



Constructive Impatience : : Do it, do it soon, and do it smart

By Peter v. Agur Jr.

WE KNOW ABOUT DEATH AND TAXES, BUT ARE YOU FAMILIAR WITH LIFE'S THIRD CERTAINTY? CHANGE. IT HAPPENS, AND WHEN IT HAPPENS WE MUST ACCOMMODATE IT OR SUFFER THE CONSEQUENCES. THE BEST APPROACH IS TO ANTICIPATE CHANGE AND PREPARE FOR IT, BUT OFTEN THAT MEANS ENLISTING THE HELP AND SUPPORT OF OTHERS TO ACCOMPLISH THE CHANGE. EFFECTIVE MANAGERS DEVISE AND IMPLEMENT STRATEGIES TO ACCOMPLISH THOSE IMPORTANT GOALS.

Two starving buzzards are perched on a dead limb in the heat of the sweltering desert. One turns to the other and says, "Patience my tail feathers. Let's go kill something!" In other words, patience is *not* always a virtue.

That buzzard was demonstrating a leadership skill that I call *constructive impatience*. As a leader and manager within a business aviation organization, you are responsible for the creation and assurance of safety, service, and efficiency. That's a huge responsibility requiring a great deal of help from your boss, your team, and your customers. If you don't exercise constructive impatience, failure may be only a matter of when and how badly.

When I talk about impatience in a professional environment I am not talking about acting like a dog with a bladder problem. I'm talking about exhibiting the leadership courage it takes to ask the hard questions and do the hard things sooner rather than later. The following three case studies help to explain my point.

Case Study 1: "Fixing the Boss"

About a year ago Phil was hired to be the director of aviation for a closely held service company in the upper Midwest. He came to the job with all the skills, experience, and knowledge it takes to his job. He was told to take the flight department's organization, operational, and business performance to "the next level." He will fail if he isn't constructively impatient.

Phil reports directly to the president of the company. She said she wants him to be a part of her management team. She also said she wants the flight department to perform as well as any other unit within the core business. Those are reasonable expectations expressed by most senior executives. But her actions haven't matched her mouth.

During the past nine months the strategic direction of the company has shifted in response to dramatic changes in the marketplace. Parts of the business have been divested. Others have been dramatically downsized. As a result, much of the senior management team has been replaced or pulled out.



Phil has watched all this happen and wondered if the boom was going to drop on the airport, too. After several months of waiting for some kind of news, he asked the president for a meeting to discuss how the changes in the business and user group impact the services and business of the flight department. So far, she has not made time available for that meeting.

To make things even more interesting, the company president is in the midst of negotiations for a new aircraft--without Phil's direct involvement. The president is orchestrating the deal through internal staffers and attorneys. Despite Phil's multiple offers to assist, his only role in the transaction has been to respond to her direct requests for data. Phil knows that if he continues to be patient, he will be on the sidelines while the company wastes his valuable experience. He will also have to live with whatever comes out of this aircraft deal. Although the president's intent isn't sinister, the end result is that Phil is being set up to fail.

Rather than complain about the situation, Phil thought through the issues and opportunities. He realized that if he delayed, there would be little he could do to contribute to the success of his department and the company. He needed to do something quickly. Otherwise, he would end up looking for career landmines with his size nines.

With that in mind, Phil wanted to meet with his president as soon as practical. He sent her an e-mail indicating the urgency of the meeting, that they could cover his questions in no more than 30 minutes (bite-sized is best when asking for senior executive's time), and his note included a description of the two things on his agenda:

1. What can the flight department do differently to support the changes in the company?
2. How do the changes in the company affect her expectations of him?

She responded via e-mail to meet her the next Monday morning in her office at 7:30 over coffee. It was apparent, as the conversation began, that she thought Phil was there to complain about not being in charge of all things aviation. But when Phil kept the conversation at a high level and on subject, she realized that he truly was more than just the oldest pilot in the barn. The meeting lasted for more than an hour with a lot of good information shared. Phil stayed focused on what he and the department could do to help her create the results she expected for the company, the department, and specifically for the ongoing aircraft transaction. As their conversation evolved, it became obvious to Phil that she had stereotyped him as a super throttle jock who was apt to be either too narrow of view or too self-centered to be a team player in the game of hardball she was conducting. It also became apparent that their meeting had influenced her opinion of Phil.

Phil knows he will have to earn his president's full respect over time by doing the right things for the right reasons. He also knows that by pushing for that meeting he helped shape the future of his department and his authority to lead it.



Phil's sense of urgency was based in the knowledge that if you aren't certain you are aligned with your boss about what is expected of you and your department, or if you haven't been given the authority and resources you need to do your job, you are hanging off a career cliff on a frayed rope. That's a good time to get constructively impatient.

Case Study Two: Turning the Tide

Jim has been the company's chief pilot of a single-aircraft operation for nearly a decade. For almost that entire time he has wanted to establish an emergency response plan (ERP) for the flight services group. And for nearly a decade he has been told by his boss, the VP of Administrative Services, that it was a great idea--but not yet, not this year, not this budget cycle, etc.

Jim took that "no" for an answer. In fact, he was a bit stoic about it. Although in his gut he knew his department needed an ERP, the delays avoided the pressure of assuming the extra burden of leading or supporting the ERP development process. Additionally, as chief pilot, he would probably be on the scene of the emergency event. If so, he could either lead the response process from there or he wouldn't be in any condition to worry about it.

Although his dark-humored approach is not uncommon, his patience is not constructive. By not getting the ERP done in a timely fashion, the department and the company remained dramatically exposed to the risks associated with being under-prepared, until this year.

Jessica is Jim's scheduler. She came from the company's executive administrative assistant group three years ago. She has learned fast and done a great job. As a reward for her performance, Jim endorsed Jessica's attendance at the NBAA's Schedulers and Dispatchers conference this past January in Orlando. One of the sessions she opted to attend was about emergency response planning. During that program Jess realized just how central her role and responsibilities would be in the event of an aircraft accident or incident.

When Jess returned from the Orlando conference she briefed Jim on her trip. She made a special point of explaining her concern for the need for an emergency response plan. When Jim began to recite his historic challenges she got right in his face, as only a scheduler can seem to do. Her most powerful point was that she felt personally responsible for being prepared. She was concerned that she would be in a terrible position unless something was done to fill the gap between having only an outdated phone contact list and being able to do some good for survivors, the victims, their families, and the company

Jim pointed out his past efforts and the stone walls he'd encountered. Jess reminded Jim of her knowledge of how downtown works and asked permission to take a shot at getting the program approved. Jim turned her loose.



Jess put together an ERP development plan and asked Jim to arrange for an appointment for them to meet with Jim's boss. As the meeting began, Jim made the introductions and made it clear that Jess was the meeting leader and that he supported her completely. Jess was polite but firm throughout meeting. She put her argument in economic and organizational terms. The VP listened politely. As Jess' presentation came to a close he understood the energy she had around the issue. That impressed him enough to ask her why she felt so strongly about spending time and money on a project that, admittedly, had very little probability of ever being used.

Her response stopped him cold. "Because, if we are prepared, I'll be able to sleep better at night. If we're not, you shouldn't."

A week later the VP called Jim to inform him of his approval to proceed with the emergency response plan. Jim asked what Jessica had said to convince him now was the time. "She pushed the issue. It was obvious how much she believes in getting this done. I would have given you the same go-ahead if you had pushed as hard as she did."

Jim's patience had been read by the VP as a lack of commitment to an important program. Jessica's constructive impatience turned the tide.

Case Study Three: "F Troop"

Ken's challenge is very different. Two years ago he was promoted to director of aviation. He reported to the chief financial officer (CFO). The CFO and the company's chairman had explained to Ken at the time of his promotion that they wanted the flight department to continue to operate from two bases, but, like other parts of the company, the operation should become more effective and efficient through common systems, policies, and shares resources. Over the past two years Ken and his local team have done a great job of consolidating the flight department's written policies and procedures. The coordination of operations and teamwork between the two bases has a long way to go, though.

Ken is based at the corporate headquarters in Cincinnati with the company's Falcon 50. Before Ken's promotion the company's Ft. Wayne, Indiana, flight department was a classic "F Troop" operation. The staff there flew their Beechjet with a strong sense of independence and had their own ways of doing things.

Historically, the flight organization's rift was fostered by the Ft. Wayne's senior executives and their local senior captain. These executives enjoyed a strong sense of ownership over the local aviation services. This isn't unusual, because a business aircraft is a freedom tool. Anything between the user and the resource (such as centralized scheduling or crews that don't report locally) can be seen as a barrier to effective service.



The Ft. Wayne senior captain, Bob, had effectively nurtured a strong relationship with his passengers. He had learned to anticipate their needs intuitively. In fact, he had become fishing and hunting buddies with the Ft. Wayne division's president.

Bob's "customer relations" worked great and were absolutely appropriate when the operations were managed separately. But now Ken has a challenge. Bob has continued to cherish and nurture his direct relationship with Ft. Wayne's top management. Ken knows that Bob is a valuable and valued member of the flight services organization. But he also knows that his organization will suffer if a unity of purpose is not understood and demonstrated. His concern was how to, and when to, address the issue.

He chose sooner rather than later. His reasoning was sound. Behaviors have a "squatter's rights" factor to them. If improper behaviors are allowed to continue, the assumption by the doer and the audience is that they are condoned or not an issue. Once behaviors are settled in, they are hard to uproot and change.

Ken was very smart about how he met the challenge. First he had to reconfirm the company's objective of a unified flight services group. After all, when push comes to shove, if the CFO and chairman aren't fully behind him, Ken will not only be highly embarrassed but he will also have lost a great deal of his credibility within his company and his department.

The way Ken posed the question to his boss was not as a complaint about Bob and his executive's relationship or Bob's behaviors. Ken met briefly with the CFO to confirm the outcomes he and the chairman wanted. Then Ken indicated that, as a byproduct of this change, there were apt to be disruptions of some very well established behaviors and relationships among both key flight department members as well as the senior customers they serve. The CFO told Ken that this was typical of every consolidation they had initiated throughout the company. Ken was smart to meet with his boss. It had confirmed that Ken understood the outcomes he was to create, and also that he had the authority to proceed.

Ken then did something even smarter. He enrolled the personal assistance of the president of the Ft. Wayne division. Ken met with him privately to explain the chairman's charge and to enlist his assistance in making the effort successful. How? By asking the executive what risks that change created to the levels of service he needs and expects from flight services. By hearing those concerns up front, rather than patiently waiting for complaints, Ken gave the executive the reassurance that his concerns for continued high levels of service were not only heard but would also be addressed. In other words, the new formal service system was going to take care of him, so he didn't have to supplant it with an informal system that is relationship-based with the local lead captain.

In addition, Ken asked the Ft. Wayne president to help him reassure Bob that the new system would support Bob's efforts to deliver flawless service to the executive and his



team. In doing so, Ken gained the explicit allegiance of the customer group in Ken's next step, helping Bob align his behaviors with those needed for the department.

The meeting between Ken and Bob started out tense but ended up going quite well. Ken made clear that he had a job to do that was directed by Cincinnati's top management. He told Bob that he had held a private meeting with the Ft. Wayne president to gain his support, cooperation, and forbearance for the coming changes. After all, any change in a service system has a transition period when there is a heightened risk of errors. When Bob realized what was expected of him and that there was no point of appeal, he came to the mature realization that he needed either to play ball by the new rules or go to another ballpark. He liked this ballpark. He was in the game.

In this case, Ken's constructive impatience was a blend of not waiting for things to get worse, as well as being proactive to assure the results he needed. Ken was able to pick the right time (sooner rather than later) and approach (inclusive, direct, and mature). It paid off with a home run.

So can you be constructively impatient? Sure, about the less important stuff. But if it really should be done, and it really needs to be done sooner rather than later, get your tail feathers in gear and kiss patience good-bye.

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