

## **On Second Thought – Episode 10**

### **Psychological Notes**

### **When You Are the Safety Department**

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When no one is checking your work, safety depends on the system you built before pressure arrived. This is the main psychological idea behind Episode 10.

Most people want to make safe choices. The problem is that human judgment changes with fatigue, stress, time pressure, money, pride, and commitment to a plan. A rule that feels obvious when we are calm can start to feel negotiable when we are tired, rushed, or trying to finish something. That is why “be careful” is not enough.

A strong personal safety system moves important standards outside the moment. It gives us written rules, consistent limits, independent checks, and a way to learn from mistakes and near misses. In other words, it creates structure that can keep working even when our judgment is not at its best. Episode 10 defines this kind of system as written standards, enforcement that applies to you every time, and a learning process that turns mistakes into improvements.

### **Why Self-Supervision Is Difficult**

When you work alone, you are both the worker and the supervisor, which creates a built-in conflict. The same part of you that wants to complete the flight, finish the repair, save the money, or keep the traffic moving is also supposed to decide whether you should stop. Motivation and oversight are happening inside the same mind, which makes self-supervision difficult. A written standard helps separate those two roles.

For example, a pilot may decide in advance not to depart below a certain ceiling. A mechanic may decide never to sign off a certain condition without another inspection. A controller may set a workload level at which help must be requested. The important part is that the standard exists before the pressure begins. A rule written in advance is much harder to quietly lower in the moment.

### **Systems Beat Memory**

People forget, rationalize, become distracted, and get tired. A system is designed to catch those normal human weaknesses. A checklist remembers what you may forget. A written minimum prevents the decision from becoming a negotiation. A

required second look can catch something your own eyes missed. A hazard list keeps familiar risks visible. Psychologists sometimes refer to this as cognitive offloading: moving information or decisions out of working memory and into a more reliable external structure. This is not a sign of weakness.

Large aviation organizations use procedures, checklists, inspections, quality assurance, and reporting systems because they understand that even skilled people make mistakes. Someone working alone needs the same defenses, just on a smaller scale. The goal is not to become perfectly disciplined. The goal is to build a structure that makes the safer choice easier to repeat.

### **Learn From the Mistakes Nobody Saw**

One of the most important jobs of a safety department is learning from errors and close calls. A lone operator can do the same thing. The dangerous response to a near miss is: “Nothing happened.” “I caught it.” “I will remember next time.” Those thoughts may reduce discomfort, but they do not improve the system.

A better response is: What happened? Why did it happen? What made it possible? What should change? These questions shift the focus away from blame and toward the conditions that allowed the error to develop.

Then something in the system gets adjusted. That might be a checklist item, a personal minimum, a reminder, a procedure, a tool, or a second-person review.

In Episode 10, we explore this as a reporting loop: notice the problem, fix it, and later check whether the fix actually worked. That last step matters. A lesson is not complete simply because we understand the mistake. Learning becomes useful when behavior or the system changes.

### **Familiarity Can Lower Vigilance**

Another psychological risk is familiarity. The more often we do something successfully, the less risky it can begin to feel. That can lead to complacency. A familiar flight may get less preparation. A familiar maintenance task may get less attention. A quiet control position may feel easier than it really is. The danger is that the situation may look familiar even when something important has changed. Repeated success can create a sense of predictability that is stronger than the evidence really supports. A new airplane, new avionics, new passengers, a new airport, a new task, or even unusual fatigue can change the risk.

That is why Episode 10 treats change itself as a hazard. When something is unfamiliar, margins should get wider until the new situation becomes truly familiar. This is not overcaution. It is recognition that our mental model may lag behind the reality of a changed situation.

## **Safety Culture for One Person**

In a large organization, safety responsibilities are divided among many people. Someone writes the rules. Someone supervises. Someone checks quality. Someone investigates mistakes. Someone decides what needs to change. When you work alone, those jobs do not disappear. They all become yours. That means you are the owner, the manager, the quality-control department, and the safety department at the same time.

The challenge is not simply to “try harder.” The challenge is to build enough structure that you do not have to depend on perfect attention, memory, judgment, or motivation every time. A good personal safety system accepts normal human limitations and builds defenses around them.

## **Three Things You Can Do Now**

1. Write down ONE RULE you do not want to negotiate later

Choose one area where pressure tends to change your judgment. It might be weather, fuel, fatigue, workload, cost, or a maintenance limit. Write one clear standard while you are calm. Make it specific enough that your future self cannot easily talk around it.

2. Turn one recent CLOSE CALL into a system change

Think of one situation that nearly became a problem. Do not stop at “I will be more careful next time.” Ask what allowed the situation to develop and what should change so the same situation is less likely to happen again. Then change something concrete.

3. Borrow ONE outside set of eyes

Pick one person you trust and ask them to review something you normally judge alone. That might be a flight decision, a maintenance process, a personal minimum, or a work habit. Independent review can reveal assumptions that are difficult to see from inside your own thinking.

## **Final Thought**

When no one is watching, safety depends on more than good intentions. The strongest operators build rules, checks, and learning systems in advance. That way, safety does not depend on remembering to be perfect. It depends on a structure that still works when the person is tired, busy, distracted, or under pressure. That is what it means to be your own safety department.