

Team Emotional Intelligence: The Hidden Cost of Silence



The Night the Screws Stayed Out

On September 11, 1991, an Embraer EMB-120 operated as Continental Express Flight 2574 departed Houston following overnight maintenance.

The work package included removal and replacement of horizontal stabilizer deice boots. During the second shift, 47 screws were removed from the top of the left horizontal stabilizer leading edge assembly. The third shift completed work on the right side but did not reinstall the screws on the left side before the aircraft returned to service.

The first leg of the morning was uneventful.

At 10:03 a.m., descending through 11,800 feet, aerodynamic loads caused the partially secured left horizontal stabilizer leading edge to separate. The aircraft pitched violently nose-down and broke apart in flight. All 14 people on board were lost.

The NTSB cited failure to adhere to proper maintenance and inspection procedures.

One NTSB board member filed a dissenting opinion, suggesting that the probable cause should have addressed something deeper: the failure of management to establish a culture that encouraged and enforced adherence to procedures (NTSB Aircraft Accident Report AAR-92/04).

Not just a procedural failure.

A cultural one.

And culture, at its core, is relational.

Before the Breakup

What happened in that hangar was not mechanical mystery.

It was a series of small human decisions:

- A shift turnover that did not fully capture aircraft configuration.
- Assumptions about what had been completed.
- Incomplete documentation.
- No final verification of fastener replacement.

No one intended harm. No one believed they were releasing an unsafe aircraft. But somewhere between the second shift and the third shift, something quiet happened. The social cost of asking a clarifying question became higher than the perceived risk of proceeding.

And that is where Team Emotional Intelligence lives — or erodes.

What Team Emotional Intelligence Really Means

In earlier articles, we defined Team Emotional Intelligence (Team EI) as the collective emotional capacity available within a group — the ability to regulate tension, surface doubt, manage disagreement, and maintain connection under pressure.

Research examining Team EI and performance has shown that emotionally intelligent teams perform better but not automatically. The dynamic operates through the structure of relationships inside the team and depends heavily on intrateam trust (Schutte, et al., 2020).

When trust is high:

- Emotional intelligence is optimized.
- Concerns are shared more freely.
- Information density increases.

- Teams perform better.

When trust is low:

- Emotional intelligence becomes isolated talent.
- Communication narrows.
- Doubt is filtered.
- Silence increases.

The research suggests that emotional capacity only translates into performance when the relational network inside the team is strong (Schutte, et al., 2020).

In maintenance environments, that network is built during:

- Shift change.
- Inspector review.
- Supervisor oversight.
- Informal “double-check” conversations.

When those relational ties thin, so does safety margin.

What “Missing Behaviors” Look Like

When Team EI is missing, you see:

- Assumptions replacing confirmation.
- Incomplete turnover notes left unchallenged.
- Technicians hesitating to question progress.
- Supervisors assuming competence without verification.
- Documentation signed without relational cross-check.

Conflict avoidance masquerades as efficiency. And over time, the relational density inside the system weakens. In the case of Flight 2574, the accident was not caused by a lack of technical knowledge. It was caused by a breakdown in relational accountability across shifts.

Why Conflict Reveals the Weakness

Conflict does not create failure. Conflict reveals whether Team EI exists.

In high Team EI environments:

- A technician says, “I need to see this secured.”
- An inspector says, “Walk me through what was completed.”
- A supervisor tolerates a five-minute delay to eliminate uncertainty.
- Tension is acknowledged, not suppressed.

In low Team EI environments:

- Questions feel accusatory.
- Challenge feels disruptive.
- Doubt is internalized.
- Silence becomes self-protection.

Dissent highlights an important distinction. Procedures exist on paper. Culture determines whether they are lived.

And culture is sustained through the emotional infrastructure of the team — the willingness to question, clarify, and challenge respectfully under pressure.

The Safety Culture Implication

Human and organizational factors repeatedly appear in serious accident investigations. They rarely begin with willful violation.

They begin with relational thinning:

- Reduced psychological safety.
- Narrowed communication.
- Increased authority gradient.
- Emotional fatigue.
- Avoided micro-conflict.

Team EI is not a soft concept. It is a structural resource. It determines whether the system welcomes friction early or suppresses it until physics intervenes.

In Houston, the fasteners were forgotten. But long before that, something deeper had already loosened. The margin narrowed because the social cost of asking a “simple” question felt too high.

While an individual missed the fasteners, the failure was shared. The team failed to bridge the gap during a silent handoff, and the organization failed to provide the structural "safety checks" that catch human error before it reaches the flight line.

Ultimately, Team EI is the infrastructure that ensures when one layer fails, the next one holds.

Looking Ahead

Healthy conflict is not the absence of tension.

It is the presence of:

- Emotional regulation,
- Mutual respect,
- Trust,
- And structural connection across roles.

In aerospace, conflict is not a threat to safety. Avoided conflict is.

In our next series, we will examine Conflict Management — not as confrontation, but as disciplined tension that strengthens decision-making and protects margin.

Because safety culture is not built by procedure alone. It is sustained by teams strong enough to challenge each other — respectfully — before 11,800 feet.

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References

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