

Beyond Words: Sensing Risk Through Social Awareness



Part 3 of our Emotional Intelligence in Aerospace Series

In Part 1 of this series, we talked about **Self-Awareness**—the ability to recognize your own emotions and understand how they influence your behavior. Then in Part 2, we explored **Self-Management**, or how to stay steady, flexible, and effective under pressure.

Now we turn our attention outward—toward the people and culture around us.

Social Awareness is the skill of picking up on what others are feeling, even when they don't spell it out. In aerospace, whether you're on the product team, air crew team, or vehicle maintenance team, your ability to read emotional cues and understand group dynamics can strengthen trust, improve collaboration, and prevent costly disconnects.

Psychologist Daniel Goleman, who helped popularize the idea of emotional intelligence, describes Social Awareness as a set of skills that help you tune into other people's emotional states—and into the unspoken norms of the organization you work in. It's about more than empathy. It's also about understanding how things *really* work in your team or company.

What Social Awareness Looks Like in Practice

Social Awareness shows up in subtle ways. It's noticing a hesitation in someone's voice. It's recognizing that a teammate's silence might mean something is wrong—or that a usually upbeat colleague seems withdrawn. It's reading the energy in a room and adjusting your approach accordingly.

In aerospace, these soft cues can carry hard consequences. If someone's off their game but doesn't feel safe enough to speak up, things can unravel quickly. Teams that pay attention to each other—who make space for concerns before they become issues—are safer, stronger, and more resilient.

Social Awareness also includes being attuned to organizational culture. Every workplace has unspoken rules. Some teams encourage open dialogue; others value deference to seniority. Some leaders invite feedback; others unintentionally shut it down. Being aware of those patterns helps you work more effectively—and shape a healthier culture in the process.

Real-World Reflections

Let's bring this to life with a couple of examples.

A captain senses something is off with their first officer during preflight. Nothing big—just a few short answers, a delay in checklist responses. A socially aware leader doesn't ignore it. They ask a simple question: *"Everything good today?"* That moment of check-in could be enough to surface a concern before takeoff—fatigue, distraction, uncertainty. Or it might just give the FO a chance to reset. Either way, it's better than flying with tension no one's naming.

Now imagine a different setting—on the ground, in ops. A dispatcher picks up the phone to handle a client's last-minute change. It's the third urgent request today. Their tone on the call is abrupt, bordering on rude. When they hang up, they sigh loudly and start typing with visible frustration. A socially aware supervisor doesn't chalk it up to mood. They say, *"You've been juggling a lot—want to talk it through?"* That small gesture could help someone feel supported before the stress spills into an error or burnout.

Whether in the air or on the ground, Social Awareness helps us keep people safe—not just physically, but emotionally too.

A Few Ways to Strengthen Social Awareness

This isn't something you have or don't have—it's something you can build with practice. A few habits that help:

- **Listen between the lines.** Pay attention to tone, timing, and body language.
 - **Ask, don't assume.** A gentle check-in can open the door for someone to share what's going on.
 - **Notice who's speaking—and who isn't.** Team dynamics tell you a lot.
 - **Learn how your team works.** Every group has a culture, whether it's named or not.
 - **Make space for real conversation.** Especially when the stakes are high or people are stressed.
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Why It Matters for Safety Culture

At its core, Social Awareness isn't just about being nice. It's about being effective—and safe. The best safety cultures aren't just built on checklists and procedures. They're built on people who pay attention to each other, speak up early, and respond with care and clarity.

When people feel seen and heard, they're more likely to share concerns, offer feedback, and bring their best thinking forward. That's what makes aerospace teams thrive—and what keeps small issues from turning into big ones.

Coming Next

In Part 4, we'll close out the series with **Relationship Management**—how to handle conflict, influence others constructively, and lead with emotional intelligence in any role.

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References

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. New York: Bantam Books.

Goleman, D. (2002). *The Emotional Intelligence of Leaders*. Harvard Business Review.