The Tolerance of Mediocrity & Demanding Perfection from Students

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The Tolerance of Mediocrity & Demanding Perfection from Students ~Guest Blogger Capt. Brian Schiff

The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires.
–William Arthur Ward

Bart's (not his real name) flight instructor had moved on in her professional flying career. The greener pastures offered by the airlines (not like recently) compelled his CFI to abandon her students so that she could fly jets in the "big show". So, I took over Bart's training.

Bart had already soloed and completed the cross-country time required by the regulations when he came to me. My objective was to prepare him for the private pilot airplane practical test. During his first lesson with me, we did steep turns, slow-flight and stalls. His steep turns bounced from top to bottom between the plus and minus 100-foot tolerances allowed by the then Airman Certification Standards.

When I told him that his steep turns were horrible, he replied, "But my instructor said I am allowed plus or minus 100 feet." Boy did he take advantage of those margins.



Ask any of my students, former or present, what my tolerances are during maneuvers. They all will say "zero". In fact, most of my students take checkrides without ever knowing how much altitude they are allowed to lose or how much their airspeed may vary because I teach them to aim for perfection. Of what use is the tolerance information? A pilot should continuously strive for perfection and make corrections toward it when needed. Why assign a tolerable level of mediocrity to be acceptable? If you can maintain 2,599 feet, you can maintain 2,500 feet.

I equate the attempt for perfection to target shooting. If you aim for the bull's-eye and miss, you still hit the target. If you aim for the target and miss, you fail altogether. A great pilot was asked, "what makes you a great pilot?" His answer: "I don't consider myself a really great pilot. I continue to strive to become one, and I think therein lies the difference." Great pilots don't think they're the best. Only the mediocre are always at their best.

Mediocre means: of only moderate quality or not very good. If this describes the pilot you want to be, then when you fly, aim only for the allowable parameters of the Airman Certification Standards. (By the way, when are they going to rename this new document the Aeronautical Certification Standards? But I digress.)

Flight instructors should lead by example and fly with precision at all times—especially when demonstrating maneuvers to their students. Instructors should precisely maintain their intended headings, airspeeds, and altitudes. In this regard, I lead by example. Do I lock the needles on their targets? No. I am not that good. But I try, and when I fall short, the error is usually minuscule, and a correction toward the intended parameter is immediately applied. If flight instructors allow themselves loose tolerances when flying, their students will follow suit. Students learn what they live. They emulate their instructors. They idolize you, so make every effort to fly like you would expect them to fly. Aim for the bull's-eye.

Bart took his private pilot checkride without regard for the maximum tolerances allowed of his performance. They were meaningless. That superfluous information would only have served to allow him to tolerate mediocrity. He passed with flying colors and now is a professional pilot.

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(Photo taken and provide by Brian Schiff)
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