading edge extra sharp."

If the big boss isn't willing to help, or if the big boss is the problem, then you have what many would call a "career-defining moment." If the problem pilot poses a safety of flight risk, you need to ask yourself how you will feel if you had to read about that pilot and a planeload of people entombed in an airplane you used to fly. Would that be worth taking a stand?

There are also steps short of the "nuclear option" that can let the problem pilot know some behaviors are not tolerated in a professional flight department. Even the most problematic pilot has strengths and can provide valuable contributions to the flight department. Focus on the problematic behaviors, not the pilot. If, for example, you witness a pilot willfully skip a flight control check required by the flight manual and push the throttles forward to taxi, what will you do? I have never seen this but I believe I would react thusly: Apply the brakes, bring the airplane to a stop and say, "We missed a critical step in the checklist. Let's do that before we go any further."

A truly professional pilot knows flying isn't easy, and requires unrelenting dedication and constant study. The pros know they can make mistakes and lose proficiency; training is needed to remain on top of the game. A problem pilot will deny these realities with the false bravado or feigned coolness of an X-plane test pilot. But both of these traits are used to hide the fear of admitting they cannot know it all.

A problem pilot puts lives at risk and puts our profession at risk. If you are reading this article, and have made it to the end, you are probably not a problem pilot. You are still in the "learn mode." But those problem pilots in your ranks are your problem. And it is up to you to "fix" them.