

THE MISSING CONTROL: Psychological Safety in High-Risk Work



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Sentis acknowledges the traditional custodians throughout Australia and recognises their connections to land, waters and community.

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet today and pay our respects to elders past and present. We extend that respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here today. We do this because we value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, culture and knowledge.





**BE A
GREAT
PLACE TO
WORK**



**SUPPORT
GREAT
WORK**



**DO
GREAT
WORK**

Our Mission: To change the lives of individuals and organisations for the better, every day

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Our Experience

- ✓ Over 200,000 participants
- ✓ 500 + organisations
- ✓ 35 countries
- ✓ Broad industry experience
- ✓ Dedicated team of Organisational Psychologists and consultants



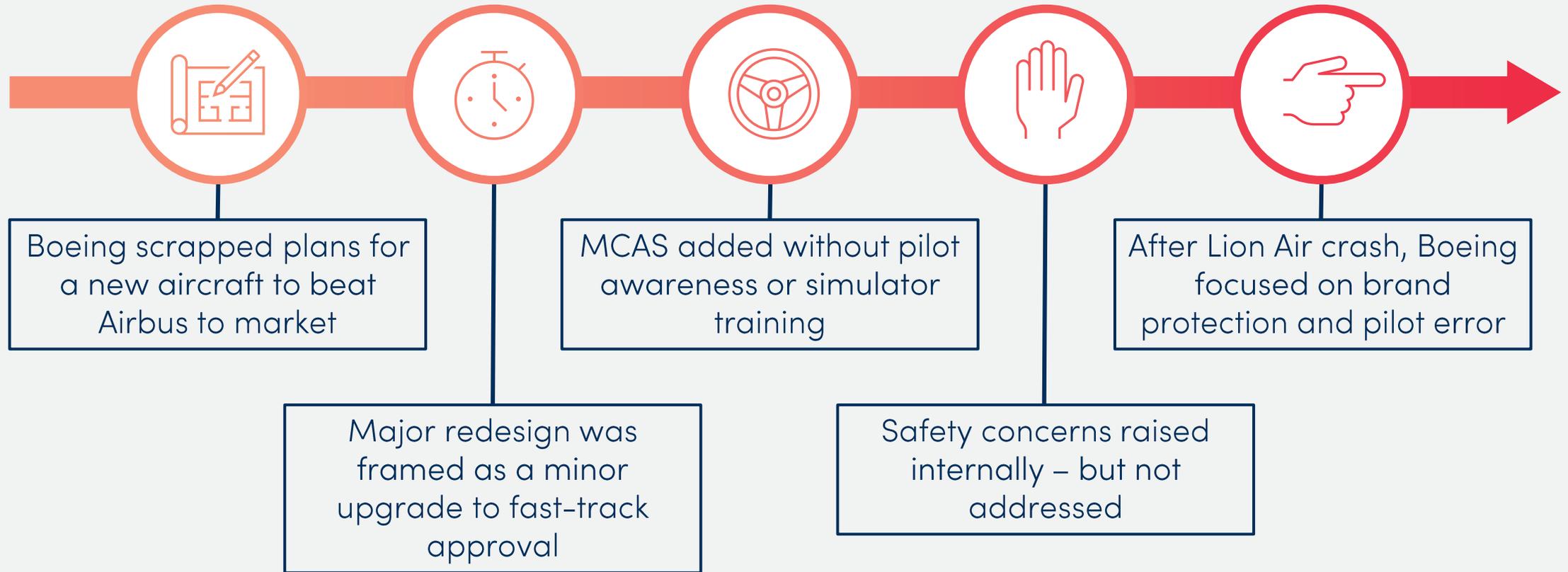
The Cost of Silence

Two crashes. Same aircraft. Same problem?

- 2018: Lion Air Flight 610 crashes, 189 lives lost → Boeing implied the crash was due to human error
- 2019: Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 crashes, 157 lives lost → Attention turned to the similarities...
- Both were Boeing 737 Max aircraft
- Both showed signs of the same malfunction relating to the Manoeuvring Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS)



A culture of speed over safety



Emails and interviews revealed a culture problem

"I don't know how to fix these things...it's systemic. It's culture. It's the fact we have a senior leadership team that understand very little about the business and yet are driving us to certain objectives," said an employee in an email dated June 2018.

"The downside is someone can threaten your position at work," said Cynthia Cole, retired Boeing engineer. "You play ball or else. The managers could tell you to keep your mouth shut or you lose your job."

Retired Boeing scientist Stan Sorscher said it's not just salary at stake. "It's your assignments. You get reassigned to another thing. You can be replaced by someone who is less capable of resisting pressure."

What happens when speaking up isn't safe?

- Pressure to perform silences internal concerns
- Warning signs are missed – not because they're not known, but because they aren't surfaced
- Psychological safety is absent: fear of slowing production or challenging leadership
- We miss the opportunity to create true safety: based on strong systems supported by a positive culture of openness, candour, and leadership that invites challenge

When speaking up becomes risky, safety becomes fragile.

Brady Report: Systemic failures behind tragedy



Poor or absent supervision



Inadequate task-specific training



Hazards unaddressed or normalised

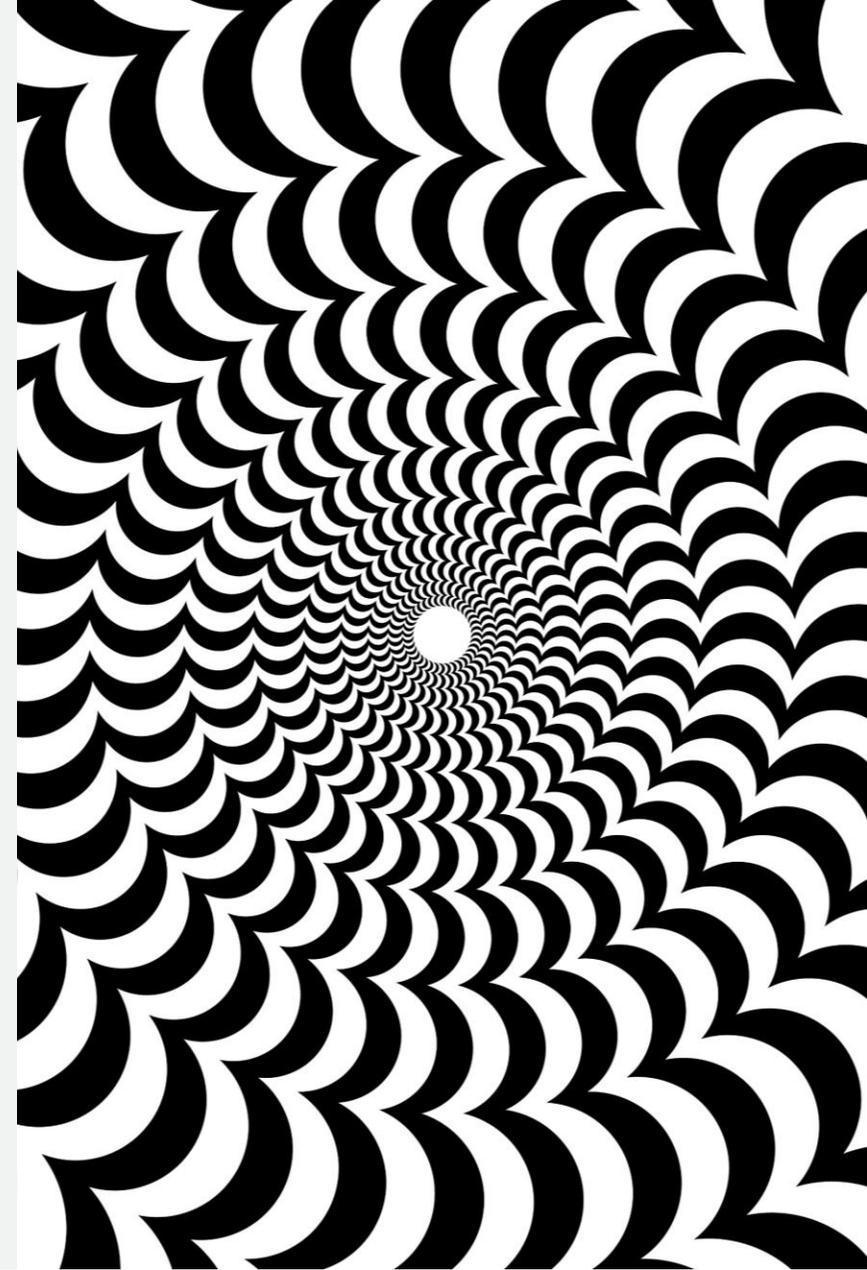


Repeating patterns of preventable fatalities

The illusion of safety

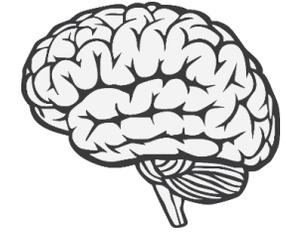
WHEN CONTROLS EXIST – BUT COMMUNICATION DOESN'T...

- Systems and controls can give a false sense of safety
- If people aren't speaking up, weak points go unnoticed / unacknowledged
- Hazard controls degrade over time without human input
- Silence doesn't mean safety – it could be a sign of unspoken risk



The Safety Experience and Psychological Safety

Safety is a whole-person experience



Safe =

Protected, respected, valued, certain of role and expectations, able to trust and be trusted, sense of belonging & acceptance

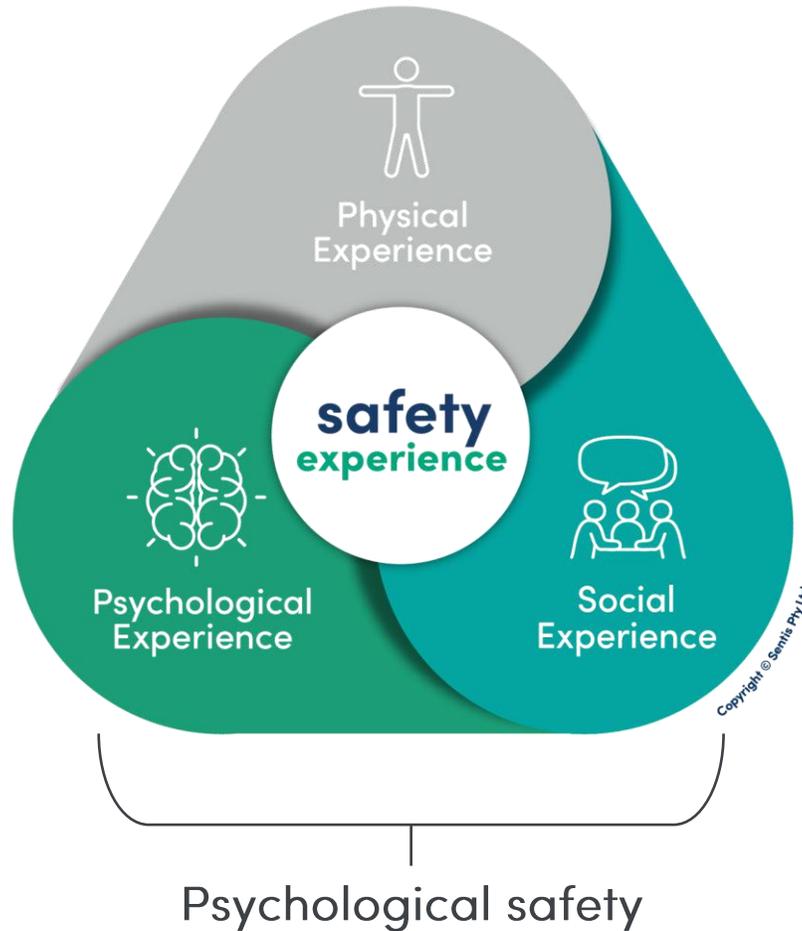
Well =

Competent, confident, calm and grounded, with the physical, mental & emotional capacity to meet my demands

Engaged =

Doing meaningful work, connected to people and purpose, intrinsically motivated, able to contribute and see progress

Defining psychological safety



Psychological safety climate:

“A shared belief that it is safe to take interpersonal risks in the workplace, such as sharing ideas, asking questions, raising concerns, or even admitting mistakes, without fear of negative consequences or repercussions.”

- Amy Edmondson

What the data shows

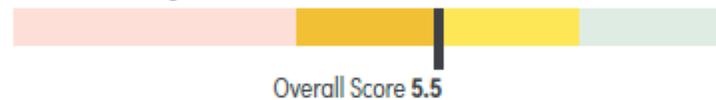
Psychological Safety Climate: Strength

Extent to which people do not hesitate to ask others for help



Psychological Safety Climate: Strength

Comfort in being oneself at work



Psychological Safety Climate: Opportunity

Extent to which people are not afraid to try different or new ways



Psychological Safety Climate: Opportunity

Fairness of how mistakes are managed



■ Negative ■ Fair - Low ■ Fair - High ■ Positive

- Based on psychological safety climate data from 8,000 respondents across 16 organisations and 5 industries
- **Strength:** willingness to ask others for help and be themselves at work
- **Opportunity:** the fear of trying new ways of doing things, and the perception that mistakes are managed fairly

Should Psychological Safety Be Viewed Like A Control?

Broadening our view of risk mitigation

Critical controls are those controls that are essential to prevent or mitigate a Material Unwanted Event (MUE).

Traditional Critical Controls

- Eliminate or reduce exposure to hazards
- Often engineering, isolation or procedural mechanisms
- Can reduce or remove the potential for harm
- Require maintenance and verification
- Work best when supported by worker engagement and insight

Human risk-mitigating factors

- Enable early identification
- Relational, behavioural and cultural in nature
- Create the climate where issues can be raised as they occur
- Prevent escalation by surfacing weak signals
- Strengthens effectiveness of other controls
- Require leadership consistency and behavioural modelling

The extra layer of defence

CCM without psychological safety

- Hazards more likely to go unreported – fear drives 38% of underreporting
- People likely to use ‘workarounds’ when they can’t speak up
- Controls may degrade unnoticed
- Workers hesitate to challenge decisions or raise concerns
- Early warning signs are missed

CCM with psychological safety

- Weak signals are surfaced early
- People speak up when controls aren’t working
- Risks are discussed and addressed before escalation
- Teams adapt and respond proactively
- People report mistakes and teams are able to learn from them

Making psychological safety tangible



ASK

Understand the data:

- Use validated tools
- Ask about confidence to speak up, fairness of error management
- Track over time



OBSERVE

Spot the signals:

- People raising concerns
- Admitting mistakes
- Offering new ideas
- Asking questions
- Reporting issues early



ENCOURAGE

Leadership action:

- Recognise and reward reporting and speaking up
- Invite and act on feedback
- Supportive coaching style
- Blame VS accountability
- Create space for learning

The Foundation For HROs

PSC enables HRO principles

Principle 1: Preoccupation with failure

What it means:

Process failures are addressed immediately and completely.

High-reliability organisations constantly look for small signs of failure. They assume risk is always present and seek to detect problems before they escalate.

How psychological safety enables:

Creating an environment where people feel safe to speak up about weak signals, near misses, and anomalies—no matter how small or uncertain they may seem.

PSC enables HRO principles

Principle 2: Reluctance to simplify

What it means:

Complex problems get complex solutions. HROs avoid assuming simple explanations. They value complexity and dig deeper into why problems occur.

How psychological safety enables:

Encouraging people to share diverse views, challenge assumptions, and speak up when things don't seem straightforward or when "the usual explanation" doesn't feel right.

PSC enables HRO principles

Principle 3: Sensitivity to operations

What it means:

Every voice matters.

HROs stay connected to the reality of frontline work. They monitor day-to-day operations and encourage real-time feedback from those closest to the work.

How psychological safety enables:

Allowing frontline workers to speak openly about risks, workarounds, or misalignments between procedure and reality—without fear of judgement or blame.

PSC enables HRO principles

Principle 4: Commitment to resilience

What it means:

Recovery is swift.

HROs build capacity to adapt and recover quickly when unexpected events occur. They learn and improve through setbacks.

How psychological safety enables:

Fostering open debriefs, honest discussions about failure, and a mindset where people can admit errors and learn from them together.

PSC enables HRO principles

Principle 5: Deference to expertise

What it means:

Experts are trusted.

HROs empower the people with the most relevant knowledge to make decisions, regardless of hierarchy or rank.

How psychological safety enables:

Ensuring everyone—from the newest apprentice to the most experienced operator—feels safe to contribute their knowledge, raise concerns, and lead when it counts.



If we treated psychological safety as seriously as any other critical control, what would we do differently in how we lead, manage risk, and respond to warning signs?



Without trust, voice, and
openness, high reliability
remains theoretical.

Strengthening the system that makes safety work

5 takeaways to build high psychological safety

1. Demonstrate that safety comes before speed
2. Listen to the early warning signs
3. Reward those who speak up
4. Train leaders to respond supportively
5. Make psychological safety visible

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