

THE PROFESSIONAL FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR MENTOR



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ARE
PILOTLESS
GA AIRCRAFT
ON THE
HORIZON?

- You Make Your Own Luck
- Failure Is Not an Option
- Winding Down, Giving Back

Are You Living at a 12?

Challenge yourself

There are few things that bother me more than seeing lack of professionalism within the aviation industry. Professionalism is, in and of itself, a loaded word. My dictionary defines professionalism as “the conduct, aims, or qualities that characterize or mark a profession or a professional person.” In this article, I’m going to unpack what I believe professionalism entails for us as instructors.

The above definition is threefold: conduct, aims, and qualities. Let’s unpack conduct and qualities. As an instructor, you are the face of the aviation industry. You are the first thing that new aviators see, and your attitudes and actions toward, with and around your students will without doubt mold and shape their own attitudes and actions. Students mirror their instructors, sometimes consciously and often unconsciously. I myself am a hybrid of the instructors that I’ve had, with my own views and beliefs mixed in. I’ve consciously chosen to emulate behavior that I’ve seen and admired in my instructors, and at times, I’ve consciously chosen not to emulate behavior that I saw that I believed to be unprofessional. At the same time, I know I possess habits both good and bad that I *unconsciously* picked up along the way. Chances are, your student will end up just like you, and as such, you stand on privileged ground as an instructor.

You have the immense privilege and responsibility of molding the next generation of aviators. I believe that in the aggregate, most instructors do a good job of asking their students for professional-level behavior. Where the problem comes in, is that many instructors ask for “level 10” performance from their students, when they themselves only live at a 5, 6 or maybe 7! And here’s the thing: You cannot expect

level 8, 9 or 10 performance from your students when you live at a 5; *if you want level 10 performance from your students, you must live at a 12.* Here are some examples:

- Do you ask your students to do their pre-flight inspections with a checklist, but yet whenever you end up doing a flight, you just do a quick walk-around without the checklist?
- Do you make your students do a weight and balance calculation for every flight, but neglect to do one yourself?
- Do you demand your students show up early for their lesson, but yet you yourself often show up 5 or 10 minutes (or more) late?
- Do you demand your students strictly adhere to the policies of your flight school, but bend or ignore the rules for yourself?
- Have you ever wasted a student’s time doing an unnecessary lesson because you needed/wanted more flight time or pay?
- Do you gripe and complain to your students about the policies of the flight school?
- Do you ignore the policies altogether if you don’t agree with them?

If you answered “yes” to any of the above questions, you need to re-evaluate your own standards of professionalism. At the end of the day, you have no right to ask *anything* of your students that you yourself are either not willing to do or that you don’t model yourself. Furthermore, you must hold yourself to a higher standard than what you ask or expect of your students, and you need to live there consistently, even when no one is watching. You must lead by example.

I’d like to touch briefly on organizational policies, because I think this can be a real doozy and thorn in the side for a lot of instructors. Having worked on both the instructor side and the management side of a Part 141 flight school, I understand



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where the frustration comes from. On the instructor side, policies can often seem too restrictive, punitive or completely pointless. On the management side, we’ve seen some ridiculous things from both students and instructors, ranging from simply immature (i.e., “meowing” on guard frequency) to downright dangerous. I can almost guarantee you that every word in your organization’s policies came either directly or indirectly from someone doing something stupid.

What does professionalism entail, in an organization that has a lot of policies, some of which may even be irrelevant and cumbersome? Again, live at a 12! Stay within the bounds of those policies, and teach your students to do the same. If the policy is truly unreasonable or needlessly cumbersome, go talk to the higher-ups about revising or removing the policy. But until it’s changed, you owe it to your students to model the behavior that’s expected of you and them.

Now, for managers (chief flight instructors, assistant-chief flight instructors, check instructors, etc. reading): Are you living within the bounds of those policies? If not, why not? Again, you have no right to ask anything of your instructors that you yourself are not doing. Make sure you regu-



larly revisit your flight school policies and procedures and make sure that they are still relevant. Make sure they are reasonable, and that you yourself are not only capable of abiding by them, but that you actually abide by them. If they are so cumbersome or unreasonable to cause you to ignore them, they need to be removed or revised.

Finally, I want to leave you with some thoughts as to the “aims” of a professional. What are you doing to improve yourself professionally? Many, if not most, instructors are using flight instruction as a way to build time so they can get to their end goal of being an airline or corporate pilot, and there’s nothing wrong with that. However, the problem with this can manifest itself in “short-timer syndrome.” Challenge yourself to do the best you can do, and show up at 100 percent even if your end goal is to leave flight instruction and go elsewhere.

Helen Keller said, “I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty

to accomplish small tasks as if they were great and noble.”

I think being a professional pilot means embodying that mantra; that you treat even the small, menial tasks as though they were great and noble. It’s understanding that how you show up in the small things is how you show up in everything. If you cut corners as an instructor, you’re going to cut corners in the airlines. If you don’t bother to treat your student’s time and money with respect, you’re going to do the same with your corporate clients, airline passengers, etc.

Being a professional pilot means being a person of integrity. It’s doing the right thing even when it’s hard. Being a professional pilot means setting the example for your students. It means doing what you say. It means studying your airplane and knowing the aircraft limitations and systems. It’s understanding that you aren’t perfect, and when you find a weakness in your knowl-

edge or behavior, you own it, and take steps to improve.

I want to challenge you as you move forward: Don’t settle for second best. Don’t settle for “I know enough.” Don’t settle for average. Stay open to learning, and understand that just because you know something today doesn’t mean that you’ll remember it tomorrow, especially if you don’t practice and keep it fresh in your mind. Challenge yourself to a lifetime of pursuing greatness, of striving to become the best pilot you could ever be. Keep your eyes and mind open, and whenever you find something admirable — a book that moves you, a professor who inspires you, a ground school instructor who is brilliant at teaching, a simulator instructor who pushes you to be better — take mental notes, and strive to live at a 12!

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