



Non-exec directors' Future Focus seminar with Mandy Hickson

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KPMG Board Leadership Centre



Former Tornado GR4 fast jet pilot with the RAF Mandy Hickson joined non-executive directors to share her experiences of calculating risks, taking decisions and why she always trusts in her team.

The dizzy heights of 30,000 feet may not seem like the most obvious place to give lessons to a boardroom, but Mandy Hickson – the second woman to fly a Tornado GR4 – showed that there are plenty of similarities between the two.

Drawing upon a 17-year career as a RAF pilot, Mandy Hickson completed three tours of duty and 45 missions over Iraq, which included patrolling the 'no fly' zone. Facing risks that most board members only ever see at the cinema, Mandy's ability to make the right calls in high-risk situations came down to three factors: teamwork, intensive preparation and immediate feedback.

Team work is the only way to work

Up in the air, there's only one blind spot: directly behind the jet. That's why pilots fly in formation. It means someone is keeping an eye on your aircraft at all times. Keeping that formation tight – they fly three-quarters of a mile apart from each other – it means there's always someone covering you. What's more, always someone around to give you a perspective you don't have.

This is something Mandy sees in her work with large organisations. She warns against getting stuck in a rut, approaching problems with tunnel vision and always going about things the same way. It's not until you work in a team, where people open up other people's minds to new ways of tackling a topic, that you'll get the full perspective.

There's no such a thing as a crisis if you've asked 'what if?'

For every single operation, Mandy's crew would play out every single possible scenario. Asking 'what if?' is an important part of a crew's preparation. By thinking about all of the things that could go wrong, they'd discuss, and decide, what they'd do in that scenario. Then, in the unlikely case that disaster did strike, the team didn't feel like they were reacting in a crisis, they were simply following their plan to the letter.

It's an approach that works for businesses, too. How frequently do teams put projects to a stress test? Ask those difficult questions: what would happen if we go over budget, or if our supplier goes bust, or if our CEO ends up on the front page of the newspaper (for the wrong reasons)? Play out every scenario, however improbable it may seem at the start and then you'll know what to do if something does go wrong.

Set time aside to debrief once the work's done

After every single mission, even if it was flawless, the team would debrief. In those meetings, Mandy explained they'd talk about what had happened, run through the facts, discussing what went well and what could have gone better.

Behind every incident in the air – and Mandy has lost friends during her time in the RAF – there's always an element of human error. Sharing feedback when something has gone wrong isn't enough; just as only giving praise to a colleague for good work won't do either. For every major incident, there are probably 30 minor ones and as many as 300 near misses. Praise builds confidence, but not competence. Frank feedback does both in her view.

There's always a chance to do things better. That's true in a corporate environment too, but unless leaders give people a chance to reflect on what worked well (and not-so-well), near-misses could turn into full-on collisions.

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