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**EMPATHY IN
ACTION**
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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION FOR WORKPLACE INCLUSION



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STRATEGY

Flying forward: sensitivity and sensibility

June 12, 2025 will be remembered with a heavy heart. The tragic accident of Air India's Ahmedabad–London flight AI 171, a Boeing 787-8 Dreamliner, shook not just the aviation industry but also every Indian. The aircraft was among the most sophisticated. And yet, in one shattering moment, lives were lost, families were broken, and questions were raised. In fact, the shockwaves were felt far beyond Air India. Friends of mine working across other airlines shared how a quiet gloom descended over their staff too—because in aviation, a tragedy anywhere is felt everywhere. This is not the first time aviation has faced heartbreak. Every such accident reopens old wounds, but it also carries a silent reminder: aviation is built on resilience.

From a management perspective, it was a profoundly challenging scenario. “Behind every headline number lies a family shattered, a CEO carrying the unbearable weight of lost colleagues and shaken customers, and regulators grappling with the sobering question—could this have been prevented? The emails from the Air India CEO to a frequent flyer like me; I can only imagine

the weight in his words, knowing that every reassurance must fight through his own grief and responsibility.” No wonder, as Shiv Shivakumar often reminds us, a CEO is not only the Chief Executive Officer but also the Chief Empathy Officer.

Half the safety equation

As a young pilot officer in the Indian Air Force (IAF), I learnt early that safety is never about machinery alone. The most advanced aircraft, weather radars, and check lists cannot compensate for the human element—our decisions, our culture, our accountability. That insight became the seed for my earliest writings on aviation. I once wrote in *Aerospace Safety Journal*: “Knowledge is only half the safety equation. The other half is attitude.” Time and again, investigations reveal that even when technical factors play a role, the mindset of decision-makers—at all levels—determines the fine line between a close call and a catastrophe.

Aviation psychology identifies five high-risk attitudes: Macho (I can do it all), Anti-authority (Rules don't apply to me), Invulnerability (Believing accidents only happen to others), Impulsiveness (Act now, think later), and Resignation (What difference does it make?).

Such attitudes do not belong to a cockpit or a control room—yet they slip in, unless checked by humility, teamwork, and discipline.

Equation to evolution

If half the safety equation is about systems and technology, and the other half is about people and culture, then the real challenge is balance. Aircraft, today, are more sophisticated than ever, yet human attitudes and organisational mindsets remain the decisive factor.

Every tragedy revives an old dilemma: how do we balance safety with growth? India's aviation sector is booming, with air travel now touching families who a decade ago would never have considered flying. Demand for new routes, faster clearances, and competitive fares creates invisible pressure points.

But aviation is not just another industry. Here, the cost of an error is counted in lives—be it civil or military aviation. Progress cannot be bought by discounting safety. This paradox demands strong leadership—not only from airlines but also from regulators, manufacturers, and even passengers.

Citizens and stakeholders

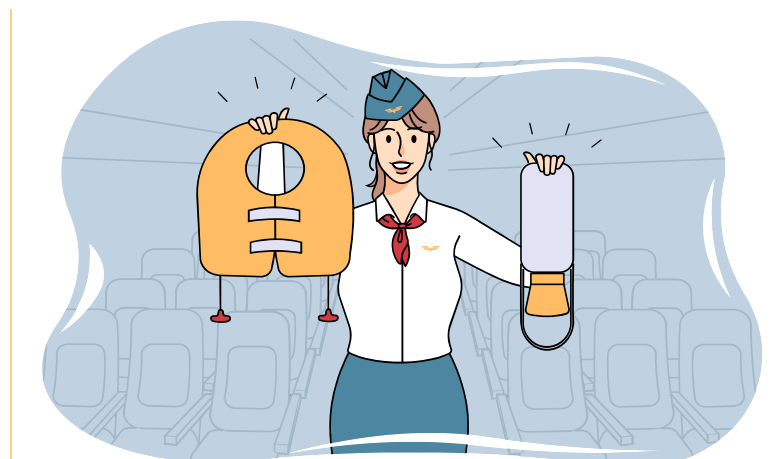
One might ask, "What can ordinary citizens do?" Quite a lot, actually. As passengers, we must value safety over convenience—unlearn ignoring safety instructions at all stages of flight,

especially use of electronic gadgets. Resist the urge to pressure airlines into short cuts. Understand that delays due to technical checks are not inefficiency; they are responsibility in action. Similarly, policymakers must ensure that regulation keeps pace with growth, and that oversight is independent, well-funded, and technology-enabled.

"While the interim investigation report offers technical leads, much of what citizens consumed was half-baked media speculation designed for sensation rather than substance—breaking news race—reminding us why authentic communication and trust matter in aviation safety."

Global lessons—local applications

History shows that aviation safety improves only when we treat accidents as lessons, not as blame games. The U.S. NASA's famous "wheels of accident causation" diagram illustrates the





timeless relevance—how failures rarely occur in isolation. They are usually the result of a chain—technical glitches, human lapses, organisational blind spots, and cultural pressures. Break just one link, and the accident may never happen.

For India, the lesson is clear: as we modernise fleets and expand global footprints, we must invest in safety culture—continuous training, transparent reporting, data-driven decision-making, and above all, humility.

From compliance to conscience

Every aviation tragedy is both a wound and a warning. While families grieve, regulators investigate, and airlines rebuild trust, the real tribute lies in learning. The path forward lies in acknowledging that no system is perfect, no machine invincible, and no human beyond error—it means embedding accountability, humility, and continuous improvement into every cockpit, control room, and boardroom as follows:

Leadership & accountability: Safety is not a department; it is a mindset that flows from the top.

Regulators must be anticipatory, not reactive: Rules must evolve with technology

and traffic growth.

Cultivate intrapreneurs in safety:

Employees at every level should be empowered to raise red flags.

Media/citizens blend scrutiny with empathy:

Truth-seeking should not descend into trial by noise.

In Hindi, there is a phrase: “*Hoshiyaari aur zimmedaari saath-saath chalni chahiye.*” (Alertness and responsibility must walk hand in hand.) That is the essence.

Conclusion

At its heart, aviation safety is not a checkbox—it is a covenant. A covenant that calls for vigilance from institutions, empathy from leaders, and maturity from citizens. If India is to truly honour those we lost, our collective promise must be clear: never again through neglect, never again through complacency.

We must embrace what I call “Sensitivity and Sensibility”—the sense to build robust systems and the sensibility to act with empathy, integrity, and courage when failures do occur. Because in aviation, every life saved is not just a statistic—it is a story preserved, a family kept whole, a future left unbroken. **IM**



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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