

Roots of Safety Attitudes: Past, Training, and Culture



In aerospace, we often say that “attitude is everything.” But where do those attitudes actually come from? And more importantly, how can organizations influence them toward safe outcomes?

The **Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1985; 1991)** tells us that attitudes don’t appear out of thin air. They are learned and reinforced over time, built from **beliefs, values, and the experiences we carry with us.**

The Roots of Safety Attitudes

Past Experiences

In aerospace, past events can be among the strongest influences on belief. Consider a flight crew that once experienced a runway excursion on a contaminated surface. Although no one was injured, the experience left a lasting impression: braking reports and runway condition codes are no longer just data points—they are signals that could prevent another close call. From that day forward, the crew’s *attitude toward precaution* in winter operations shifted dramatically.

Outside aerospace, a driver who once hydroplaned in heavy rain might approach every storm differently. Where they once drove confidently at the speed limit, now they

instinctively slow down and keep a greater following distance. The memory of that moment reshaped their attitude toward risk in wet weather.

Both cases demonstrate how experiences shape enduring attitudes that influence the evaluation of future safety choices.

Training and Education

In the flight deck, training isn't just about memorizing checklists. During Crew Resource Management (CRM) training, for example, a first officer may be taught specific phrases for challenging a captain who overlooks a procedure. The real shift isn't in vocabulary, but in attitude: the FO moves from "*I shouldn't speak up*" to "*It's my duty to speak up.*" When the pressure is on, that belief drives safer behavior.

In everyday life, think of someone who takes a CPR class. Initially, they may hesitate at the idea of stepping in during an emergency. But after practicing compressions on a mannequin, learning how to use an AED, and hearing survival stories, their outlook changes. They don't just know the steps — they now *believe* they can make a difference. Their attitude toward emergencies becomes proactive rather than passive.

Training works when it changes not only what we know, but also what we *value*.

Organizational Safety Culture

Culture may be the most powerful shaper of attitudes. In one flight department, a captain who diverts around bad weather is congratulated for exercising good judgment. In another instance, the same decision is second-guessed for causing delays and increased fuel costs. Over time, crews internalize these signals. At the first operator, pilots build an attitude that safety-based decisions will be supported. At the second, attitudes may tilt toward "pressing on," even when doubt creeps in.

The same dynamic plays out in other fields as well. On a construction site, if foremen praise a worker who stops the job after spotting a hazard, the team develops an attitude that safety takes priority over schedule. But if supervisors complain about "lost time," workers quickly adopt the belief that speed is valued over protection.

Culture doesn't just influence compliance — it teaches people *how to think* about safety, which shapes the attitudes they carry into every decision.

Why Attitudes Matter

Armitage & Conner's (2001) meta-analysis of 185 studies found that **attitudes often account for 30–40% of the variation in intentions**. In plain terms: if you want to predict whether a person intends to follow a safety procedure, their underlying attitude toward that procedure is one of the strongest indicators.

That's why positive safety attitudes are more than “nice to have.” They drive whether people speak up, report hazards, and follow through on safety-critical actions.

How Organizations Can Shape Attitudes

As safety professionals, we can't control every past experience, but we *can* influence the environment in which attitudes are reinforced:

➔ **Model the Standard.** Leaders who wear their seatbelts, follow sterile flight deck rules, and support go-arounds send a stronger message than any memo could ever convey.

📺 **Tell the Stories.** A hospital that openly shares lessons from a near-miss medication error creates lasting attitudes about double-checking doses.

✂️ **Reinforce in Training.** Simulator scenarios build confidence in the flight deck; hands-on drills build conviction on a factory floor. Training that “feels real” is what sticks.

✅ **Recognize Safe Choices.** Whether it's a pilot who diverts or a warehouse worker who stops the line after spotting a hazard, public recognition reinforces that safety is valued.

💬 **Protect Open Communication.** Employees at a repair station — or nurses on a hospital floor — are far more likely to report concerns if they know they won't be punished for speaking up.

Closing Thought

Attitudes don't just “exist” — they are learned, shaped, and reinforced. As Ajzen showed, they are central to what we *intend* to do, and intentions are the strongest predictor of what we actually *will* do.

For leaders, this means shaping safety attitudes isn't optional. Whether in a flight deck, a hangar, or a hospital ward, influencing attitudes is one of the most direct ways to build a culture where the right beliefs drive the right actions — every time.

How do social pressures shape safety? In Part 4, we'll explore how *subjective norms* — the expectations of peers, leaders, and the wider industry — influence decisions in the flight deck, the hangar, and beyond.

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References

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