

Be Careful What You Say

By LCdr. Tom Long

During my tour as a flight instructor, training NFOs on the finer points of the T-34C and navigation, I found myself sitting at the hold-short and going through the engine run-up checklist. My student was in the front seat, on his third hop in the VNAV stage, having recently finished a phase of AIRNAVs flown from the backseat.

My student had completed the FAM syllabus months earlier—where he was taught the start checklist and recently had flown two VNAVs from the front seat. However, I calmly reminded him not to push on the condition-lever-release mechanism when doing the propeller-feather check. I instead had him look at the throttle quadrant, as I pushed the release mechanism.

Thinking my discussion was thorough, I did not do my routine of preemptively blocking the lever with my hand. The student began the procedure and promptly did what I had showed him and told him not to do. As we sat there in the baking, Pensacola, summer sun, the aircraft got very quiet as the propeller began to spin down. Looking around at the other T-34s in the run-up area, I saw many snickers and fingers pointing at me, piercing my pride.

I calmly told the student to check certain switches. Meanwhile, I quickly went through my checklist to restart the engine before the scalding sun melted us into a puddle on the floor of our T-34. I fully now understand why it was considered a downing discrepancy if the air-conditioning did not work in the “Turbo Weenie.”

Once I had restarted the aircraft, I told my student, “No sweat. Don’t worry about what just happened. Pretend it didn’t happen and continue accordingly. The past is the past. You must think ahead of the aircraft, not behind it.”

In retrospect, I’m sure he was sweating the load the entire time, thinking he was a goner.

We continued the VNAV flight, but his performance was not up to standards, probably because he dwelled on the incident in the run-up. We returned to base without further incident. I subsequently downed him for the flight. He was a good guy, and I enjoyed flying with him, but his performance did not meet VNAV standards for that

flight. Although he was disappointed in his performance, I could tell he had a positive attitude, which is an important key to success, and he now flies B-1Bs with the Air Guard.

My teaching technique of negative reinforcement, by telling him, “Don’t do this,” was intended to keep him from making a mistake. Instead, it caused him to do exactly the opposite. After he shut down the engine in the run-up area, I should have returned to base and incom- pleted the event. I thought telling him to “fuggedaboutit” would be enough to get

him back in the game and get the X. Sometimes students cannot put little things behind them—things that experienced instructors consider minor issues. However, unintentionally shutting down your engine is not minor. Students often are overly concerned with their grades and what their “been there, done that” instructor thinks about them and their performance.

I learned a lot about my instructional technique and student psychology. I also evaluated my CRM skills and made several technique changes. On your next instructional hop, remember, even a very small mistake by a student can be amplified in their mind, and they may dwell on it throughout the flight. You might be better off to call it a day and try again next time. 🦅

LCdr. Long flew with VT-10 during this event; he currently flies with VR-53.

