



Holding the Rudder When You Are Not OK

More than a third of first-world civil aviation tragedies are caused not just by human error – but by pilot suicide. If that can happen in the cockpit, what does it mean for us – as managers, influencers, and hard-working professionals?

This reflection draws on insights from the *Mindful Manager and the Personal Flight Envelope* – tools to help leaders pause, recalibrate, and stay human under pressure.

Leadership, burnout, and the silent danger of looking fine

As an aerospace engineer, I trust systems – fail-safes, redundancy, procedures. When something fails, there should be an explanation.

But with Air India 171, that logic fails. The aircraft was sound. The cause appears to be the pilot.

And this is not rare. From MH370 to Germanwings 9525 to China Eastern MU5735 – pilot suicide has become a recognised risk.



- ◆ Between 2014 and 2025, four such incidents caused 781 deaths – across some of the world's top airlines.
- ◆ That is more than one-third of all fatalities among the 25 largest global carriers.
- ◆ In a system designed for reliability, the last big variable is painfully clear: the person in the cockpit.

So I ask: if this happens in aviation, what is happening in the rest of the workplace?

Captain Dr. Steeve said it best

"Pilots are highly trained. Highly skilled. But that does not mean they are always well."

They work alone. Under pressure. With broken sleep and high stakes.

And they know this: admit you are struggling, and you risk your licence.

So they keep going. Until they cannot. Now look up from the cockpit. Into a boardroom. An emergency ward. A trading floor. The uniform changes. The pressure does not.

A different uniform. Another terrible crash.

I work with senior professionals – C-suite, Managing Directors, Partners, Heads of. On the outside, they are flying high. But when I run the [Personal Flight Envelope](#) assessment, the truth looks different

- ! They no longer wake before the alarm, feeling rested.
- ! The stress comes home – their partner says: "You are home, but not really."
- ! They lose their personality like their hair – quietly, gradually, with no one mentioning it.

I ask, "How are you?" I hear, "All fine." I ask again – slower, and for real – and something shifts.

Sometimes they go quiet. More often, they cry.

Men and women. Big titles. Big cars. Impressive watches. Beautiful bags. And behind a closed door, they cry – in a rare space where they finally feel seen.

Almost always, the same truth appears:

They feel they cannot be themselves at work. And they silently disagree with their own decisions.



What does a crash look like outside the cockpit?

There is no explosion. No investigation. No black box.

But there is damage – and it often lasts.

1. **Decision paralysis** – everyone sees the problem, but no one moves. Risk-taking dies. Mediocrity replaces brilliance.
2. **Toxic micromanagement** – leaders over-control what they do not fully grasp. They lose the team: its experience, creativity, and drive.
3. **Resignation of the HPPs** – the Hard-working Persistent People. They quietly hold everything together while others play politics. They do not shout. They build. And when they leave, they take the backbone with them.

(More here: [Bursting the Bubble of Corporate Talent](#))

The result? Leaders lose their edge, their professional empathy – the very thing that earns trust and inspires effort.

No Black Box hidden in the ashes... or is there?

Let us talk about the lie

In The Mindful Manager – part of my leadership series on YouTube – I ask: “How often do you feel pressure to act in ways that are not you?” You might recognise the signs:

- ! Saying “yes” when everything in you says “no”
- ! Wearing clothes that do not feel like yours
- ! Speaking lines that sound like someone else
- ! Smiling when you want to scream

We call it professionalism. But too often, it is painful performance. A costly act.

You gain speed by copying others. Approval by echoing your boss. Protection through blending in while losing yourself.

When your compass fades, Deadlines. Demands. Discipline run your show. Until one day, you look in the mirror – and no longer recognise the person staring back.



The real cost of “just one more thing”

Every time you say “yes” to one more call, one more task – you say “no” to what keeps you human: sleep, movement, loving connection, quiet. At first, it feels like nothing. A small price for your success.

Then it becomes the norm – silent, invisible, automatic, deviously destructive.

You tell yourself you are coping. In truth you are drifting. You might have become a victim of self-betrayal – the first step in betraying others. And that is when real damage begins.

What would have happened if the pilots had paused?

If they had felt safe enough to say: “I am not OK”? If they had not been penalised for speaking up? If someone had asked – and really meant it –

“How are you, really?”

We cannot rewrite those stories. But we can change ours. And it starts with something deceptively small: STOP.

- Stop – what you are doing, just for a moment
- ⌚ Take a few breaths. Let yourself arrive in the present
- 🔍 Observe – what is happening around and inside you?
- 🌀 Proceed with focus. Intentionally, not automatically.

One pause will not fix everything. But it can disrupt the cycle. And it might be enough to bring you – or perhaps all passengers – back into the picture.

Mindfulness is not soft. It is strategic.

This is not about scented candles or corporate kumbaya.

It is not about slowing down.

It is about moving with precision – acting with intention, to go fast.

It is not about vulnerability for its own sake – but about protecting your performance, your presence, your people.

This is responsible self-leadership. Because no one wins when the crucial people burn out.



The question that can change everything

It is the same question I ask my clients. But I do not want your rehearsed answer.

I ask – no, I beg – for the one that may not feel safe to say at work. The one you have not spoken aloud in a while. The one that reveals – not hides – what is really going on.

How are you – really?

And I want you to pause. Because in that moment, something real can surface – not what you usually say, but what your body already knows. And it might make the difference.

Captain Dr. Steeve made it part of his daily briefing – a check-in before weather, before systems, before the flight. Because when you are the one holding the rudder, there is a lot to protect.

It starts by knowing how you – and the others – really are.

If you want to hear more about this, please check out: [The Mindful Manager](#) and [Sustaining a Successful Mindset](#). For self-diagnosis on where you stand, please complete the free-of-charge [Leadership Learning Baseline Assessment](#). Upon completing this confidential questionnaire, we will send you your personal interpretative report. For Captain Dr. Steeve's Youtube post, click [here](#).

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