

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY



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CREATING A CULTURE OF CANDOR

WHAT IS IT?

WHY BOTHER?

HOW TO DO IT

WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY?



In this economically uncertain landscape, it's easy for leaders to hone in on growth and financial stability. But this laser focus to protect our businesses can blind us to the potential damage seeping into our culture. Stress and pressure spread like wildfire, engulfing employee after employee until the entire company grinds to a burnt out halt.

It feels like we've been discussing 'challenging' and 'uncertain' times for so long, it's become the norm. No one underestimates the power of a high-performing team, but few know how to develop them and even fewer actually have them working in their business. There are many ways to foster a high-performance culture, but one often overlooked aspect is psychological safety.

Imagine an environment where everyone feels comfortable speaking up, sharing ideas, and even making mistakes. That's the power of psychological safety. It's a shared belief that the workplace is a safe space for taking risks, where you can express yourself openly without fear of getting shut down.

This concept was first introduced by organisational behavioural scientist [Amy Edmondson](#), who defined it as "a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up."



At its core, psychological safety encompasses four key components:

Respect

Empowering employees and giving them opportunities to shine.

Trust

Knowing the team have each other's backs and creating space to be vulnerable.

Inclusion

Ensuring that all voices are heard and valued, regardless of background or position.

Openness

Encouraging honest and transparent communication without fear of repercussions.

When all four of these elements are present, employees are more likely to take productive risks, share innovative ideas and crucially, admit mistakes – all of which are essential for growth, learning and continuous development.

THE BENEFITS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IN THE WORKPLACE

Numerous studies have highlighted the profound impact of psychological safety on performance and employee well-being. Google's People Operations team – resolute on forming the 'Perfect Team' – discovered that psychological safety was the most influential element of team effectiveness. It outweighed all other factors such as team composition or individual talent. Now whilst Google's implementation of such a culture is questioned by its' critics, their research is undeniable.

Businesses that weave psychological safety into their culture reap numerous benefits, including

IMPROVED TEAM PERFORMANCE AND INNOVATION

Employees are more likely to challenge the status quo, leading to better problem-solving and more innovative solutions.

BETTER DECISION-MAKING

When people feel comfortable voicing concerns or opposing opinions, they make better, more informed decisions by considering a broader range of perspectives and potential risks.

INCREASED RETENTION AND REDUCED TURNOVER

Psychological safety fosters a sense of belonging and loyalty, making employees more likely to stay which in turn reduces the costs associated with high turnover.

HIGHER EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND JOB SATISFACTION

Employees who feel valued and respected are more likely to be engaged, motivated, and committed to their work.



NURTURING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IS A DELIBERATE AND ONGOING PROCESS THAT REQUIRES COMMITMENT AT ALL LEVELS.



Leadership and Modelling Behaviour

Leaders hold the key to unlocking psychological safety within their teams. By shedding the omnipotent persona and openly admitting their mistakes, they send a powerful message – it's okay to be human. This vulnerability paves the way for others to do the same, encouraging a culture of open communication and shared learning. Leaders who actively seek feedback from their teams demonstrate a willingness to learn and grow, further solidifying trust and psychological safety.

Beyond vulnerability, leaders should actively cultivate an environment that encourages open communication. This means promoting active listening, respectful dialogue, and a zero-tolerance policy for shaming or blame games.

Building Trust and Respect

Trust and respect are the cornerstones of psychological safety. Leaders can nurture these values by fostering an environment that celebrates diversity of thought. Encourage employees to share unique perspectives and embrace inclusive practices that ensure everyone feels valued and heard. Conflict is inevitable, but by addressing disagreements constructively, teams can transform them into opportunities for growth and learning.

A [Harvard Business Review study](#) found that teams with high levels of these values were more likely to engage in productive conflict. This healthy debate leads to better decision-making and ultimately, improved team performance.

Recognising and Rewarding Psychological Safety

To solidify the values of psychologically safe culture, celebrate and recognise behaviours that promote open communication, vulnerability, and risk-taking. This type of positive reinforcement encourages employees to continually develop a safe space for themselves and their colleagues.

Embedding psychological safety into performance evaluations holds teams accountable for upholding your values and demonstrates their importance to the business's overall success. Ultimately, aligning psychological safety with your core values creates a cohesive system that strengthens this essential element of a high performing team.

Encouraging Participation and Feedback

Psychological safety thrives on open communication and a two-way street for feedback. Implement anonymous surveys or suggestion boxes to gather honest insights, and most importantly, respond positively to the feedback received.

When employees see their concerns addressed and suggestions valued, it strengthens trust and reinforces an organic feedback loop.

Why not consider incorporating psychological safety training?

Equip employees with the knowledge and tools to navigate challenging conversations and provide constructive feedback.



WHILE THE BENEFITS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY ARE UNDENIABLE, WHEN IMPLEMENTING THESE PRACTICES YOU MIGHT ENCOUNTER ROADBLOCKS ALONG THE WAY.



Entrenched Hierarchies

Rigid structures can stifle open communication and risk-taking.

Fear of Failure

A culture that punishes mistakes can create an environment of fear, hindering innovation and psychological safety.

Lack of Diversity

Homogenous teams can lead to groupthink and a reluctance to challenge the status quo.

Resistance to Change

Shifting company culture takes time and effort, and many employees – no matter their status or length of service – fear a shift in the status quo.

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-pronged approach. Open communication is key – leaders should transparently discuss the importance of psychological safety and encourage honest feedback on existing barriers. Training programs can equip employees with the tools and skills to navigate challenging conversations and empower them to give constructive feedback.

Ultimately, fostering a cultural shift that celebrates vulnerability, embraces diverse perspectives, and rewards risk-taking behaviours is essential for sustaining psychological safety in the long term.

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