Tombstone Methodology and the Normalization of Deviance: A Wake-Up Call for Aviation Safety

In aviation, we pride ourselves on having one of the safest transportation systems in the world. But safety isn't just a statistic—it's a mindset. And too often, our mindset is shaped by a flawed and reactive framework known as the **"tombstone methodology."**

This term refers to the unsettling reality that meaningful safety reforms frequently occur **only after lives are lost**. We measure success by the absence of fatalities, rather than by the abundance of near-misses and systemic red flags that precede them. We wait for the tombstones, then take action. Until then, we justify inaction.

The DCA Incident: A Tragedy Years in the Making

The recent midair collision scenario near Washington National Airport (DCA) is a tragic example of this broken approach. The warning signs were not hidden—they were hiding in plain sight:

- **Airspace design flaws** that create dangerous convergences.
- **Night visual separation procedures** still in use despite their limitations.
- **Night vision goggles (NVGs)** that restrict visibility in one of the busiest corridors in the country.
- **ATC overload and reduced supervision**, normalized by years of "just getting by."

Which brings us to another critical concept: **normalization of deviance**.

When "It's Always Worked" Becomes the Most Dangerous Phrase in Aviation

Normalization of deviance occurs when **risky practices become standard operating procedure** simply because nothing bad has happened—yet.

This cultural drift away from established safety norms doesn't happen all at once. It builds slowly:

- A visual approach is accepted at night despite marginal visibility.
- A controller manages too many aircraft because it's "a light shift."
- Airspace inefficiencies are tolerated because redesign is too costly or politically difficult.

These deviations become the new normal. And over time, we forget they were ever deviations at all.

The Deadly Feedback Loop

The **tombstone methodology** is the system's failure to respond until there's a tragedy.
The **normalization of deviance** is the cultural failure to recognize danger before it explodes.

Together, they create a feedback loop that ultimately leads to disaster.

We Must Change the Metric—and the Mindset

As someone who has spent decades working in aviation safety—as a captain, air traffic controller, and regulatory advisor—I've seen these dynamics play out over and over. In my experience, we often don't fix what's broken until we see the gravestones.

But it doesn't have to be this way.

We must shift from measuring **fatal outcomes** to tracking **leading indicators**.
We must empower aviation professionals to speak up—and act—**before** the unthinkable happens.
And we must invest in **modernized safety management systems** that view incidents and precursors as opportunities, not inconveniences.

In Closing

My heart aches for the families impacted by this wholly preventable tragedy. Their loss is a painful reminder that **safety must be proactive, not reactive**. We owe it to them—and to everyone who entrusts their lives to aviation—to do better.

Let's stop waiting for tombstones.

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