

Is the Skipper in His “Box” Yet?

by Cdr. Anthony J. Rizzo

Five minutes to walk before a 1 v 1 ACM training flight. The weather was perfect, the brief was textbook, the jets were ready, and maintenance control was standing by. Everything was on track until I turned the corner and headed to my office from the briefing room. There, waiting for me with better-talk-to-the-skipper-about-this-one looks on their faces were my XO, MO, CMC, and the 200 Division chief.

The MO confirmed my suspicions that they weren't there just to wish me a good flight when he asked, “Are you in your ‘box’ yet, skipper?” Good question. Was I in the “box” (sometimes called the “bubble”) and already compartmentalized, mentally focused on my flight, and should therefore avoid any potential distractions? Or should I risk an intrusion and get a quick dump on whatever was important enough to bring a significant chunk of the chain of command to my office doorstep?

My half-serious, half-joking response to the MO, “I’m not in my ‘box’ until I climb up the ladder,” is true for many of us. At times,

our billets demand it. Certain decisions just can't wait until after the flight. In this case, the situation did require an immediate decision from Rocket 1. A quick call to maintenance control to slide the launch 15 minutes saved the training sortie, and we kept the problem from escalating.

It made me think more about what distractions I should allow so close to man-up. When do those distractions mean it's time to give your flight to the JO hanging around the SDO desk looking for that second hop of the day?

Back in T-34s, I entered my box the moment I left the Q. I didn't leave it until I shut down the engine in the chocks after landing. As we gain experience in our flying careers, we quickly learn how to jump in and out of our boxes. We learn to tune out distractions when it's time to focus on flying. We even have designated briefing rooms or areas where we can sequester ourselves to better concentrate on the upcoming mission. As we head toward maintenance control to sign for the jet, we make the mental shift from naval officer to naval aviator.



How and when you enter these boxes become important factors in how well you are able to compartmentalize before going flying. This process of compartmentalization is, in reality, a self-evaluation using ORM principles. Countless occurrences in our professional and personal lives could be identified as hazards if they have the potential to distract you in the air. Assessing the risk to determine what intrusions you should allow into your bubble is hard. That requires making risk decisions. Ask yourself: Is the potential risk to my concentration and performance worth getting through a few more folders in the in-box or taking that last-second phone call from the detailer who wants to discuss that disassociated tour that happens to fit your career timing perfectly? What do you do if, while you are briefing,

admin hands you a message that your spouse called while you were briefing about some “plumbing problem” that’s already been fixed so “...don’t bother calling me at home right now because I’ll be at the carpet store for the next few hours”?

If distractions do occur or can’t be avoided, implement controls. Delay the launch if you can and tackle the issue now. If you have to, bite the bullet, take yourself off the flight schedule and handle the problem. If nothing else, you won’t be thinking about what you shoulda, woulda, coulda done as you hit the merge. And finally, supervise yourself once airborne. Make sure you’re focusing on the task at hand and not about what awaits you after the flight. 🦅

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