



Focus

AIRCREW COGNITIVE TRAINING — CORE COMPETENCY ONE OF THREE

Of the three things this program asks of every 121 aircrew professional, focus comes first — not because it is hardest to master, but because everything else depends on it. Direction has nothing to direct without focus. Cognitive cooperation has nothing to cross-check without focus. This is why Aircrew Cognitive Training treats focus as a trained discipline, not a personality trait some people happen to have and others don't.

What Focus Actually Is

Attention is not unlimited. Human factors research describes it as a finite pool of cognitive resources allocated across competing demands — and once that pool is exhausted, performance degrades even in tasks a person is otherwise fully qualified to perform ([Flight-Crew Human Factors Handbook](#)). Focus is the deliberate act of directing that limited resource at what matters most in the moment, and holding it there against everything competing for it.

That makes focus different from vigilance or effort. A technician can work hard and still be unfocused if attention is split across a conversation, a phone, and the panel in front of them. A pilot can be fully alert and still miss a callout if attention has drifted to a non-flying task at the wrong moment. Focus is not about trying harder — it is about choosing, on purpose, what gets the attention you have.

Why It Breaks Down

Focus degrades quietly, which is what makes it dangerous. Fatigue narrows attention before a person notices it happening. Complacency lets a familiar task run on autopilot past the point where it should have been re-checked. Interruptions during a critical step — a radio call, a question shouted across the hangar — don't just cost time; they cost the mental thread that was holding the task together. These are three of the human-factors industry's well-documented "Dirty Dozen" failure patterns ([SKYbrary](#)), and all three attack focus specifically.

In the Cockpit and On the Floor

The sterile cockpit rule below 10,000 feet exists for exactly this reason: it removes competing demands during the phases of flight where focus matters most. A checklist read with full attention, item by item, is a focus tool before it is a memory tool. On the hangar floor, the same principle drives task card discipline — one system verified at a time, one torque value confirmed before moving to the next fastener, because the moment attention splits across two tasks is the moment either one is capable of quietly going wrong.

Building the Habit



- Protect critical phases. Treat sterile-cockpit moments and critical task-card steps as protected time — no side conversations, no non-essential interruptions.
- Brief before you start. State out loud what you're about to do and what would make you stop. It commits attention to the task before the task begins.
- Use checklists as attention anchors, not memory aids. Read each item, verify it, then move — don't let the eyes get ahead of the check.
- Debrief the distraction. When focus breaks, say so and re-verify from the last confirmed point, rather than assuming memory filled the gap correctly.

What This Program Asks

Every pilot and every maintenance technician is asked to treat sustained focus under workload as a professional skill worth training — practiced in briefings, protected during critical steps, and honestly reported when it breaks. Focus is the foundation the other two competencies in this program, direction and cognitive cooperation, are built on.

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REFERENCES

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