

# Seeing the Big Picture

How visualization can help your students fly better

BY WAYNE PRODGER

**D**uring our training, most of us measure our progress against the progress of other students. We can't help it; it's just human nature. After a while, we may notice that some students' flying skills appear to be much better than our own.

When we start, we're all inexperienced at flying. For the most part, we're on an even playing field. We all fly the same lessons, and we all have the same number of hours each day, so we can't attribute better skills to having more time. A lot of the top students don't seem to be smarter than we are or have a richer aviation background. So, what is it that allows some students to outperform others?

The difference is that some students can focus on their goals and manage their time more effectively. As instructors, we can help our students succeed by teaching them how to visualize their flying skills. Not only does visualization help with time management, it also reinforces what students have learned and breaks down some of the mental barriers that can block their ability to learn.

Visualization is particularly effective for learning a new skill (such as helicopter flying) or honing a skill you already have, and it's never too soon to teach this "magic" technique. I introduce new students to visualization during the first orientation and introduction meeting. Even though it may be a couple of lessons before they're ready to use it, I think it's important to let students

know ahead of time what they'll be doing and the keys to effectively using this tool.

To understand how to use visualization, and how to teach it, we'll explore the technique and how it's applied. Who knows, it may be the technique that lets your students experience a significant breakthrough and finally "get it."

**1. What is visualization?** Visualization is the art and skill of creating a mental model of an event or situation. The student controls the outcome of an "imaginary" flight with thoughts and muscle memory. Top students visualize frequently and consistently throughout their training.

**2. How does it work?** Our bodies can't tell the difference between a real experience and one we are vividly imagining. We aren't able to think or imagine without some level of physical response. During visualization, the thoughts and images a student controls in his mind lead to controlling his muscles properly. If he repeats the mental visualization in the proper sequence with the correct thoughts and images, his body learns the correct corresponding physical movements as well. This "pattern" is gradually strengthened to the point where, when he performs the maneuver "for real," there is a higher probability he will respond with the correct physical movements.

The more vivid and detailed the visualization, the more powerful the effect on the

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body. Visualizing the maneuver as real—think HDTV—and as precisely as possible actually produces physical sensations in the human body. Getting this "feeling" as he visualizes flying is very important. This "feeling" means he is making a connection between his brain and his body.

**3. Why is visualization hard work?** For students to develop strong mental skills and to get the most out of visualization, they have to be able to control the images being "seen" in their minds. The student controls the speed, precision, and outcome of the maneuver with his mind. Visualization is hard mental work; it is not to be confused with daydreaming. If a student concentrates on sharpening his visualization skills, he will develop a very effective and powerful tool. This mental tool can lead to earlier success and more proficient flying.

We've all experienced frustrating moments where we're not able to perform as



well as we know we can, or where we try the same maneuver over and over while still making the same mistakes. As instructors, we demonstrate a maneuver so our students know what it should look like, what it will feel like, what it should sound like. On the occasion that a student does it right, she knows the great feeling of having done a maneuver well. When using visualization, she should understand that “seeing” the maneuver requires being able to mentally picture, in a clear and graphic way, everything that happens when doing the maneuver correctly.

#### 4. How do students do it?

First, your student should go to a quiet place where she can concentrate. Remind her that she is going to be flying the maneuver in her mind, so she has to be in a place that allows her to “hear” the engine, “feel” the helicopter, and “see” all the proper images. Advise her to take a series of slow, deep breaths to reach a state of relaxation.

To begin, she should remember in detail how she felt just before doing the maneuver. She should notice her level of confidence, and remember the kinds of positive statements you said to her right before she started the maneuver (she should be telling herself something positive before beginning each maneuver).

Second, she wants to see the maneuver in her mind all the way through to its completion. She should visualize the maneuver, feel the maneuver, and involve all of her senses. She should see all of the gauges as she does her instrument scan. She should be positive. She should hold her hands and feet in the same position that she would if she had the controls in them. She should focus her attention on each little detail that contributed to that maneuver being successful and feel these senses become deeply imprinted in her mind and impressed in her body memory as well, so that

anytime she wants, she can picture and describe this maneuver.

Third, she should do it again. Each time she does a mental rehearsal, it reinforces and programs her desired performance level. When she practices visualization, she influences her thinking and her behavior toward reaching the desired

effect—nailing the maneuver.

The more often your students use this technique, the more natural visualization will become. The rewards will be significant improvement in their performance and progress throughout their training.

In other words, they’ll make progress you both can definitely see. ■

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