

Normalization of Deviance

Devil in the details

BY ALLEN SILVER



As I'm winging my way home from the good life in Costa Rica on my favorite airline that serves peanuts and where bags fly free, I've decided to write my column about how a three-word concept has come into my understanding during the past three months. It keeps showing up, and I think it also has great value to aerobatic pilots. It is called the "normalization of deviance."

I heard this term first at the International Council of Air Shows last December; the second time was at the National Warbird Operators Conference in February; and the last was in an article from the latest *Parachutist* magazine. These speakers, authors, and I are all talking about our fields of expertise, but we all are preaching the same sermon. I'll tell you

about them, but first will give you a little background on what "normalization of deviance" means.

Now we all take risks of one kind or another, and life itself is a risk. But that is not what I am talking about here. I am talking about how some practices have become so out of the norm that the consequences have led to disastrous effect. Sociologist Diane Vaughan, Ph.D., described the term in her studies of deviance in organizations. Professor Vaughan teaches and conducts research at Columbia University's Department of Sociology. Her list of awards and accomplishments are numerous. Her most recent endeavors include researching how large groups or organizations affect the decision-making of the individual.

Professor Vaughan explains normalization of deviance as

when people within an organization become so accustomed to changing the rules and guidelines that they don't consider their new change as deviant despite the fact that they have far exceeded their own rules for elementary safety. As people grow more accustomed to the new deviant behavior, the more it occurs. To people outside the organization, the activities seem deviant; however, people within the organization do not recognize the deviance because it is seen as a normal occurrence. She further explains that education is the best solution for mitigating deviant behavior. Being clear about standards and rewarding those who come forward (whistle-blowers) is part of the education that needs to take place.

So what does this have to do with us? Whether we are part of a large organization, a community organization such as the International Aerobatic Club, or even a member of a local IAC chapter, we need to think less individualistic and more as team players to stop the negative effects due to our deviance from accepted standards and practices. Our thinking and practices need to become more team-based, where each person can see that he is letting his fellow flyers down when he subverts or overlooks rules and accepted procedures. Leaders need to set an example with their full cooperation. A top-down approach is very important.

Education — and also continuing education when updates are known — is vital. For instance, after years of flying, major airlines understand the need for cockpit resource management (CRM). After numerous accidents where the right seat never questioned the left seat, the airlines developed CRM training, and the accident rate dropped dramatically. We still have airplanes landing short of the runway, such as at San Francisco, because of the failure to speak up. How do you explain that to someone after an accident “if only I had spoken up I may have prevented this accident”? Preventing deviance from rules is easier than correcting damages (if that’s possible) that result from changing time-proven procedures even slightly.

The whole point of my column is the importance of working as a team to help deviated practices from becoming “the new norm.”

International Council of Air Shows

At the 2016 ICAS Convention in Las Vegas, astronaut Charles Pre-

**Preventing deviance
from rules is easier
than correcting
damages
(if that’s possible)
that result from
changing time-proven
procedures even slightly.**

court gave a talk that was quite an eye-opener. Not only has he been in space aboard the shuttle and spent time on the International Space Station, Precourt was also one of the investigators of the 1986 Challenger and 2003 Columbia disasters. What he spoke about was the normalization of deviance, as in “We’ve always done it this way — why change?” In the case of the Challenger, the faulty O-rings in the rocket boosters were of concern to some of the engineers, but they were considered not a problem because they had worked before. The group that had assessed the joints had conducted tests to find the limits and capabilities of the joint performance. Each time evidence, initially interpreted as a deviation from expected performance, was reinterpreted as within the bounds of acceptable risk. The acceptance of this risk led to the Challenger exploding on the morning of January 28, 1986.

Precourt went on to explain that pieces of foam had been coming off the shuttles on lift-

off and had never caused a problem. So why worry? It was considered within acceptable risk. Well, tell that to the families of the Columbia astronauts when it disintegrated on re-entry.

The normalization of deviance has and will continue to cost the lives of people until we take another look at how we conduct our pre-flight inspections, maintenance, and parachute procedures, or how we’ve always done a particular maneuver before with no problem.

National Warbird Operators Conference

The second example of normalization of deviance came during the recent NWOC held this past February in Virginia Beach, Virginia, where I was one of

the guest speakers. I was invited to give my bailout seminar. I have been a guest speaker at NWOC on at least four occasions over the past 10 years. This group of dedicated pilots recognizes the need for continuous education to help mitigate the normalization of deviance. It was during my presentation there that I spoke on this three-word concept I’d first heard about in Las Vegas two months prior. The goal of my presentations is not only to present my “Bailout and Survival Equipment Seminar” to pilots but also to help them understand that the normalization of deviance is not normal. I don’t want you to ever have to see if your expensive cushion (parachute) works.

What was unusual was that when I was through with my presentation, the very next speaker, John Lohmar, unbeknownst to me, spoke about “Your Risk Perception Profile.” John is a graduate of the NTSB’s Aviation Accident Investigation School and is a certified aviation accident in-

investigator. He does expert witness testimony, safety consultation, and accident investigation. What do you think he talked about in depth? You guessed it — the normalization of deviance.

Later, it was refreshing to see this group break into smaller group discussions on safety-related issues. At the ICAS convention, it also has one particular session for pilots. Here they discuss openly and candidly the previous year's accidents and incidents in the hopes of preventing future accidents.

Parachutist Magazine

When I arrived home from the conference, I was pleased to find my copy of *Parachutist* magazine waiting for me. For those of you who don't know, I've been skydiving for more than 54 years. Although I will admit that I stay in the aircraft more now, I have accumulated almost 2,000 hours of flight time. But let's get back to the magazine.

I opened the March issue and found an article that spoke about the normalization of deviance. The article was written by Chet Boyce and was titled "Military Aviation's Lessons for Skydivers." He talked about naval aviation and how it operated on the envelope's edge, which means there is no margin for error. He discussed the need for a robust safety program in naval aviation and how other industries have adopted similar programs. Such programs are equally relevant to the world of skydiving. I had just finished reading the first few paragraphs when I came upon the next section titled "Normalization of Deviance." This was the third time in less than three months that the words "normalization of deviance" came up. Chet went on to

How can we have an effect on stopping the "it's always worked before" attitude?

describe how one simple act out of the norm with repetition soon becomes "the new norm."

I would like to talk about my profession. That's where I'm the expert. I spent 18 of my 25 years in the Air Force working with parachutes and other survival equipment. I was constantly teaching continuous education classes to reinforce known practices that would help our pilots survive in case of an emergency. I've been involved with skydiving and parachutes in the civilian and military world for more than 54 years. I'm an FAA master parachute rigger and was a designated parachute rigger examiner for many years. Besides giving the practical and oral exams to upcoming parachute riggers and issuing them temporary certificates, I also helped with accident investigations. I have seen the normalization of deviance at work. Trust me, pilots or sky-

divers have not found new ways to kill themselves. They simply keep repeating the same mistakes over and over again. We're all creatures of habit, and those good habits need reinforcement continuously to make them become second nature or, as I would say, "committed to muscle memory."

As I'm going home as a passenger in an aircraft at 38,000 feet, it's comforting to know that the two pilots up front go through continuing education all the time to reinforce best and proven procedures so we all arrive safely at our destination. There are countless occupations that require their employees to go through continuing education courses with some regularity to prevent the normalization of deviance.

My question to you is: How can we have an effect on stopping the "it's always worked before" attitude? Just because you've sometimes or always bypassed or changed the rules and it's worked, it doesn't mean you're not in for a rude awakening someday. It's not as simple as just saying I'll stop being complacent. There is work on your part. You must come forward and be honest with yourself.

One of the big killers and causes of accidents is when a dangerous task becomes rote. This is one of the most dangerous times when deviation from best practices can sneak up on us. Things such as fatigue and stress also can contribute to poor decision-making. When you accept lower standards of performance, you're letting your guard down and you're setting yourself up for costly mistakes. In the article written for *Parachutist* magazine, Chet mentioned something very important. He said, "People can

generally easily spot complacency in others, but find it hard to spot in themselves.”

Now let's get back to the question of how you can help prevent the “it's always worked before” attitude. I suggest that you sit down with your group and seriously discuss having a safety day.

For several years, the United States Parachute Association has been having a safety day program in which drop zones can participate, one weekend a year. It works and likely has saved many lives over the years. The military calls it a stand-down. However, just thinking about safety is not enough. Bring in guest speakers with fresh ideas. Continuing education is available to help refresh and reinforce your safety procedures and maybe teach you a new procedure or technique of which you were unaware. Let me or another qualified person talk about parachute and aircraft procedures. Call it “Save My Butt Day” or whatever, but be proactive and do something before I or someone else gets a call to help with an accident investigation.

There is no such thing as an unsafe question, but there are unsafe answers! Let's make the normalization of deviance a thing of the past.

Take care, fly safely, and blue skies. **IAC**




Our service is our signature.

TransWorld Aero offers all fundamental parachute rigging services from the basic repack to minor and major repairs. In addition to maintenance services we are proud to offer custom fitting, and instructional workshops for newly purchased equipment.

Get to know your gear *and* your riggers.

- ➔ Receiving + shipping
- ➔ Drop box available for fly-by drop offs + pick ups
- ➔ Parachute Rigging, Repacking + Repairs
- ➔ Custom fitting + Equipment Workshops

 Parachute Loft located @ Rosamond Skypark (L00)

We are the last to let you down.

Ship to: 4205 Knox Avenue Rosamond, CA 93560	Mail to: PO Box 3392 Quartz Hill, CA 93586
---	---

mike@transworldaero.com | 661-206-8301
www.transworldaero.com



ROLL WITH US FOR LIFE



Demonstrate your support and commitment to promoting the safety and enjoyment of sport aerobatics with an IAC Lifetime Membership, the highest level of IAC membership with exclusive credentials and a lifetime of benefits.

VISIT IAC.org/life-time-membership or call 800-JOIN-EAA

EAA Lifetime Membership is required when applying for IAC Lifetime Membership



You Can't Scare Us!

We Can Teach ANYONE to Land a Pitts!

- 44 Years Experience.
- Train for Skybolt, Eagle, Model 12, S-1S, etc.
- We love crosswinds.
- We love low time pilots.
- We love narrow, short runways.
- Yeah, we love akro too.

Stay at "Our Place" — Families Welcome!



Budd Davison's Plus 5 Aviation, LLC
602-738-2045 - buddairbum@cox.net - Phoenix, AZ 85029

Visit us at www.airbum.com