

Walk the Flight Line: Get Dirty with your Troops

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When your squadron commander meets you at your jet, it's normally not a good sign. "Waldo, we need to talk," he said as he headed for the aircraft hangar. Had I messed up? Was I in trouble? I gulped. Was something wrong at home?

"Waldo, Sgt. Tyler told me what happened before you took off this afternoon, and I am not impressed." In an instant I knew what he was referring to.

Just a few hours earlier before taking off on a training mission, I had reprimanded my 22-year old crew F-16 chief for shorting me 500 lbs of fuel. My wing tanks just wouldn't feed and there was nothing he could do. It didn't matter to me. My mission was going to be cut short and I was upset...it reflected in my tone of voice and I unintentionally insulted him.

The commander continued, "Waldo, I'm taking you off the flying schedule tomorrow, and I want you to dig out your oldest flight suit. You're spending the day on the flight line with the crew chiefs."

That day was the longest of my career. I was up at the crack of dawn and didn't stop for twelve hours—fueling jets, inspecting engines, and inventorying aircraft parts. By the end of the day I was exhausted. I smelled of jet fuel and my flight

suit was trashed, a huge grease spot down the length of each pant leg.

Despite the negatives, walking the flight line gave me an appreciation of what the maintenance troops go through to make sure the jets of the 79th Fighter Squadron are mission ready. It also gave me the opportunity to get to know them on a personal level. Without their sacrifice, there would be no mission.



Are you getting out there with your troops and walking the flight line? Do you know their issues, gripes, and personal concerns? Are you spending time with your IT staff to see the hoops they have to jump through to make sure your web site, computers, and software are up to speed? Do you walk the factory floor and talk to the quality assurance

inspector about the challenges she may be facing? Have you ever spent a day with your channel partners and joined them on a few sales calls?

William James, a well known psychologist, said that the **desire to be appreciated** is one of the deepest drives in human nature. Knowing that our contribution is valued gives us fuel to crank our engines to afterburner when the heat is on and the missiles of business and life come zinging our way.

You don't need a formal title to do the things that great leaders do. Here are a few examples:

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Take one person out to lunch each week from a department other than your own.

Schedule an (unannounced) “squadron tour.” Visit your various “shops,” and casually, in a way that doesn’t put anyone on the spot—randomly interview your wingmen.

Sit in on a strategy session with your marketing team or a weekly budget update with a project manager.

Walking the flight line builds your credibility and effectiveness as a leader. When you know the job details and understand the challenges your wingmen face, you’ll be far better prepared to deal with human resource issues such as hiring, firing, and job moves.

What results is a more trusting work environment. Your co-workers and employees will be more likely

to approach you with their problems, because you know what it’s like to walk the flight line in *their* shoes. They’ll view you as a wingman, a trusted partner, and will see that you care—not by your philosophy but by your action. Sure, you may have to get a little dirty, but the rewards are well worth it!

See you on the flight line...

Lt. Col Rob “Waldo” Waldman is a decorated former combat fighter pilot and the author of the New York Times and Wall Street Journal best-seller ‘Never Fly Solo’. Known as “The Wingman”, he is a professional sales and leadership speaker with Fortune 500 clients such as Aflac, Nokia, New York Life, and Medtronic. He’s been featured on CNN, Fox News, BusinessWeek, and Investor’s Business Daily. To learn more about Waldo or how to be a more trusting wingman in business, visit www.YourWingman.com, or call (866) 925-3616.