

Safe Expectations by Carl Potter, CSP



“Maverick, Top Gun rules of engagement are written for your safety and for that of your team. They are not flexible, nor am I. Either obey them or you are history. Is that clear?” -Dialog from the movie, Top Gun

In the movie *Top Gun*, the rogue pilot Maverick (Lt. Pete Mitchell) continually fail to follow the safe expectations of a Naval Aviator. Maverick becomes a hero, but in the real world his bravado and rogue behavior would have cost him his career.

Expectations could be described as those desired, prescribed behaviors that lead to the desired outcome. Safe expectations are those that lead workers to recognize, evaluate, and control a hazard. By learning to see hazards, workers can then evaluate the level of risk the hazard poses, and then choose the correct control that will provide the greatest reduction of risk the hazard imposes. The final step is to apply the control.

Conventional wisdom tell us that when the pain of changing our behavior is less than the pain of continuing our current behavior, we will modify our actions. It's the old “if the stove is hot, don't touch it” approach.

To assume that people will change their behavior just because you, their supervisor, crew leader, or fellow worker, think they should, is thinking more highly of yourself than you should. People are motivated to change their behavior at the point they become uncomfortable with the status quo – the results that they have been getting.

Those results may include things like:

- getting hurt repeatedly when the rules are not followed,
- being written up for safety work practice violation, or
- not getting that raise because of poor performance.

Don't misunderstand – it is essential for a supervisor, crew leader, or co-worker to identify clear behavioral expectations to workers. However, making the connection consequences – either positive or negative is the key.

One of the ways we demonstrate this concept is through discussing near-misses or “near-hits.”

Consider the following situation that I found myself in:

When on a flight to a speaking engagement in Cleveland, Ohio, my wife, Dr. Deb, and I experienced why the FAA (Federal Aeronautical Administration) rules are expected to be followed by aircraft pilots. We were at 4,000 feet above sea level and flying IFR (instrument flight rules) on a heading assigned to us by ATC (air traffic control) inbound to Cleveland's Burke Lakefront Airport. It was a beautiful, clear day and we could see boats as we passed over Lake Erie.

The rules of engagement in the air are that the ATC watches and guides pilots flying IFR. Others who are flying VFR (Visual Flight Rules) and are not always in contact with ATC but are expected to keep on the look out for other planes and obstructions themselves.. IFR pilots flying eastbound in the United States are required to fly at odd-thousands such as; 3,000, 5,000, 7,000 feet above sea level. Likewise, when flying westbound pilots should expect even-thousand assigned altitudes. VFR pilots can fly without talking to ATC and they are expected to fly at the same 'odd and even' altitudes plus 500 feet. So, an eastbound pilot would fly at 3500 feet rather than 3000. When everyone is flying as expected, mid-air collisions can be avoided. (continue on back page)

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Suddenly we received a call from ATC:

“Skylane 4196D you have an aircraft at your eight o’clock crossing your flight path, altitude unknown.”

My response: “N1496D looking for traffic.”

As we turned our heads to look, a low wing Piper crossed just ahead and above us at what looked like less than 500 feet - we could count the rivets on it’s belly. That’s close! It is likely that the plane was at 500 foot separation, but at 150 mph it looked closer! Without the expectation of keeping 500 feet between two types of air traffic, there would likely be more mid-air collisions. After that experience and the possible consequences, I tend to watch my altitude much more closely.

Safe expectations exist for a reason. Yet, sometimes the reality of why they exist doesn’t sink in until we experience a situation that makes it clear. That’s why I believe it is essential to discuss expectations and related near-misses often.

Here’s an idea you can put to work in your next safety meeting:

1. Think about a safety expectation that you question or disagree with. (You know you have at least one!)
2. Brainstorm the negative consequences that can occur as a result of not following the expectation. Are there any positive consequences of not following the expectations.
3. As a group, think about and share a time when you experienced a near miss related to that expectation.

Take the time to understand what expectations are in your workplace. Evaluate your response to those expectations and then consider the cost of not meeting those expectations. If your personal expectation is to go home to your family every day uninjured, then you should have a willing attitude towards meeting those expectations that result in the daily safety goal of nobody gets hurt.



Carl Potter works with leaders who want to target a zero injury workplace, and employees who want to go home to their families every day without injury. He is a Certified Safety Professional and Certified Management Consultant who worked in industry for 17 years before he began advising, speaking and writing about workplace safety in 1992. As a pilot, Carl brings to his clients and audiences his experiences from the co-pit and applies many of the principals found in aviation to industry. Carl is know for his passion for safety and is a favorite keynote speaker to many associations and companies that want a speaker who is entertaining as well as informative. To find out more about Carl, visit www.carlpotter.com or, call 800-259-6209