

A New Standards Captain

The role is really that of **top instructor**

BY **JAMES ALBRIGHT** james@code7700.com



IAN LUZAN

Almost from the outset of my aviation career, I always thought my primary calling was to be an instructor and to be the best at that position. However, as it played out, I never reached those goals because I was always diverted to another role, quite often as a standards captain. I always seemed to be in competition for the top instructor slot, but I soon noticed that many pilots sought the job as a means to another “I” word: income. I wanted the assignment for the sake of instruction. In time, I learned that a standards captain with the right attitude can be the best instructor in any flight department.

So, if you are assuming that role for the first time, or even if this is a subsequent time at bat, know that you can combine your roles in standards and instruction to be the best at both. First, you must assess yourself and your environment. Then you need a plan. Finally, learn how to give honest and diplomatic feedback to those you are charged with overseeing as well as those who oversee you.

I’ve had several times at bat as a flight examiner, check airman and standards captain. These positions had different names in the U.S. Air Force, in commercial aviation and in business aviation. Regardless, I’ve concluded that the best people in the standards role had one thing in common: a sense of humility.

Confident (yet humble) — The first time you are given the title of standards captain, you ought to feel something between fear and nervousness. The questions that come to mind immediately are: Am I good enough? And how can I be expected to measure others when I am so imperfect? But these doubts pass as you come to realize that you have been given the role because of a demonstrated ability to do your job well. You must eventually approach the role knowing you can do it. (Otherwise you will fail.)

Capable (yet humble) — You cannot enforce a standard with which you fail to comply. The old axiom, “Do as I say, not as I do” almost never works and least of all for a standards captain because peer pilots (and they are peers) know your actions and that the title can be easily retracted. At best, they will nod politely and continue as before once you have left the room. At worst, they will openly (or secretly) mock you. Either way, your credibility is shot.

Knowledgeable (yet humble) — You cannot enforce a standard you don’t know, and making it up along the way will not fly with those who are more knowledgeable than you. One way to quickly lose credibility is to adamantly critique someone who quickly pulls out the book to prove you wrong.

Humble (yet confident, capable and knowledgeable) — A sense of humility is

First comes self-assessment.

important in a standards captain, no doubt about it. But in the end, you are being charged with ensuring others measure up to what your organization considers to be a minimum level of professionalism. If you are not confident you can do this and don’t have the credibility with your peers, you will have a difficult time succeeding.

Another way to approach this is to look at what makes a bad standards captain. I’ve seen a few over the years. What follows are three examples of the type:

(1) I’m here because I’m so good — Some captains end up in the standards role because they’ve outlasted the competition. They are typically weaker pilots who think their position alone means they are better than everyone else and typically critique others against personal techniques, not written guidance.

(2) I’m here so now I can coast — Some captains will have solid backgrounds and fine records of performance and may even start out as good flight examiners. But they end up thinking they no longer have to put in the work to keep proficient and knowledgeable. Soon the examinees will outshine the examiner.

(3) I’m here to thin the herd — Some captains will have suffered at the hands



JAMES ALBRIGHT/BCA

of harsh check rides over the years and will seek to do the same now that they've got the chance to do so.

Embrace those attitudes and performances at your peril.

The Better Approach

Part of your self-assessment should include a review of how you fly the line. That does not refer to your stick and rudder skills as a pilot. If you have been selected to be a standards captain you should have long ago reached the skill levels needed to earn the respect of the organization and your peers. Rather, "how you fly" refers to how well and consistently you live up to the standards that you are charged with enforcing. There is no room for hypocrisy.

After you've made an honest assessment of what you bring to the job, you need to fully understand your position in the organization. We often said in the Air Force that the commander sets the standard, the training department teaches the standard, and the standards department evaluates how well the training department is doing its job. A poor performance was more a reflection on the trainers than on the trainee.

In a smaller flight department, the training department is probably an outside outfit like FlightSafety International or CAE SimuFlite. You may also have a small retinue of individual instructors in the flight department. In fact, you may wear two hats and be one of those instructors. No matter the size of your organization, you need to "think vertical" when it comes to your role as a standards captain. You are in

the middle and will be a target for those above and below.

Rather than set standards, a standards captain ensures others meet them. However, while that statement is true in theory, in smaller flight departments where everyone wears many hats the line between "set" and "measure" becomes blurred. So, from where do the standards originate? The sources are several:

Government — As pilots, we have no shortage of governing rules and regulations. In fact, we have so many that it is easy to find ourselves in the dark because the rules vary by region and are changing faster than they can be reliably published. But as a standards captain you have to do your best to keep up and you must have a good library to fall back upon.

Organization — Your flight department should have written guidance of some sort, preferably a company, flight or general operating manual. In any case, you don't have a standard unless that standard is enumerated and published.

Individual — Because of the credibility you bring to the job, your personal techniques may be looked upon as "the way it must be done." The more credibility you have in an organization, the more recognized this personal standard becomes. But you need to understand that techniques are not enforceable standards. You can recommend them as the best way to do things, but you cannot insist they be followed as procedure.

You must also remember the vertical nature of the organization and your place in it. As a standards captain for a large management company, I had

A standards captain is also a line captain.

noticed many Gulfstream pilots building their own instrument approaches into airports where the approach in question didn't exist in aircraft navigation databases.

If only one pilot is failing a standard, you might have a very narrow problem to address. But if many pilots are failing the same standard, you might have a more systemic issue. It turned out a very well respected simulator instructor had been preaching a technique in violation of our company rules as well as those of the FAA. Our spotlight on the problem forced the training vendor to retrain the rogue instructor.

Once you've assessed yourself and the organization, you can come up with a plan of attack for the new job. You might find that you are joining a well-established standards department or replacing a highly respected standards captain who was doing everything just right. Your task is merely to fit in and continue what has been an exemplary standards organization. But that is a very rare situation. You will more likely find yourself with a greater challenge. Was the previous organization dysfunctional? Not respected? Or perhaps there were no true standards and you are starting from scratch.

If working from scratch, it will be up to you to create a standards group. To do so, you will need to understand your organization's needs before you can translate them into your new standards group's procedures. It will be up to you to introduce yourself in your new role to the organization and live up to your promises.

If you are joining a dysfunctional standards group that works for an unaware organization, you will need to tread lightly. You need to convince the lead standards captain of the need for stronger standards and obtain "buy in" from above and below. It may help to find real-world examples of similar circumstances resulting in aircraft accidents or other ill effects and show how a better standards program can prevent these.

Examine the existing standards program to find where the organization is lacking or failing to live up to its responsibilities. Ask others still in the standards group, or those who have recently departed, why things exist as they do. Use these explanations as a guide to steer your efforts to repair what is broken.

Line operation observation

If you are joining a dysfunctional standards group with marching orders to fix it, you'll need to elevate the failing team. Listen to leadership's complaints about the group and their ideas to improve the situation. Reach out to line pilots, other crewmembers and others in the flight department for more input. If members of the previous standards group are still in the flight department you may have to be very diplomatic with your questioning, such as: "What can I do to make your job easier and safer?" and "What worries you?" or "How can we elevate this flight department to the next level?"

If you are lucky enough to be joining a great standards team in a great flight department you'll need to learn from the best and find your own niche to make things even better. Start in the "learn mode" while trying to maintain the high level of performance you are fortunate to find yourself in. In a larger standards group there will be experts in many subdivisions and areas where expertise is shared. Find one of those shared areas or an area where expertise is lacking, and become that expert.

No matter which situation you find yourself in you should remember the adage, "If you don't know where you are going, you will end up somewhere else." You need to have an end result in mind before you devise your plan to get there.

Measuring and Enforcing Standards

There are check rides and then there are check rides. One that ends with a new type rating, license or admission into a new tier of aviation is of the former. Everything else is of the latter. Having given both types, let me explain.

If you are in the business of adding to a pilot's license, or granting the pilot's first license for that matter, then you have an exact list of accomplishments you must observe and an exacting list of requirements that must be met. That is pretty cut and dried.

If you are a standards captain charged with monitoring the pilot health of an organization and perhaps observing pilots on the line, you have a different calling. You can call this a check ride if you like, but I prefer the term "line operation observation," or LOO. Its purpose is to:



MARK ESNER

- ▶ Observe crew performance under normal operating conditions.
- ▶ Assess the effectiveness of training programs.
- ▶ Determine awareness of company policies and regulatory requirements.
- ▶ Provide a feedback opportunity for crews.

The LOO is a vital function and every flying organization should have some form of such a program. This can be accomplished by an outside auditor, a standards captain who is also assigned to fly the line, or even a guest pilot from the next hangar. If you are that standards captain you need to learn how to conduct a line operation observation. I've provided a guide on how to set up a LOO program, how to select and train standards captains and how to conduct the LOO itself: <http://www.code7700.com/loo.htm>

Providing Feedback Up and Down the Organization

Providing feedback up to management and down to the line is the most difficult part of standardization. You can have the greatest insights and the best answer to fix what is broken, but if you lack the skill and diplomacy to telegraph those ideas you might as well not have had them in the first place. But before you even cross that line, you need to understand the difference between procedures and techniques. The former is something "the book" says you must do. Most procedures are obviously important and will rarely, if ever, generate any pushback when you

bring them up. A few procedures, however, may be dated or your organization has agreed to institute something better. In this case, these workarounds should be documented. Once things are agreed to by the organization, they become procedures that must be followed and it will be up to you to critique pilots who fail to do so.

By contrast, techniques are things you and others have decided are good ideas and will make your job easier, more efficient and safer. But if these are not specified by "the book," they are not mandatory. You can recommend that pilots adopt them, but you cannot fault them for failing to do so.

If you know a procedure is not being followed by more than just a few pilots, you will have a difficult time convincing them that what they are doing is wrong. "Everyone does that," can be a powerful argument. Even worse, if you were unaware that "everyone does that" and are offered that as an excuse, you might feel you are stuck. You are witnessing a systemic issue, one that is generated by the system, not by the pilots. This calls for a few extra steps.

During the critique you should first ask why the pilots think the breach of procedure is OK and sincerely listen to their responses. Then you can say, "Let me look into this, but let me also recommend you start following this procedure because . . ." and give the reasons. If their reasons appear valid, it may be time for you to look into getting the procedure changed. Otherwise, you will need a discussion with the trainers and management to come up with a solution.

You should conduct a fair and unbiased debriefing based on identifiable factual items. A balance between friendliness and firmness should be maintained. If everything went well, you should cover the flights chronologically.

Always keep in mind the line operation observation requires a thorough debrief. You can be brutally honest if you phrase your critiques skillfully. The observed pilots should welcome the feedback if they understand the entire exercise is aimed at helping them and will not circle back to hurt them. A few examples from line observations I have given over the years:

▶ Two Bombardier Global Express pilots made FMS programming errors resulting in one descent that was too early and a second that was too late. Both said their FMS was prone to these types of miscalculations. They were simply waiting for the FMS top of descent cue. “The box can be pretty smart until its pretty stupid,” I agreed. But then I showed them how simple arithmetic could help them double-check the box’s math.

▶ Two Falcon 900 pilots didn’t trust the dual mode of their dual FMS setup but didn’t know how to use the initiated transfer function, either. The dual mode would commit them to programming errors without a second chance, yet the initiated transfer mode would have solved the problem. Instead they operated independently, and simultaneously programmed their FMS in tandem. I watched as they did this right after takeoff while the pilot hand-flew without looking at his instruments or outside. I timed the event. “You flew with the wings perfectly level for 20 sec. while heads down,” I said. “I’m not sure I could have done that. Let me show you how initiated transfer can fix this.”

▶ Two Bombardier Challenger 604 pilots had expertly flown from one small airport to another and my only critiques were trivial in nature. When I was done, they started to pepper me with questions about company procedures. I had an answer for all but one question. They were very happy to receive direction on the questions I had answered. The one unanswered question revealed a glaring omission in our company manuals that we immediately fixed.

▶ Another Challenger crew loaded their aircraft to a weight authorized

by our company operations manual using airport obstacle analysis software. Right after takeoff the crew accelerated to 200 kt. and the flight was fairly uneventful. During the debrief I asked them if they would have had obstacle clearance had they lost an engine 500 ft. above the runway. They didn’t understand why they wouldn’t. When I pointed out their obstacle clearance was based on flying at V_2+10 kt. and had they lost the engine at 500 ft. when they were doing 200 kt. all of the software’s assumptions would be invalid. “Could you have cleared the peak at 7,000 ft. MSL?” I asked, adding that I didn’t know the answer. But I cautioned, “You cannot assume you will because the takeoff weight was based on different assumptions.” Both pilots agreed this was a big, big problem. I recommended that if they loaded to the specified takeoff weight, they keep the speed profile, even with both engines operating, until the obstacle was beat. They agreed.

If you think there will be a lot of discussion, you should try a facilitative approach to flush out the details of procedures and techniques to be learned. Pilots tend to learn best when participating in the learning process and will “buy in” to a change in behavior better this way. One effective facilitation method is to:

▶ Start with an overview of the LOO, covering the positive points only.

▶ Cover other points and ask a few opening questions per issue.

▶ Get the pilot to do the thinking and talking.

▶ Summarize at the end (it can be useful to get the pilot to summarize), steering the conversation in the direction you think best.

Try to cover good as well as bad points. With the good points, emphasize that you will profit from having seen them in action. For example, “I am going to add that technique to my bag of tricks!” With the bad points, try to interject procedures and techniques that will help them avoid them in the future.

Critiquing procedure — The best way to critique a procedure that was executed poorly or omitted completely is to show how the procedure makes operations safer or more efficient. Following published procedures also make the pilot’s actions more predictable and that enhances crew

coordination. While you should not begin a critique citing chapter and verse of the rule or regulation, it is always helpful to know where the procedure is listed in case the response is, “Who says so?”

Critiquing techniques — If you have a better technique that complements an existing procedure, you should offer the technique as a friendly suggestion. You should make it clear that the technique is not required but a good idea.

For example, let’s say most of your pilots prefer to remove the chocks as soon as the brakes are set during the preflight. They say this ensures they won’t forget them. But let’s say you prefer to keep the airplane chocked until the fuel truck pulls away, to ensure you don’t move with a vehicle parked so closely. If your technique is not mandated by your company operations manual, you should not “scold” the pilots for pulling the chocks. You would do better to note the dangers involved with having a fuel truck parked within a few feet without having the airplane chocked, and recommend they leave the chocks in place. If you feel strongly that your technique should be procedure, you should recommend it be added to the operations manual.

Letting management know — Upper management will want to know when their pilots have excelled and you should certainly share that information. When the news is less than stellar, however, there are a few techniques to improve how well your critiques are received:

▶ If the problem stems from a shortcoming in the manuals or training environment, say so. Rather than say the pilots were unable to properly sequence the FMS for an RNAV approach, say their training was inadequate and perhaps a greater emphasis on this item is in order.

▶ If the individual pilot seemed rusty, say so. Blaming the pilot’s proficiency on a lack of flying can tell management the pilot needs to fly more (if that is true), or that the pilot isn’t keeping in the books and requires motivation.

▶ But in some cases the fault lies with the pilot and no amount of “sugar coating” will soften the blow. I once had to let a chief pilot know that his son was unfit to fly a Cessna Citation Ultra because he simply could not keep up with the airplane. The chief pilot assured me he only paired his son with

MARCH 1, 2018

The National Building Museum
 Washington, DC

Celebrate the
 people that are
 changing the face
 of aviation &
 aerospace.

One Grand Laureate Winner
 will be announced for
 Excellence in Business Aviation.

Join us and meet the people that
 embody the trailblazing spirit of
 innovation and transformation.

Additional Grand Laureate
 categories include Space, Defense
 and Commercial Aviation.

Reserve your place today!

laureates.aviationweek.com

the strongest captains, but he appreciated my honesty. I began the steps needed to have our management company disqualify the pilot but the chief pilot must have read the handwriting on the wall and pulled his son from the flight department.

As pilots we are expected to never compromise safety. But as professional business pilots we are also employees paid to help the company get its work done and our decisions can often have measurably adverse impacts on the company's bottom line. Non-union pilots flying the line don't have much of a voice with management. A standards captain does.

Complaints – Pilots can be reluctant to complain to management, especially if they think management will react negatively. As a standards captain, you can listen to the same complaints and perhaps come up with a solution short of notifying management. Or, with your level of experience, you can phrase the complaint in a way that will not anger management. Or, finally, with your credibility, you can convince management something needs to be done. You can provide the line pilot an avenue not normally available.

I once provided a series of line observations in a flight department that was going through considerable turnover. As I praised a senior pilot's performance, he made an offhanded comment about how management didn't appreciate experience because they were paying new hires more than some of the older pilots. I brought this up to the director of aviation who said it wasn't true. He wasn't aware of the pay inequity rumor and took steps to assure his more-experienced pilots that their seniority was valued with higher pay.

Suggestions – Sometimes an idea isn't a complaint, it is just a suggestion about how to do something better. But the person making the suggestion feels reluctant to speak up or is unsure that the effort will be successful. Here again a standards captain can provide the necessary "mojo."

A standards captain holds a unique position between line pilots getting the job done and a large organization's management team unfamiliar with the normal trials and tribulations of day-to-day line flying. But the standards captain is a member of upper management and thus equipped with a louder and more credible voice to

make changes and voice the concerns of line pilots.

A standards captain in a smaller organization also holds this unique position. The chief pilot in a smaller organization may fly the same schedule as his line pilots but might not understand the challenges faced by newer and less-experienced pilots. Here is where the standards captain can serve an invaluable service, letting the boss know how things are for everyone else.

The 'I' Words

After a career of instructing and evaluating as a military and civilian pilot, I've found instructing more rewarding than evaluating but evaluating an even more effective method of instructing at a higher level. More times than not, the evaluating role meant higher promotion, job status and more of that other "I" word: income.

But we need to be clear about one very distinct disadvantage of a standards captain's job when compared to that of a line instructor pilot. To do the job well, the standards captain deals with negative as well as positive news. A pilot may feel threatened by a standards captain who points out procedures are not being followed. But the news a standards captain brings to senior leadership can be unpalatable as well. Telling the boss that the cheapest training vendor isn't satisfactory can cause management to question the decision to promote you to standards in the first place.

As a line instructor, you can be an effective agent of change, but your dissenting opinions can be easily dismissed. As a standards captain you have a leadership position in the organization that requires you to speak up when you detect the rules and regulations are not being followed. You will likely be pressured at some point to look the other way, and this brings up one last "I" word to consider: integrity.

You bring a certain amount of integrity to the job and your standards captaincy will either add to your reputation of integrity, or will erase it completely. If you survive this test of your integrity, your reputation as a standards captain will grow. I've found that a standards captain who is respected by both management and the line can be the best instructor of them all. **BCA**