



BONNIE KRATZ

The Talk

Counseling problem students is one of the hardest things you'll do

by David Ison, MCFI

Flight instructors work in the trenches training pilots of all walks of life and levels of expertise. They act as the true frontline gatekeepers for aviation. Regardless of whether a flight instructor works at a small flight school, in a large university program, or in a training department at an airline, he has an obligation to do the best he can, which, at times, includes winnowing out dangerous or maldroit pilots.

Although rare, just about every flight instructor has been forced to engage in the most unpleasant of conversations: counseling a student to discontinue flying. Yet no matter how hard this task is, we as professional flight instructors owe it to our students and to our industry to be realistic about student performance and capabilities. By doing so, we can prevent future "accidents" from moving through the training pipeline. In the most extreme of examples, if the flight

instruction community had fulfilled this obligation, the 9/11 attacks may have never come to fruition.

Before any instructor starts formulating plans to rid himself of a problematic student, he should first be aware of the intent of this article. Everyone who has assumed the role of a flight—or even ground—instructor has had his share of questionable students. Those who have not been so lucky will no doubt soon have one eventually. Yet by no means should this process be rushed or taken lightly. Nor should it be assumed that it can be done alone and without the input of fellow instructors and support staff. Instead, the best way to handle potential problems is through an organized process, an example of which is offered here. The first step, of course, is realizing that there is a problem. The second is evaluating the student in question, which draws on the opinions and observations of multiple parties. Finally, if it's deemed necessary, the instructor must counsel

the student in question. I assure you, I've learned this process the hard way, and I've seen what happens when a pilot falls through the cracks.

Problem Students

In any learning environment, there are always different levels of student ability, motivation, and intelligence, as well as different personalities. Just because a student is not performing perfectly or comparably to other students does not necessarily mean that there's a problem. I have seen students make very slow starts and then take off to surpass their counterparts. Identifying a true problem is not usually hard to do. When something is amiss, it typically will stick out like a sore thumb.

Consistency and trend are the two key clues to identifying trouble. Is the student consistent? In other words, in general does he act responsibly and competently? If so, count your blessings. If the student is a wild card—

you're never sure what you will get on any particular day, or he is consistently capricious and ineffectual—it's time to take a closer look.

Trends are also important. Inclination toward improvement is highly desirable. All students are bound to hit a plateau in their training, but if there is a clear, invariable migration toward a decline in performance, the situation warrants more analysis. Likewise, no change in performance can be a warning sign—that is, the student doesn't really seem to make progress no matter how frequently he shows up at the airport.

An abrupt change in either of these clues almost always means something is going on in your student's life. Be prepared to probe in a tactful and nonthreatening way to find out what's up.

Obviously, you'll see different types and severities of behavioral problems. Some issues can be readily identified, evaluated, discussed with the student, and even corrected then and there. Others point to the need for the individual to pick a new hobby or career. Certainly there are endless categories and intensities of issues, but in order to simplify things, it's easiest to address them in broad terms. Student quandaries normally assign themselves to one or more of three realms: physical, fiscal, and psychological/emotional.

Physical obstacles range from health problems to a lack of hands-on ability. While flight instructors are not medical examiners, we have to be realistic about the prospects for people with serious health problems. Under these circumstances, refer the student to a medical examiner for the evaluation step; then meet with him again to discuss the future of his training.

There will also always be people who think that learning to fly is a great idea but just can't hack it. No matter how much time you spent on the basics, they just can't put it all together consistently and safely. If

there's anything positive to say about physical complications it's that they are among the easiest to spot. And instructors who properly track consistency and trends in the student's training will be able to best address these types of issues.

Discuss the issues that give you apprehension in order to inform, seek advice, and request outside assistance. At this point, the consorts present should offer their ideas as how to handle the situation.

Fiscal constraints are also fairly easy to identify. Students with tight finances will only be able to fly infrequently, and that leads to frustration for both the individual and his instructor. He may also be concerned about the cost of doing extra ground instruction or taking more than the bare minimum to complete steps in training. There is little doubt that flight training is an expensive undertaking, and unless one is independently wealthy, paying for flying is a struggle for a significant portion of the pilot population.

However, there is a point where it is not safe for an individual to fly because of a lack of proficiency. It is understandable that money will be an issue for almost every student at some point, but if you apply the con-

sistency and trend tests, it should become clear when fiscal restrictions are crimping the realistic probability of success.

The most complex set of potential conundrums involves the emotional or psychological states of students. We all learned the basics about what kinds of challenges might arise in the Fundamentals of Instruction (FOI). Though the FOI touches on what amounts to the tip of the iceberg, it is a good place to start to determine what is "normal" and what is not. By no means can we ever expect to be psychoanalysts, yet you don't have to be Sigmund Freud to figure out some of the struggles that go beyond the FOI.

There are personalities that just don't mesh with aviation, such as extreme versions of the typical "hazardous attitudes"—macho, invulnerability, and so forth. Some students just never seem to grasp good decision-making no matter how many scenarios they go through or how many seasoned instructors they work with. There are the lazy students who fly like Chuck Yeager but won't sit down to learn squat about their airplane, regulations, or other critical bits of knowledge.

There is also the rare breed of students with serious psychological problems that pose a danger to themselves and the flying community. Clearly, some of these students may be hard to identify, but it is paramount that instructors take their duty as gatekeepers seriously and take action in cases where there are disconcerting questions.

Evaluating Problems

Once you've gathered enough evidence to warrant concern, you can move on to the next step in the process: evaluation. At this point, you should put together a briefing that includes the student's training folder or records, trend indicators, and other general bits of data that may explain the situation to others. Arrange a meet-

ing with your chief flight instructor or supervisor, depending on the hierarchy of your particular flight school. This probably shouldn't be the first time the boss has heard about this particular student; open lines of communication are critical in flight schools, though unfortunately this isn't always the case. You would also be wise to include other senior flight instructors in the discussion, if they are available.

Discuss the issues that give you apprehension in order to inform, seek advice, and request outside assistance. At this point, the consorts present should offer their ideas as how to handle the situation. Depending on the nature and urgency of the problem, they may simply offer suggestions to take back to future lessons, but if the situation is dire, your colleagues may feel an immediate intervention is necessary. Arrange for the student to fly with one or more senior flight instructors for further evaluation. If it hasn't been blazingly obvious yet, these types of scenarios reinforce the requirement for keeping excellent and detailed student records.

In an ideal situation, this evaluation will discover the roots of the problem and determine that everything is, in fact, okay, and the student can move on successfully with a change of instructor, a change in instruction technique, or some other easy fix. Very rarely—though occasionally—you must move on to the final step: counseling.

Honestly, this is not a fun thing to do. It's uncomfortable for those doing the counseling, as well as for the individual at the receiving end. Be aware that no one likes to be criticized, nor do they enjoy being told their dream may not be what is best for them. Be considerate, and be discreet. This should be done behind closed doors and out of earshot of the pilot's lounge. The chief instructor, flight school owner, or other senior individual should also be present at the meeting.

The student shouldn't be surprised by the need to have such a meeting. You should have already made a general, but clear, expression of concern to the student in a nonconfrontational, candid manner throughout the identification and evaluation processes. Welcome the student, open with an overview of the situation, and ask for his input on how he feels things are going. This will provide some insight into how the rest

Some issues can be readily identified, evaluated, discussed with the student, and even corrected then and there. Others point to the need for the individual to pick a new hobby or career.

of the counseling session should go.

There are some considerations that must be addressed that guide how firm or direct this counseling should be. What are the career aspirations of the student? Does he simply want to get a private certificate to fly around the patch, or does he want to fly heavy iron? The problem may be something that can be resolved easily for a pilot who aspires to fly a Cessna 172, but it may not be surmountable for someone who expects to make a living flying jets.

Also, what is the type of issue at hand? Is it a maturity-related complication? Or is it a drug or alcohol dependency problem? The former

may only require some general counseling, with the suggestion of taking some time off. The latter requires immediate grounding.

Is the student just being lazy or does he have something going on in his life affecting his ability to concentrate on flying? The first may be resolved simply with a wake-up call, while the second requires further introspection and perhaps some time to resolve the issues before hitting the skies again.

In short, one size does not fit all.

The last consideration is the student's personality. Clearly, some people will accept—or even need—more firm discussions, while others may be offended, become angry, or just move on to another flight school.

Once all the variables have been worked out and the student has had the chance to tell his side of the story, begin your discussion about the prospects of the student successfully completing whatever stage of training he is currently pursuing. Feel free to discuss the issues mentioned by the student if they may affect the direction of the recommendations, but if they didn't change your mind, present evidence to show the student that there are identifiable obstacles that have not been overcome successfully throughout a long duration of training with a variety of instructors. Again, none of this should really be a surprise to the student if communications throughout the process were open and forthright. It would be understandable that a student might become angry or perplexed if all of this is “news to him.”

From here, there are several different recommendations you can make, depending on whether the student needs an attitude adjustment or outright grounding because he's dangerous. For the languid pilot, the discussion may boil down to a reality check about what it takes to be a successful pilot. For the pilot who can't keep the dirty side of the airplane down after 100 hours of instruction—though, obviously,

it should never be allowed to go this far—advise him to choose another hobby or career. Be sure to explain the financial side of things as well. It is, without a doubt, a waste of the student's money and time to continue flying, but it's also important to warn the individual that there may be other flight schools out there that will happily take his cash, even if they don't change the fundamentals of his situation.

In Practice

It's easy to talk about all of this in theory, but how does it work in the real world? Personally, I have only had to counsel a few students in my 14 years of teaching. Of these individuals, only one warranted a recommendation to stop flying. My peers locally report similar experiences.

So what types of situations have I and others like me had to deal with? Here are a few, from the easiest (relatively speaking) to the hardest to the most painful.

One of my colleagues from years ago gave a glaring example of a student who needed to be grounded. This individual would always show up late to lessons, particularly on Saturday and Sunday mornings. His eyes would be bloodshot, he was unprepared, and he often got queasy while flying. He was obviously showing up with a hangover. The instructor suggested alternate lesson times and had the student fly with the head of the flight school. Then the individual started to show up smelling of booze.

This was a no-brainer. The pilot had some serious alcohol problems. The three-step process (identification, evaluation, and counseling) went quickly. Thankfully for all of us in aviation, the student agreed with the suggestion to throw in the towel.

Another student had a hard time affording lessons. He would show up once every six to eight weeks. Each lesson ended up being a review. After having the student fly with other

instructors and explaining the situation to the chief flight instructor, the instructor advised the student to stop occasional lessons and save up enough money to fly regularly enough to knock out the desired rating at a later date. The student was actually quite relieved, and he thanked the flight school profusely. About eight months later, the student returned, flew several times a week, and got the ticket he was shooting for, all with a lot less stress and frustration.

A more difficult case was the student who kept flying on a regular basis but got nowhere. In this case, I was part of the evaluation panel. At the student's request, I flew with him on several occasions. Each time it seemed as though we ended up back at square one. This story meshed with all of the other instructors who had flown with them. No matter how you sliced it, this student could not safely fly alone in the clouds. We sat the student down for a chat, and he agreed with our observations. In fact, he ended up telling us that he was scared to fly on instruments and really did not want to, but he felt as though he "had" to get his instrument rating.

And then there was the student of a colleague of mine. Every lesson was different. One day the student did marginally well, while the next he was downright scary. The student had significant situational awareness problems and would get lost once outside the traffic pattern. He'd also have emotional problems in the airplane that he apparently did not have on the ground. With many hours under their belt, he was still not ready to solo. After many evaluations with senior flight instructors, he was advised to stop flying. He was also warned about trying to fly at other flight schools. Sadly, the student left angrily and started training again somewhere else. The owner of the subsequent flight school was notified about this student, to no avail. After many more hours, and more money, the individ-

ual eventually quit flying.

My final example is a sad case because there was no system for intervention and warning signs were ignored. The young student pilot wowed his flight instructor. He did just about everything right and was one of the best students at the school. All of sudden he started to change. His performance dropped and several individuals at the flight school noticed that the student appeared depressed, but none of these observations were shared or discussed among school employees.

One day, the student went out to preflight the aircraft and took off without his instructor. The student killed himself. Luckily, no one else was injured in the aircraft-assisted suicide.

Hopefully, the need for instructors to be active gatekeepers to the aviation industry is ever more apparent. We all have an obligation to protect students from themselves if they should not be in the air. By doing so, we also ensure that the public and the rest of the aviation community remain as safe as possible.

The process outlined here is not always easy to undertake, and counseling of students can sometimes be very difficult, but we must continue to do it for the sake of our profession. But it requires that schools improve communication and the coordination of their training, if only to ensure problems do not simply migrate around the system. If flight instructors do not stand tall in the doorway to the world of aviation, potential pilots face few obstacles separating them from catastrophe.

NAFI Master Instructor David Ison is an assistant professor of aviation at Rocky Mountain College in Billings, Montana, where he specializes in new-technologies instruction. He also serves as a coach of the college's National Intercollegiate Flying Association flight team and writes for numerous aviation publications. ■