

Normalization of Excellence is the positive adaptation of the negative “normalization of deviance”. This adaptation was done a number of years ago by Tony Kern and reminds me of an inscription chiseled into a very old Scottish castle’s stone fireplace mantel. I stayed in that castle for several days in my travelling youth days and read it every time we came to eat in front of that fireplace. It is one that I’ve never forgotten and feel it best describes today’s normalization of excellence. It was a catchy yet very wise poem that read: **Good Better Best.**

Never shall ye rest. Until your Good is Better and your Better is Best. Over the last 50 plus years I have strived to do just that. Excellent advice, carved in stone likely over five hundred years ago, that is still valid today.

Let’s start with the negative version of normalization. Normalization of deviance is, reportedly, a term first coined by a sociologist named Diane Vaughan when she reviewed the Challenger disaster. She described this phenomenon as occurring when people within an organization become so used to a dangerous practice that it becomes an accepted norm. The Challenger exploded 73 seconds after liftoff on January 28, 1986 when two o-rings on one of the rocket booster’s segments failed allowing a blow torch like flame to burn into the shuttle’s booster fuel tank. Those two o-rings, on previous flights, were found to be charred as the segments were recovered for reuse. As they were a critical component, this was investigated, but as they had not completely failed, the weakness came to be seen as normal and Safe until due to colder launch weather than normal they failed. The lesson learned was **a Safe end result does not guarantee that the action is Safe.** It equates to the “game” of Russian roulette where you put one bullet in a six shooter revolver gun and spin the cylinder. You have five chances that when you pull the trigger it will be blank but thinking it was Safe will be proved wrong in time. Normalization of deviance would strike again when the foam coming off the external fuel tank damaged the tile that dispersed the reentry heat on the shuttle. It was known that pieces of foam came off at launch, but it became normal until, with the Columbia, the “gun went off”. Another lesson relearned the expensive hard way. Always remember that a Safe outcome does not guarantee it was the result of a Safe action. Misfortune Murphy is waiting and the odds will come in his favour one day.

Normalization of excellence is the reverse where it becomes normal to not except the status quo, but continuously work to improve it. Instead of accepting it is Safe because it hasn’t failed YET, the normalization of excellence strives to make it ever Safer. Normalization of excellence could be termed working at a level where perfection is the accepted norm to shoot for. An article on norms can be found in the #8 July 2015 issue. As indicated in the #38 Nov. 2018 issue, my father used to say that “if you want perfection, you’ll have to die and go to heaven, but you should still strive for it”. As you are part of the group called humans who are responsible for

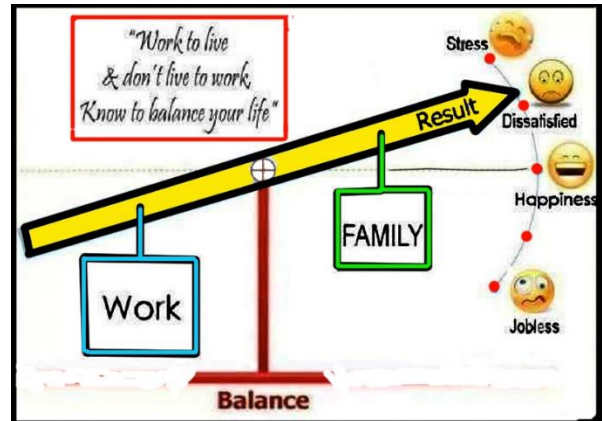
80% plus of aviation accidents, the question is: are you working at your full potential or satisfied at just being good enough to get by?

Normalization of excellence calls for you to continuously strive to be all that you are capable of being. Maybe not perfect, but the best that you can be. Since we don't really know exactly what each of us is capable of being, we have to make the effort to push ourselves outside of our comfort zone. If you are to be successful, this must become a habit. Start with pre-task and post-task briefings much like today's pilots are required to do. This can be between yourself for just a minute of your time. It doesn't take long, but the benefit of not making that unintentional error far outweighs the time taken before starting a task to go over what could possibly go wrong and what should I do to avoid or mitigate it? It can be as simple as placing a shop rag under the part you are removing to catch a dropped nut you don't intend to drop. See #43 June 2019 article – The Watch and the Coin. The post-task talk with yourself looks at how well the work on the task went and what could I have done better? The answer to this short briefing will apply to the next time you are about to do the task. You are looking at moving the Good Better Best, to the Best or Normalization of Excellence.

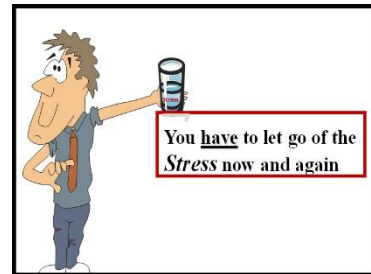
We don't know just what we are really capable of until we are put to the test. There have been instances where, in an emergency (let's say there is a car on fire with people in it), the expected "macho-man" freezes while the office nerd puts his own Safety aside and runs to Save the "damsel in distress". I made 21 jumps out of a perfectly good aircraft just to see if I could do it. The first few jumps were way out of my comfort zone and the jump out of the Safety of the inside of the aircraft, I believe, took place only because I'd rather die than go back down in the aircraft and face my friends. While I'm not suggesting that you jump out of an aircraft I am suggesting that you continuously challenge yourself.

If you recall in the Stress issue (#22 April 2017) we used a model that showed a graph with the increase in stress resulting in an increase in productivity up to a certain point above which the productivity decreased rapidly. I called that area the "So-so" stress, where you are working at your maximum stress and productivity level. Normalization of excellence may put you there, but you can't stay there indefinitely without a break without running the high risk of burnout. Excess stress can have some very unpleasant consequences. There is an old saying that "You can't have too much of a good thing". That is very very false. Water is a good thing, as we can live only about three days without it. Yet, a radio station held a contest they called "Hold your Wee for a Wii". Eighteen contestants had to drink one glass of water (8 oz) every 12 minutes without urinating or vomiting. Jennifer, a mother of 3 children, was determined to win the game console for her children, but vomited when they were down to the last two contestants. They joked that she looked pregnant when she left without the prize. She died of water intoxication several hours later. I suspect that her children got a Wii out of the \$16.5 million awarded to her estate, but they would rather have had their mother. The saying to follow has to be: "Everything in moderation". There has to be a balance between work and family. Society sees the wisdom of that by having laws that limit the number of days one can legally work without a break. This is why we have weekends, occasional long weekends and vacations.

It is reputed that when Bill Gates was trying to get Microsoft up and running, he had a bed beside his computer and worked until exhausted, slept and went back to working on the many problems in the programs. You can only do that for so long before you will begin to experience burnout, unless you balance it with time off. With burnout you become so obsessed with your work that you exclude almost everything else. In the extreme, the person begrudges the time required to eat and sleep. Without a break from this excess stress, the immune system begins to weaken, the person will have heightened blood pressure, type two diabetes is a greater possibility, the person will begin to have problems sleeping, they begin to have problems staying focused and it begins to be more and more difficult to do simple jobs. The solution begins with the realization that the problem exists.



In workshops I hold a plastic glass half full of water and ask the class if they thought I could hold the glass with an outstretched arm for 10 minutes. They all agree that I could. I then say what about one hour? Some begin to believe that I couldn't. Two hours, most believe that I couldn't. (And so do I) Why not? It doesn't get heavier but it sure begins to feel that it is. I then say if I held it for 45 minutes and set it down for 15 minutes how long could I hold it. Most agreed for many more hours. I then explained that the glass of water represents stress and if you put it down at regular intervals you could hold it indefinitely.



Therefore, to avoid burnout in the search for perfection, take regular breaks from it. Spend quality time with friends and family. Have a hobby or another project of interest. Take up mind relaxing yoga and now they say to take a break and just doodle. Anything that equates to putting that glass of stress down for a time. Strive to improve yourself but don't let it take over your life.