

HELPING TRAINEE CONTROLLERS ACHIEVE THEIR DREAMS



Becoming a controller or professional pilot is a long and expensive process. If it goes wrong, there are consequences for the individual and the organisation. But if a person fails their final validation, does that have to mean the end of the line? In this article, **Neil May** outlines a training and coaching programme to help trainee controllers be more confident and resilient when under pressure, to the benefit of everyone.

KEY POINTS

- Resilient individuals have confidence, a strong social network, adaptability and purposefulness.
- It is essential for the trainee to understand their internal motivation for becoming a controller, and to keep motivated and focused when times get tough.
- Trainees must maintain confidence and project confidence. They must have a performance and learning mind-set.
- It's OK for a trainee to make mistakes, so long as they learn from them.
- Quality of practice is far more important than quantity of practice. It is essential that Instructors and Training Managers learn and practise the skills of how to identify and support struggling trainees.



In the autumn of 2014, the training team at NATS' Swanwick Area Control Centre had a problem. Over a matter of weeks, four trainee controllers had all failed their final validation assessments. The instructors were mystified. They believed that all four trainees had the necessary technical skills to pass the assessment and to be good, competent controllers. But for some reason, they didn't perform on the day. The hopes and dreams of four trainee controllers were on the line.

The Swanwick training team asked the Human Factors team in NATS for help. By the time of the final validation assessment, a trainee controller has

spent around three years in training. A lot of time, money, energy and emotion has been invested by both the trainee and the organisation. Failing an assessment is bad for the organisation and bad for the individual.

Occupational psychologists from the HF team interviewed both trainee and experienced controllers and found a number of common themes. Successful trainees had confidence in themselves, they performed well under pressure, and had the ability to accept and bounce back quickly from setbacks and negative feedback. Non-technical skills were just as important to success as technical skills.



A training and coaching programme was put together to help trainee controllers be more confident and resilient when under pressure. This was built around a model of resilience which had been developed and applied very successfully in elite sports. There are four key elements:

- **Confidence** – Individuals feel more resilient when they feel competent and effective in coping with stressful situations. Strong self-esteem is important.
- **Social Support** – Having good relationships with others and seeking support helps individuals to overcome adverse situations. This is especially important for trainees who may be away from home in a new environment.
- **Adaptability** – Flexibility and being able to adapt to changing situations that are beyond our control are essential to maintaining resilience. Resilient individuals can cope well with change and their recovery from its impact tends to be quicker.
- **Purposefulness** – Having a clear sense of purpose, clear values, drive and direction helps individuals to persist and achieve in the face of setbacks.

Today, soon after their arrival in NATS, all trainee controllers attend a series of non-technical skill training sessions to help them to prepare for the pressures that they will face. Most trainees have been very successful before joining NATS, and know that they have done better than many hundreds of other applicants to get a place on the controller training course. At this stage, many new trainees are unaware of, or do not recognise, how challenging the training might be for them. They are unprepared to deal with the pressure that they will face.

The confidence and resilience sessions cover eight modules and are supported by workbooks and tools to help the trainees throughout their three years of controller training. A key focus of the training is providing practical tools and techniques to encourage the trainees to develop a proactive approach to learning. Right from the start of their training, they need to learn a lot of information in a short period of time and are quickly working under pressure. Trainees are taught study techniques to help absorb the vast amount of information. This includes building their social support network by working in groups with other trainees and making sure that they proactively ask questions of the instructors where unsure.

Another key element is the diary that trainees have to complete after every training session. This asks the trainee to identify five things that they did really well during the session and no more than three things that they could improve on. This reinforces the message that the trainee is encouraged to take control of their learning in an active way. Ultimately, the trainee should aim to build upon the positive behaviours and eradicate the areas to improve upon.

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Role models for trainees are discussed and these are generally previous trainees who have gone on to successfully validate, family members, or people who have achieved great success in the fields of sports, music and politics, often overcoming adversity along the way. Tips for success are provided and case studies discussed to provide trainees with suggestions that they could apply to themselves.

Recognising the signs of stress in oneself is extremely important. Each of us has different mental, physical and

behavioural symptoms that tell us we are feeling stressed. If we recognise these symptoms, we can do something about them. If they are ignored, they can easily be a distraction from the training being imparted. Again, tips for success are provided from previous trainees who have dealt effectively with stress.

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It is well known that motivation is an important key to success. Trainees are helped to identify their internal motivations for becoming a controller and to ensure that they keep motivated when times get tough. This also requires trainees to remain focused on their goals and, in line with elite sports, to visualise what success looks like for them. As Michael Jordan, the US basketball player, said, *"I don't do things half-heartedly because I know that if I do, I can expect half-hearted results."*

Maintaining confidence is important but projecting confidence is just as important. The way in which the trainee is perceived by their instructors and their future fellow controllers has a psychological effect on how they are treated. A trainee might be extremely motivated to succeed but if they come across as not being motivated to learn, to listen or to improve, then this is likely to affect the help and support that they will receive.

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Motivation and confidence can be eroded rapidly during training, maybe through poor performance on practical exercises, exam failure or making mistakes during on-the-job training. The negative feelings can be even more difficult to cope with in trainees who, before starting controller training, seldom or never experienced failure.

Trainees must have a performance and a learning mindset. They must demonstrate positivity, and accept and bounce back quickly from setbacks and negative feedback. A key part of learning is making mistakes. As Winston Churchill said, *"Success is going from failure to failure without losing enthusiasm."* A successful trainee in NATS said, *"I think sometimes I needed to make the mistakes to realise what I needed help on. I was a bit scared to make mistakes but it's fine to make mistakes, just make sure you learn from them and remember them and watch what other people do right and wrong, and learn from that too."*

For most of us, success doesn't come without a lot of hard work and practice. In elite sports, it is often cited that 10,000 hours of purposeful practice is required to become expert. Tiger Woods and the Williams sisters all started practising their sports at a very early age. Trainee controllers cannot be provided with 10,000 hours of practice before their validation assessment, nor can they start training at three years of age. It is essential therefore that every hour they get is focused on achieving their goals. Quality of practice is far more important than quantity of practice. It is important to break down the goal of becoming a controller into shorter, meaningful goals that can be measured, achieved and recognised.

As said earlier, many trainees do not recognise how difficult and stressful the training might be for them on first arrival. One-to-one coaching is therefore provided throughout their live 'on-the-job' period of training, which is focused on the specific confidence and resilience issues that the trainee is facing. The challenges that trainees

face are diverse and can include building an effective visual scan, team resource management, and maximising performance under pressure. It is only when faced with setbacks during this critical phase of their training working with real aircraft that trainees fully recognise the importance of the confidence and resilience support available to them.

The non-technical skills programme is constantly evolving and being cascaded more broadly into the organisation. Non-technical skills training modules are built into instructor and training manager programmes. These key people are taught the importance of effective feedback to maximise trainee performance and how to recognise and support struggling trainees to ensure that confidence issues are caught quickly. One Training Manager said, *"when a trainee's confidence drops, it drops quickly like falling off a cliff and it can be hard to turn it around. My job is to catch them before they fall."*

The need to address confidence and resilience issues arose because four trainees at Swanwick failed their final validation assessments over a short period. As a direct result of the support provided through the confidence and resilience programme, three of these trainees subsequently passed and became valid controllers. One of them said, *"The board day went very smoothly, and where normally I'm a bag of nerves before a practical assessment, I didn't feel anything all day. I just felt comfortable and I'm obviously delighted."* Four years on, they continue to be successful controllers. The confidence and resilience programme helped them to achieve their dreams. 

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