LEADING INDICATORS: IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS
with *Jeff "Odie" Espenship*

This easy-to-use Leader's Guide is provided to assist in conducting a successful presentation. Featured are:

INTRODUCTION: A brief description of the program and the subject that it addresses.

PROGRAM OUTLINE: Summarizes the program content. If the program outline is discussed before the video is presented, the entire program will be more meaningful and successful.

PREPARING FOR AND CONDUCTING THE PRESENTATION: These sections will help you set up the training environment, help you relate the program to site-specific incidents, and provide program objectives for focusing your presentation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: Questions may be copied and given to participants to stimulate discussion about the program, its safety lessons and universal theme.

INTRODUCTION

Jeff "Odie" Espenship is a United States Air Force A-10 Warthog fighter pilot and also an international airline pilot. As a flight leader, he knows what it takes to operate safely in a high-risk and sometimes dangerous work environment. In this dynamic presentation, Odie discusses his experiences involving ***shortcuts***, ***snap decisions*** and ***complacency*** as a pilot and how they relate to common workplace situations. Because these leading indicators tend to snowball and contribute to accidents, he stresses that employees must always be aware of the "little things" and take action when they tempt us or our co-workers to perform unsafe acts.

While pointing out common safety errors often made by fighter pilots and regular employees alike, Odie emphasizes the lessons all workers can learn from these mistakes:

- It's the "little things" like inattention to detail, lack of focus and assuming that usually snowball and result in accidents.
- While we may not always achieve perfection, if we expect and pursue it, we will achieve excellence along the way.
- Getting away with a shortcut normalizes deviant behavior and discourages people from speaking up.
- If a leading indicator contributes to a close call, you should share that information with your co-workers to help prevent it from happening again.
- While we can become complacent with experience as our jobs become routine, safety and operational excellence are never routine or automatic.
- It's imperative that you speak up when you see someone performing an unsafe act because that's how we prevent future accidents from happening.

PROGRAM OUTLINE

IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS THAT 'GET US'

"I look out in this crowd and I see a bunch of fighter pilots." says Odie, "I see each of you as the fighter pilots of your companies; you're the ones out there every single day, tip of the spear, getting the job done, you wingmen, you flight leaders."

As fighter pilots of their companies, employees are the ones who have the most to lose if something goes wrong, he adds. "You are the ones that end up with those scrapes, strains, those bruises, burns, contusions, those lost-time accidents. You're the ones that end up in the burn unit; heaven forbid; you're the ones that end up in the morgue."

"You know as a fighter pilot, you know what gets us?" Odie asks. "It's not the big items, is it? Those big old 'kill me' items as I call them, we'll watch out for the 'kill me' items; I mean we've been trained."

"It's the little things; it's the tiny things," he continues. "That's what snowballs on us and tags us. It's the little things like inattention to detail, lack of focus, being interrupted, being distracted, poor job safety briefing, miscommunication, assuming."

Maybe we've taken a shortcut or made an impulsive, spontaneous or snap decision, says Odie. "Maybe we've gotten a little complacent. Those little things, that's what snowballs on us."

LEADING INDICATORS OF ACCIDENTS

When accidents happen to us, investigators come in, Odie says. "And I look at investigators; they're like a dog in a hubcap factory. They chase everything and they usually catch it."

"Those accidents that happen to use, your company calls them accident rates; and, we refer to these accident rates as lagging or trailing indicators because this is what happens: it's behind us and we have to investigate what happens, but that's looking in the rearview mirror to look at those lagging and trailing indicators," notes Odie.

We need to be looking in front us as well; do we not?" he asks. "Those things that lead up to accidents, that's out in front of us. And so, those things that we find that lead up to accidents, we call those leading indicators."

Odie says he would like to focus on three leading indicators: shortcuts, snap decisions and complacency.

SHORTCUTS & THE PURSUIT OF PERFECTION

It doesn't matter what industry we're in or whether we're at home or work, we all take shortcuts and have different reasons for taking them, according to Odie.

"Maybe we've put pressure on ourselves to do it, maybe our boss has put some pressure on us; maybe we're trying to beat a timeline; maybe we're trying to impress our supervisor or foreman," Odie says, "but the bottom line—you're the only one that knows why you take that shortcut out there."

He adds that the road to perfection requires inward reflection because as fighter pilots that's what we're after. "Because you come in second as a fighter pilot or come in second on your job, you may not come home."

We have to focus on perfection, pursuing perfection, expecting perfection," says Odie. "You may not always achieve it, but if you expect it and you pursue it, you will achieve excellence along the way. And that's what we're after here."

ODIE & HIS BROTHER TAKE A SHORTCUT

Odie gives an example of a shortcut that he and his brother took that had a "tremendous impact" on him, his mother, his father, his brother and his brother's family.

On the weekends, Odie and his brother would go to air shows to perform. Odie would fly the plane while his brother ran the logistics.

There's a starting procedure that you are supposed to do every time the airplane engine is started, according to Odie. "You're supposed to grab the propeller blade and you're supposed to pull it through, by hand, very slowly, very methodically on this airplane, nine times."

This precaution is performed to check for a hydraulic leak or lock. "You've got to make sure no fluid has gotten in the bottom of the cylinder heads and the only way to check that is to pull it through by hand…Because if you push that big starter button and that engine starts and there's fluid down there, like unburned fluid or oil or something, you can damage the engine," says Odie.

One Sunday, after finishing an air show in the northeast, Odie and his brother were in a hurry to take off as a thunderstorm approached. While Odie was in the cockpit doing his pre-flight checks, his brother started to pull the propeller blade like he had always done.

Odie says he looked down at his brother and yelled, "Don't worry about it. Man, don't worry about it. We've done that hundreds of times. Get in the back, man, we've got to go; we're in a hurry."

Odie's brother looked up with him with a "questioning attitude." "But he didn't say anything to me. He just got in the back, strapped in, I pushed the starter button. Let me tell you, that motor came to life just like it had always done, off we went to Atlanta," says Odie.

That shortcut they took and got away with is an example of how deviant behavior in the workplace can become normalized. "We take a shortcut, we get away with it, it gets easier; it's hard for people to speak up when they see something that's not right, like my brother," Odie says.

SHORTCUT CONTRIBUTES TO ODIE'S BROTHER'S DEATH

Six months later, Odie's brother and a friend were going to ferry an airplane down to Florida for an air show. Odie was planning to fly a commercial flight to the show the next day.

Two hours after his brother and friend took off, Odie received a phone call from someone explaining how the plane had been involved in an accident and there were two fatalities. "One phone call—my world went from fantastic to awful, just like that," Odie says.

The investigators came in and found everything that was wrong, according to Odie. "They pulled that engine apart, and the type of failure they found inside that engine was indicative, or had signs of hydraulic leak or hydraulic lock."

In a phone call from one of the investigators, Odie was asked if his friend and his brother knew to pull the propeller blade through before starting the engine. When he replied that they did, the investigator asked, "Did they always do it?"

The investigators went to the person who fueled up the airplane before it departed for Florida and asked him if had seen them perform the check. He responded, "No, I don't remember them pulling that propeller blade through, but I do remember them being in a big hurry for me to finish fueling this airplane because they were running late for some air show down in Florida."

HOW SHORTCUTS AFFECT OURSELVES AND OTHERS AROUND US

As he was standing over the wreckage of the crash, Odie says he had to reflect inward on his work behavior. "And I have to say to myself, 'did I do something, did I show my brother something that influenced his behavior six months down the road?'"

"When we make a decision, and it is a decision, to take a shortcut, we are in effect showing ourselves and showing others around us how to break the rules and still live," says Odie. The list of shortcuts that we take at home or at work is long and distinguished, he adds.

It could be like skipping a procedure or skipping a step in a procedure, Odie says. "Lockout/tagout comes to mind. It could be like using the wrong tool for the job when the right tool is just like right over there, but you don't feel like going and getting it. It could be using a chair instead of a step ladder, insufficient PPE for the job."

"You don't know long you have before it catches up to you or catches up to someone else. In my case it was about six months," he concludes.

SNAP or IMPULSIVE DECISIONS

THE PLEXIGLAS NAVEL

Odie says we sometimes do things without thinking at all. "Snap decisions, impulsive decisions, things we just do spontaneously. And when we're out there and that accident happens, usually we say to ourselves, 'Man, what I thinking?'"

One day, he did something "dumb, dangerous and different" when he was flying his Air Force jet. His commander pulled him aside and gave him some advice. He said, "Odie, before you do anything impulsively, I want you to always think things through to their worst logical conclusion."

As Odie turned around to leave, the commander pulled out a round piece of Plexiglas and flipped it to Odie. When he asked what it was, the commander said, "This is your Plexiglas navel. I want you to carry that Plexiglas navel on your person at all times."

When Odie asked what he was to do with it, the commander replied, "It's a Plexiglas belly button, so next time you get out there and do something dumb, dangerous and different with your head up your rear end, you can use that Plexiglas navel and still look out and see where you're going."

"And I've always carried that navel with me, everywhere I went, because I did something; I made a snap decision one day when I was out flying and it almost killed me," says Odie. "And I'm not really proud to share it, but I think it's important that we share those leading indicators and that we learn from those who have gone before us."

VIDEOTAPING SLED DOG TEAM ALMOST COSTS ODIE HIS LIFE

While serving as wingman in the Air Force with 300 hours of flying experience, Odie was flying a mission one day in a mountainous region of Alaska. "Now, looking back, 300 hours is not a lot of time, but when I was sitting in the seat that day, I thought 300 hours was some good experience," he says.

On this mission, Odie's flight leader was flying about half a mile in front of him. They were flying at about 300 feet off the ground at 400 miles per hour through the mountainous terrain when his flight leader radioed him to say there was a dog sled team on the ground below.

After he saw the dog sled on the horizon, Odie says he got a bright idea and made the spontaneous decision to capture the team on video. "And if you think about it, every day we go to work, whether we're home or we're at work, we make some dumb and dangerous decisions spontaneously."

"Like crawling into a confined space or not chocking our vehicle; 'oh I'll just be a second,'" he continues. "Lifting a heavy object without getting help, maybe it's using equipment, a forklift or a man lift, and we haven't been properly trained."

Other spontaneous decisions we make include running red lights, passing on a double-yellow line, not putting on our seatbelts and driving after drinking, Odie adds. "The list is long and distinguished, and on this particular day, for me at 300 feet and 400 miles per hour, I'm about to join that long and distinguished list."

Odie says he had to do some "quick and fancy" hand work and some hand/eye coordination to get the sled dog team to pull up on the video monitor, including reaching down behind himself to turn on the video, reach up to select the proper weapon, hold the throttle and stick and then go heads down in the cockpit to access the monitor.

Accident rates statistically are highest for fighter pilot with 300 hours of experience because they're very confident, says Odie. "They think they know it all, but in reality, you know just enough to get yourself killed."

While people new to a job are still trying to figure out how to operate their equipment and how to "fit in," they haven't been shown how to break the rules and still live, notes Odie. "But as you get more experience, see, you start getting more confident in your ability…which is where I was at this point; I was right at the top of that accident curve."

He adds that you if you manage to survive, you start working your way down the back side of that curve as you get into the upper level experience or "old fart level," which is where he is now, but he was at the top of the bell curve during this mission.

As he was watching the dog sled team on the monitor and traveling toward them at 400 miles per hour, Odie says he was "kind of mesmerized, but all of a sudden in here my internal timer went off." It told him to look up and when he did, he realized he was flying straight toward a mountain.

Fortunately, he avoided hitting the mountain at the last second and they continued on their mission. He says that while he didn't tell anyone about what happened immediately, he eventually "came clean on that."

"The reason is this folks, that's a leading indicator," continues Odie. "Chances are, if it happened to me, if I made a dumb, dangerous and different decision spontaneously, chances are it's probably happened before, it'll probably happen again and it's a good idea to share that information with your brethren."

He says that while it is hard to do, you should speak up—say something if you see something. "Very important: we have to share; we have to be comfortable sharing that leading indicator information with each other."

COMPLACENCY: THE SILENT KILLER

"I call complacency the silent killer," says Odie. "You know, the longer we do our jobs, the more experience we get, we get more familiar, get on the back side of that bell curve."

"We start to rely maybe on the automation that we have. We figure that computer is never going to break; we start settling into a routine," he adds.

While we want our jobs to go routinely, safety and operational excellence is never routine or automatic, according to Odie. "Complacency, you know, it sneaks up on us. It is very insidious, but it happens to the best of us."

SAFETY'S NOT AUTOMATIC: THE CRASH OF THUNDERBIRD SIX

To illustrate his points about complacency, Odie tells a story (aided by a video and photos) about an Air Force Thunderbird pilot who crashed at an air show. He asks the audience what words come to mind when you see such a pilot and they respond with terms such as excellence, precision, skillful and teamwork.

"I look out in this crowd and I see excellence, I see precision, I see teamwork and I see skill; and, just like a Thunderbird pilot, on your best day, you make one mistake, a small, in his case, complacency error." Odie says. "It can take you from headlines to headstones right quick."

The most dangerous maneuver performed at air shows is any maneuver that requires you to pull your airplane directly at the ground, explains Odie. It's not the fall that's so dangerous, but the sudden stop.

While Thunderbird Six had done his air show routine hundreds of times, "safety's not automatic," says Odie. The pilot was supposed to have his co-workers compute the altitude at which he was to roll on his back, but failed to do it.

As the pilot flew on his 45-degree ascent to that "magic altitude," he was 1,000 feet low when he rolled on his back. "So here he is on his down line and now he's got his afterburner lit. He's got the stick pulled back," says Odie.

"He's pulling about nine G's, about nine times his body weight" when he realized he wasn't going to make it, Odie continues. "And his airplane hits the ground."

The pilot was able to eject four-tenths of a second before the plane impacted the ground. Odie shows footage of the crash, adding, "Look at the engine; that's the engine of the F-16 going down, flipping down the runway. Knock it off; air show's over."

Odie then shows the audience video and still pictures of the crash and the pilot's escape. "Here he is just being pulled from the parachute and his airplane explodes beneath him. He spent a month in the hospital, but he survived that accident," he says.

CONCLUSION

"As I look out on this crowd, I see a bunch of Thunderbird pilots; I see a bunch of warriors," says Odie.

"You folks are out there, every single day, working hard, salt of the earth, getting the job done. And just like a Thunderbird pilot, we know it's the little things that get us. It's not the big items; it's the little things."

"…and you know, you don't have one of those rocket-powered, aces-2 ejection seats like that Thunderbird pilot to get yourself out of trouble," he continues. "It's the little things. It's the snap decisions; it's the complacency. It's those little things that snowball into something big."

He tells the audience members that if they see something, say something. "And the list is long and distinguished of those little things. And you can think back on your world of all those little things that lead up to accidents."

When it comes to the shortcuts we take, the snap decisions that get us in trouble and complacency, the silent killer, Odie says there's only one person who has the final say. "It's not your boss, it's not the plant manager, it's not your safety team, it's not your family; it really boils down to you. You're the one."

"If you see someone headed down an errant and unsafe path, it's up to you to speak up. I know it's hard to do, but it's imperative that you do it because that's how we prevent future accidents from happening," Odie concludes.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Have you or a co-worker ever been involved in an accident or a close call that involved a shortcut, a snap decision or complacency? If so, explain what happened and how the leading indicator contributed to the situation.

2. Name some other "little things" that can lead to accidents besides the three discussed by Odie. How can they snowball and result in someone being injured?

3. Have you ever seen a co-worker taking a shortcut and didn't speak up about it? If so, why didn't you take action?

4. If you had a close call on your job that could be directly related to a shortcut or snap decision, would you discuss what happened with your co-workers? Why or why not?

5. Explain how accident rates progress through the bell curve from the "still in diapers" stage through the "old fart" stage.