

WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY?

“Psychological safety describes the belief that neither the formal nor informal consequences of interpersonal risks, like asking for help or admitting a failure, will be punitive... when people feel their workplace is an environment where they can speak up, offer ideas, and ask questions without fear of being punished or embarrassed”¹ It is a climate where people tend to trust and respect each other, and where people give, and expect to be given, the benefit of the doubt.

MYTH BUSTING!

Myth #1: Creating a work environment free from harm is enough to create psychological safety

Psychologically safe work environments are quite rare, and they require deliberate and specific actions to create – much more than just good intent or the absence of harm.

Myth #2: Psychological safety is about being nice and avoiding discomfort

In many ways it’s actually the opposite. It is about candour, giving honest and constructive feedback, being willing to engage in healthy conflict, having tough conversations and dealing with difficult situations head on. Psychological safety is about feeling safe enough to feel uncomfortable.

Myth #3: Psychological safety means lowering performance standards

Psychological safety and performance are equally important, but separate dimensions – and we need both. Creating psychological safety, is about creating an environment where there is openness, honesty, challenge, and collaboration, and all of these things actually drive high performance.

Myth #4: Psychological safety is the same across the organisation and once you get it you have got it

Psychological safety is much more intimate than that. It exists between teams of people who work together, rather than organisations as a whole. It’s also not something you either have or you don’t. It is fluid and requires ongoing and deliberate attention.

WHY IS PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IMPORTANT?

We are biologically wired to want to be part of the in-group or the ‘tribe’. We don’t want to look, incompetent, disagreeable or disruptive, because this could risk interpersonal or social rejection, which our brains perceive in the same way as physical danger or threat.

When we feel socially rejected or threatened, our fight-or-flight response is activated in the brain, and this shuts down the parts of the brain responsible for our higher order thinking processes, such as working memory, analytic thinking, creative insight, learning, collaboration and problem solving.

Psychological safety is about minimising interpersonal fear. When we do this, there are a number of important outcomes for individuals, teams and organisations, including:

- Higher levels of performance and engagement
- Improved innovation and productivity
- Greater learning and improved decision making
- Decreased turnover and absenteeism
- Reduced safety incidents and injuries
- Improved wellbeing and interpersonal relationships
- Mistakes are reported more quickly and can be addressed

¹ Edmondson, A.C. (2018). The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth. Wiley Publishing, p. 15

BUILDING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

In her book *'the fearless organisation: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth'*, Amy Edmondson outlines a three-stage approach to building psychological safety

Step 1: Set the Stage

Making it clear why we need psychological safety. Clearly acknowledging and setting expectations around the uncertainty and interdependence of the work, and the way that failure is viewed and accepted – even expected – in order to learn. It is also about emphasising the purpose and meaning of the work; why it is important that people speak up, and what is at stake if they don't

Step 2: Invite participation and model

This requires leaders to show humility in acknowledging their own gaps and mistakes or failures. It is about actually asking people questions to elicit feedback, errors, concerns or challenges – this is done in the sorts of conversations that leaders have with their teams day to day, and also through establishing structures and processes for gathering input (such as discussion forums).

Step 3: Monitor your response and respond productively

Walking the talk and proving to the team that it really is safe to speak up and that the goal is genuinely about continuous learning and improvement. Leaders in particular, but everyone in the team, need to be very aware of how they respond to these moments of interpersonal risk, and the impact that has on the psychological safety of the group.

THE IMPACT OF REMOTE WORKING (AND COVID)

Because psychological safety is such a relational construct, it is not surprising that remote work for, any reason, makes it harder to build. It's harder for people really say what they're thinking, it's harder to read each other's body language, it's harder to gauge how you are being received, on a screen. At the same time, the impact of COVID for many people is that they are operating at a higher base level of threat or fear right now – this means that the need for psychological safety is even greater, just to get people back to baseline.

The other significant impact is the loss of micro-interactions. Many powerful conversations for building psychological safety would typically happen outside of the meeting room – the 'water cooler' conversations. A lot of these conversations are not happening right now. Leaders and teams need to be thinking proactively and creatively about how they can bring the water cooler conversations back into the virtual room, in ways that work for them and their unique context.

FURTHER RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

[4 Steps to Boost Psychological Safety at Your Workplace \(hbr.org\)](#)

[A Guide to Psychological Safety - The Learner Lab](#)

[Building a psychologically safe workplace | Amy Edmondson | TEDxHGSE](#)

Edmondson, A.C. (1999). Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 44(2): 350-383.

Edmondson, A.C. (2018). *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*. Wiley Publishing.

[Google's Project Aristotle](#)

[How Psychological Safety Actually Works \(forbes.com\)](#)

[How to Cultivate Psychological Safety, and Why it Matters | LinkedIn](#)