



Know When to Say When

By Sgt. Travis A. Tibbitt, USMC

During the course of a career, a person often can observe things he or she considers to be learning points. Having encountered many situations, I've gained a sense of humility when it comes to doing my job as an aviation professional. The hardest thing I found is to swallow my pride, and the easiest way to teach a lesson is from experience. When that event happens to you, the learning curve accelerates—sometimes with deadly consequences.

I remember being a young man, excited about—but unsure of—my upcoming tour in Japan. The duty station I was headed to had a mix of many types of aircraft. Being an air-traffic controller, this job was a challenge that most took head-on, because, if you can perform well at facilities like these, you generally will do well wherever you go. After getting several qualifications and deploying,

I looked forward to finishing my time and heading back to the states. Then came the time of knowing [when to say when](#).

I just had finished conducting numerous back-to-back approaches to the airport as the final controller. I asked the supervisor for a break, a chance to go outside, get some fresh air, and clear my head a little.

In the meantime, I noticed another controller, our radar chief, had walked into the room. The chief was the technical and practical resident expert in that branch. I remember greeting him and asking why he was down there; he rarely was in the room. You would think an individual in that position practically would live there; not the case with the chief. He said he was there to get his mins. Every controller is responsible for maintaining currency on the positions on which they are qualified. He came this day to get his mins on approach.

A short time later, it happened. The door to the radar room flew open, and out came one of my buddies. After a few expletives and say whats, we went back into the radar room.

I felt like we had walked into an accident. The radar chief definitely was getting his mins, and he wasn't prepared for the situation. As soon as he took control of the position, two aircraft played bumper cars while refueling in midair. One pilot was smart and ejected almost immediately; the other was hell-bent on getting his severely damaged, almost un-flyable aircraft back to base. To complicate the situation, here was our controller, who should have known more than

tion was bad, but no one would say the obvious. Similar problems occur almost every day in our profession, and, although the problems are troubling to deal with, they must be addressed. The simple truth was the supervisor should have acted on his gut instinct, pulled off the controller, and replaced him with a more capable one. A recent boss of mine always said, "Don't take it personal; business is business." This phrase exactly fits the situation with the radar chief. Being a supervisor carries a heavy responsibility.

I later talked with the young man who had been in the room with the chief. He still was unsure what the best course of action should have been to handle the situation, but he definitely learned something from witnessing the mishap.

The rest of the story is about [ego](#). The radar chief was known to have one; a good, but sometimes dangerous trait in our profession. An ego usually showed to those around you that you were a good controller, and there was nothing you could not handle. But, having an ego also is a double-edged sword. A person who usually is not willing to ask for help or relief may not want to appear to be weak. Too bad that pride and ego sometimes can take a front seat to safety.

Does it show weakness to reach out to those who are struggling?

most how to handle the situation, completely lost in the ensuing complications from the emergency. The sense of wanting to help came over me, but I was not assigned to any position by the supervisor. Having been a radar supervisor at my last facility, I did what I could to help. I plugged into a vacant position, started writing down information, and helped to clarify intentions while the chaos increased.

Meanwhile, the radar chief's controlling efforts grew worse. He made wrong calls and turns, wrong altitudes, and had severe situational-awareness issues. The supervisor, who was on at the time, was new in that position. He later said he was unsure about pulling a struggling controller off position because he was the radar chief; he was afraid of the repercussions.

The aircraft eventually made it back and somehow landed. The tension in the room, though, had not eased yet. There were some major faults with the way business was conducted that day. Everyone knew the situa-

Why is it that we are [afraid to ask for help](#)? Does it show weakness to reach out to those who are struggling? How can everyone see something happening and yet not take the right action?

I could have said something to the supervisor that day, perhaps a suggestion to replace the controller with someone who was better able to handle the situation. If you believe something is not right and can offer sound advice, it is your responsibility to do so. This proactive effort sometimes may get you into hot water, but it may just save a life.

I would rather have to take a lecture on knowing my place in the chain of command than watch a senseless and tragic event unfold because I was too weak to stop it. Our place as aviation professionals and enthusiasts is to assure this mindset never fades. From the most seasoned professional to the newest trainee, know when to say when. 

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