

NEMSPA

Professionalism

This summer the National Transportation and Safety Board (NTSB) released its "Top-10 Most Wanted," and at the top of their list is "pilot and air traffic controller professionalism." The following is an excerpt from one of the statements posted by the NTSB on their website: "Although the vast majority of the pilots and air traffic controllers responsible for millions of flights each year routinely perform as qualified and competent professionals under a variety of demanding circumstances, there have been a disturbing number of individual incidents of noncompliant behavior, intentional misconduct, or lack of commitment to essential task. These occurrences demonstrate an erosion of pilot and air traffic controller professionalism."

First and foremost, understand that there is nothing routine about what we do in the air medical transport arena. If you feel that way, please consider another profession as soon as possible. Second, professionalism is an essential component of the air medical industry for every role and at every level. Professionalism is born out of experience, maturity, and expertise, but most importantly, it is fostered and nurtured by mutual respect and self-discipline. My favorite quote on the subject is, "Professionalism is doing the right thing even when no one is looking."

So how do we ensure that someone becomes that professional we are all desperately looking for? First and foremost, we must treat them like a professional, not like a second-class citizen. I fear that all too often many of us have heard (or uttered) phrases such as, "He's just a pilot," "You're just the bus driver," "You're just self-loading baggage," "You're just ballast." While some may say such things in apparent jest, they can reflect an underlying attitude or culture that, in many cases, undermines and slowly erodes professionalism from the inside out like a cancer.

I have often heard helicopter pilots in general referred to as the blue-collar workers of aviation. Personally I consider that to be one of the highest compliments that I could ever receive. I have found that most blue-collar workers (my father being one) have a very high degree of integrity and professionalism, more so in some cases than their white-collar counterparts. Most take great pride in their work, mentor others, and treat their counterparts as equals and with respect—all of the attributes that we are looking for in a professional.

For professionalism to flourish, we must promote an environment of mutual respect within our organizations and across our industry. Without mutual respect, morale and esprit-de-corps will be compromised, and these 2 intangible assets are essential ingredients in any program's safety culture. Fostering an organizational environment where respect prevails and everyone is equal and no one is supported as a source of gossip, innuendos, or half-truths will do much to enhance any program's morale. An increase in professionalism will be a natural byproduct of this environment.

Inclusion is another piece of the mutual respect puzzle that can significantly impact professionalism. To have a safety stand-down seminar that excluded any members of the flight team would, in my opinion, show a significant lack of respect and professionalism toward that group. Conducting an air medical resource management course with no medical crewmembers or convening a meeting to discuss the design and construction of a new heliport without any pilots in attendance to participate in the discussion are other examples of the kind of division or fragmentation that can erode professionalism from the inside out, yet they continue to occur too often. Inclusion is very important in fostering professionalism at every level.

True professionals will listen to and acknowledge what others think without compromising their own integrity or commitment to best practices. In discussing events where there is uncertainty as to what actually took place or what the facts are, a professional must function as an educator and a communicator. If a void in the facts is allowed to exist, it will be filled by something other than the truth. Gossip and hearsay will erode an environment of professionalism from the inside out. Education and rapid communication are the countermeasures that will stop gossip and hearsay in their tracks. Professionals step up to the plate immediately and are the first to address the issues and seek the facts in an open forum with mutual respect and without personal agendas. Professionals don't gossip or act as armchair quarterbacks, nor do they give credence to those who do.

In one way or another, we are all influenced by and products of our environment. If that environment is inclusive and based on mutual respect, with everyone being treated equally and where excellence is fostered at every level, then professionalism will generally flourish and mature. If, on the other hand, the environment

in which we find ourselves lacks mutual respect or excellence is just an empty word that is only talked about rather than practiced, then professionalism will surely evaporate into thin air. In such an environment, morale and the quality of the safety culture will likewise suffer.

In an effort to help foster professionalism within our industry, the National EMS Pilots Association has

picked up the NTSB's challenge and is in the process of authoring a code of ethics for air medical pilots. Our hope is to highlight the traits that best represent professionalism in our industry and provide quality guidelines to emulate. NEMSPA's goal is to unveil this code of ethics in October at the Air Medical Transport Conference in Saint Louis, Missouri.

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