

Why We Follow the Crowd (and When It Matters for Safety)



Have you ever been invited to an event where everyone else seemed to know the dress code—formal suits, elegant gowns—while you showed up in something more casual? That uneasy feeling comes from what psychologists call **subjective norms**—the unspoken pressure to fit in and act the way others expect.

In the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), subjective norms sit alongside attitudes and perceived behavioral control. Attitudes reflect what *I* believe. Norms reflect what *we* believe. And that “we” can be surprisingly persuasive.

What Are Subjective Norms

Put plainly, it comes down to this: *What do I think the people around me expect me to do? And how willing am I to go along?*

It’s not always written in policy. Sometimes it’s as subtle as a shrug, a silence, or the feeling that “this is how we do things here.”

And let’s be honest—none of us is immune. We all want to belong.

Aviation Examples: The Quiet Pull of the Group

Picture a new first officer flying with a captain who prefers to press on through deteriorating weather. The FO may know a diversion is safer, but the pull to defer to the captain can outweigh their own judgment.

Or step into a hangar: the team is rushing to get an aircraft out the door. Everyone else is moving fast, so the one technician who wants to double-check a step may feel pressure to skip it.

Reporting follows the same pattern. In a culture where filing safety reports is normal, people do it. In a culture where “nobody bothers,” silence quickly becomes the standard.

Everyday Life Reminders

This isn’t unique to aerospace. Plenty of office workers stay late, not because they need to, but because the rest of the team is still at their desks. Others recycle at work, not because they’re deeply committed, but because their peers do.

That’s the power of “what’s normal.” It’s not always about what we think—it’s about what we think others expect.

Why It Matters for Safety

Norms can work for us or against us.

✅ When they’re positive, they build habits like checklist discipline, speaking up, and reporting hazards.

⚠️ When they’re negative, they encourage shortcuts, silence, or risky “business as usual.”

Studies back this up. Workplace research has shown that employees are far more likely to follow safety procedures if they believe their supervisors and peers expect them to do so (Wallace & Chen, 2006). In aviation maintenance, group norms were found to determine whether engineers followed protocols—sometimes more than their personal attitudes did (Fogarty & Shaw, 2010).

The lesson is clear: leaders set the tone. A captain who openly invites input, or a manager who praises thorough reporting, creates a climate where speaking up is normal. Over time, those examples become the unwritten rule—*this is just how we do safety here*.

Looking Ahead

Subjective norms remind us that people don't act in a vacuum. We constantly scan the room for cues. Next week, we'll take a closer look at how these social pressures play out in aerospace safety culture—sometimes pushing teams toward safer choices, and other times nudging them toward risky shortcuts.

References

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