



# Book Never Fly Solo

## Lead with Courage, Build Trusting Partnerships, and Reach New Heights in Business

Rob "Waldo" Waldman  
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### Recommendation

The cockpit of a fighter jet is the last place you would expect to find someone with claustrophobia and a fear of heights. Remarkably, Lt. Col. Rob “Waldo” Waldman managed to keep that little secret from the US Air Force during a stellar career in which he flew 65 combat missions in Serbia and Iraq. Now a professional leadership speaker, the retired pilot uses lessons from his Air Force days to inspire others to strive for success in business and life. Waldman is most compelling when he shares military stories and explains the tools and techniques he used to overcome adversity. He deserves credit for attempting to draw instructive parallels between his military experiences and life in the corporate world, and he sustains the metaphor of a pilot and his “wingmen.” However, Waldman rarely strays from a traditional leadership course, recycling age-old advice about pursuing dreams and building relationships. Though experienced flyers may not need to climb aboard, *BooksInShort* believes that readers with only ground-level exposure to motivational leadership material will find value and inspiration in Waldman’s flight.

### Take-Aways

- Enlisting the support of others is a sign of strength, not weakness. That’s why pilots have “wingmen” watching their backs.
- Good wingmen look out for others before themselves.
- Don’t be afraid to ask for help. Ace wingmen do it all the time.
- Motivation is valuable only when it provokes action.
- Integrity is the cornerstone for building unbreakable relationships.
- Steer clear of negative people. They will drain your energy and sabotage your mission.
- Strive for “situational awareness” before tackling any endeavor.
- Really get to know the people who work with you every day.
- Maintain contact with your most trusted wingmen – even if it’s only a phone call every couple of months.
- Aborting a mission or abandoning a project can be an appropriate course of action under the right circumstances.

### Summary

#### Support for Your Dreams

Success in business – and life – requires hard work, a positive attitude and the ability to overcome adversity. Even those who triumph at the highest levels understand the importance of a good support team. No one can succeed without other people’s help. Even highly skilled fighter pilots would never dream of flying a mission without their trusted “wingmen.” Whether you’re strapped into a cockpit at 20,000 feet or running a sales meeting, you must be able to depend on others to help you navigate choppy air.

“The journey can’t begin until you find a mission in your work and life that is worth fighting for.”

While you want the confidence of knowing who has your back in an emergency, of course, you are ultimately responsible for setting your own path. No one can do it for you. Begin by identifying your mission, a dream that makes you passionate about your objectives. Yet motivation alone will not guarantee success. You must accompany drive with action – the willingness to move forward, especially when you’re frightened, insecure or overwhelmed.

## Be Prepared

Fighter pilots spend hours reviewing every possible scenario that could arise during a mission. They try to be ready for all kinds of emergencies, and they rehearse the steps they would take in any given situation. Businesspeople also must be ready to deal with unfavorable circumstances. What's your plan if the computer system goes down for an extended period? How would your company compensate if key personnel took jobs elsewhere? What would happen if a sudden economic downturn created the possibility of layoffs? Learn from the experience of others. Books and industry magazines are excellent sources of information. Talk to colleagues who have lived through particular scenarios. You can never get enough feedback.

"You often hear...that attitude determines altitude. This is only partly true. A more accurate formula is attitude plus action determines altitude."

Don't be afraid to ask for help. It's not a sign of weakness. In fact, expecting support from people within your outfit is perfectly reasonable. Fighter pilots could never survive combat missions without their wingmen. A jet's tiny cockpit doesn't allow pilots much movement, leaving them especially vulnerable to enemy planes directly behind them in the six o'clock position. Wingmen in combat constantly check "each other's six," making sure that no squadron member is left open to attack from the rear. In the corporate world, "checking six" boils down to these three elements:

- **"Effective communication"** — Keep your eyes open. Recognizing when a co-worker is struggling and may be in real danger of falling apart isn't always easy. Some people keep to themselves, working behind closed doors and rarely communicating. They may be filled with self-doubt or alienation. They may want to reach out, but may not know how. Check in with your colleagues. Provide encouragement and a sympathetic ear.
- **"Honest feedback"** — Authenticity is always best, particularly in giving and receiving feedback. Be willing to acknowledge your shortcomings and allow your fellow flyers to make observations and suggestions. Conversely, don't hesitate to approach a colleague and tactfully express your concerns, especially if your team's effort could be compromised.
- **"Mutual support"** — Integrity is the cornerstone of a strong team. Lack of integrity can destroy everything. Honesty and authenticity generate trust. It's comforting to know your wingmen will do the right thing, back you up and admit to their mistakes. Their end results may not always be what you intended, but you'll never doubt their motivation. Integrity and shared support should be ingrained and automatic.

## Beware of Negativity

A gloomy, pessimistic work environment can hurt even the most highly motivated individual. However, you will never maximize your potential if you allow toxic, self-pitying co-workers who wallow in negativity to affect you. In some situations, protecting your sanity by leaving a firm that is mired in pessimism is the right choice, even if you sacrifice job security.

"In business, a solid foundation of judgment and skill can mean the difference between success and catastrophe, and these qualities aren't acquired overnight."

No matter where you are, you have to find a way to fly through turbulent skies. If you're feeling down or worried, focus on the positive aspects of your life. Think about your family and how much they depend on you. Reflect on the things you really enjoy. You may even need to take a couple of days off and get away from it all. Everyone goes through periods when they feel unproductive or uninspired. Stepping back and viewing your situation from a fresh perspective may help. Don't allow yourself to get burned out, and don't ignore the warning signs of excessive physical or mental fatigue. This kind of problem usually doesn't fix itself.

"Excessive multitasking can cripple your performance and even shoot down your career. Focus is critical to success, whether you're in a cockpit, a cubicle or a boardroom."

Allow your wingmen to lift your spirits and restore your confidence. If you're anxious or fearful and need a pep talk, seek people who will provide positive feedback and re-energize you. Good wingmen look out for each other, but they're humble enough to admit when they need help.

## All for One and One for All

In combat, fighter pilots depend on their wingmen to alert them to dangerous — even potentially fatal — predicaments. A great deal of radio communication buzzes among pilots as a squadron attempts to complete a successful mission. Of course, you're not likely to face a life-or-death situation in the office, but the principles of teamwork and cooperation still apply. Fighter pilots can't fly solo and neither can you. Whether you're part of a multinational corporation or one of three staffers in a small office, you need a solid, productive relationship with your associates.

"Have the courage to give and receive feedback, especially when it's something you or your wingman may not want to hear."

Maybe you're an executive facing several difficult situations early on a Monday morning. One of your best employees is considering an offer from the competition. A production manager indicates that plant problems are delaying the latest product rollout. Your technology chief insists on shutting down the computer system for an hour for upgrades. You start to feel your composure slipping. Your door suddenly opens and in walks one of your most trusted department heads, a wingman whose calm demeanor and level-headed approach is legendary. Your executive wants to talk with you about a new idea, but instead becomes a sounding board, allowing you to vent your frustrations while offering gentle direction and pointing out your options.

"A good wingman will recognize when you aren't functioning at the highest level of performance."

A good wingman may sometimes tell you news you don't want to hear. You may think you're ready for a promotion or anxious to take on a new project, but your wingman diplomatically explains that maybe you need more time before making such a big move. Your fellow flyer isn't trying to hurt your feelings, but merely looking out for what's truly in your best interests. If you've established a relationship of mutual trust, you can listen to advice in the proper context.

"Without integrity, there can be no trust. Partnerships erode and mission-readiness falters."

Good wingmen establish their credibility by being prepared and offering wise counsel when necessary. They are always trying to improve themselves and gain more knowledge while keeping a careful eye on their colleagues. Good wingmen are unselfish and willing to put others before themselves. If you see a buddy in trouble, lend a hand. Remember that if one wingman goes down, so does your squad.

## Making a List and Checking It Twice

Life sometimes throws a knockout punch. Maybe a family member contracts a serious disease or you're the victim of downsizing or a layoff. Perhaps your marriage has hit a rough spot or your child has just gotten suspended from school again. You need people to turn to, your wingmen. To ensure that you'll always have wingmen to count on, nurture your relationships by taking these steps:

- List 20 friends and allies who you trust the most. Compile a similar list of trustworthy business contacts. Make sure you have all their contact information (address, phone number and email address).
- Touch base once a week with one person from each list. Have lunch or meet for coffee. Share what's happening in your life. Maybe you can help someone along the way.
- At the very least, make a phone call to every wingman on your lists every couple of months. Stay in touch.
- Reach out to any new contacts often with a phone call or an email. They'll appreciate your concern, but act without an expectation of anything in return.

## Always Communicate

"Situational awareness" enables a squadron of jet pilots to confidently take on a mission. Even if the skies are pitch black and the enemy is lurking, knowing where you're headed and who's on your wing gives you the assurance that you will succeed. In worst-case scenarios, a pilot may lose radio contact with his wingmen, leaving him with no situational awareness at all. Communication breakdowns are inevitable in the workplace – sometimes they can't be avoided – but you can minimize risk by establishing a strong communication system.

"Good communication has to be planned. The problem is that most organizations have terrible communication plans – or none at all."

Faulty communication is a common complaint among employees. In one online poll of 1,000 participants, 28% indicated that "poor communication at the beginning of a project" was the primary reason the project failed. Try to incorporate these tips in your "mission briefings":

- Be prompt in starting and ending your meetings.
- Clearly state your reasons for gathering your wingmen.
- Make all your team members know their responsibilities.
- Explain the parameters of the mission.
- Have a backup plan in case of unexpected circumstances.

"Winners always fly as a team, for though we may manage to survive on our own, we win together."

Be organized and to the point so you instill confidence in your wingmen. They will take their cues from you. If you project insecurity, you could compromise the mission.

## Know When to Fold 'Em

No pilot wants to abort a mission. The very idea raises questions and creates self-doubt. But in some circumstances, that's the appropriate thing to do. Throwing in the towel at the first sign of adversity is an entirely different matter. Military officers – and business leaders – realize they will face difficult challenges, and they expect to persevere. They are paid to make tough decisions that others may not like. In one form or another, fear is usually the enemy. Some people are afraid to succeed; others are petrified of failure. Some people can't tolerate the idea of being disliked; others don't want their weaknesses exposed.

"You need to feel confident that when you call on your wingmen to get the job done, they'll be flying with you 'same way, same day'."

Aborting a mission or abandoning a project ultimately boils down to whether you are going to jeopardize the welfare of others or shirk your responsibilities. Plowing ahead because of ego or pride is not acceptable. Listen to the voice of common sense within you. Don't push a project when you know its problems are too numerous or severe to overcome. Stop wasting time on sales accounts that dried up months ago. Press on if you have good reasons; if not, abort the mission and cut your losses.

## Serve Up Your Best

Outstanding leaders make it their business to know their wingmen. Find out a little about the people who work hard for you every day. Are they married? Do they have children? Show genuine interest in their well-being and they'll repay you with loyalty, admiration and dedication. Remember that the way you act and carry yourself every day makes an impression on everyone around you. Good leaders earn respect through their actions, not their titles or grand offices.

"The greater the fear, the greater the opportunity for growth."

You can't motivate your wingmen if you don't earn their respect. Leaders who demonstrate their commitment to their squadron will find that their people will go the extra mile for them. Teamwork and cooperation are necessary in any endeavor. You can only go so far flying solo.

## About the Author

**Rob "Waldo" Waldman**, a former fighter pilot, is a lieutenant colonel in the US Air Force Reserve and a professional leadership speaker.

