

Psychological Safety for the Future-Fit Leader



Why is psychological safety so crucial?



Psychological safety is a simple idea on paper for businesses, but a difficult one to embed and execute in practice. With the established ways of working undergoing rapid transformation, interactions with our coworkers and peers have radically changed. Remote working has deprived us of the valuable face-to-face connections that built rapport, fostered understanding and drove innovation.

All this has had implications for how the culture of an organisation plays out, with remote working demanding a more deliberate approach to connecting with colleagues, particularly new ones or those on other teams. Apart from the challenges within organisations, many people have had to navigate various personal challenges during the pandemic and the boundaries between work and home life have blurred.

Psychological safety has been called the 'precursor to adaptive, innovative performance – at the individual, team and organisation level'. With team members working remotely, however, the lack of opportunities to interact and decreased visibility have led to some employees feeling isolated and stressed. These emotions are tied to reduced performance and, crucially, negatively impact psychological safety.

Given that high-performing teams and psychological safety go hand in hand, and the recognition that an absence of psychological safety in workplaces can have major repercussions across the business, leaders must create the conditions to combat the challenges of this critical inflection point in how we work together.

What are the benefits of psychological safety?



Reframes failure

When psychological safety is present, people feel comfortable being themselves. This mentality is important because without it, employees will not feel at ease when speaking up about initiatives or projects that are not working. This, in turn, leaves the organisation vulnerable to failures that could have been avoided. In a psychologically safe working climate, people are more productive and can learn from their mistakes.

Maximises innovative capacity

Psychological safety can boost innovative behaviours. As employees feel increasingly comfortable speaking their minds, they are more likely to formulate and present new ideas and to take moderate risks, and it may lead to breakthroughs.

Enables diverse thinking

Psychological safety allows for a broad spectrum of diverse thoughts and perspectives to be heard, and diverse groups are better able to recognise problems and offer up creative solutions than groups of people with similar life experience. When psychological safety is present among a diverse group, individuals feel comfortable contributing their unique perspective knowing that it will be taken into account and valued.



Psychological Safety is:

"The belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes."

(Amy Edmondson,
Harvard Business School)

How can you create psychological safety in your organisation?



Be consultative and supportive

It is important to understand your own unique leadership style so that you can determine how your behaviour affects those under your leadership. To build psychological safety, you should adopt a more consultative or supportive leadership style. By doing so, you can create a positive team climate, which is the most important driver of a team's psychological safety.

Tip: Set the stage for employees to speak up by reinforcing and uniting all employees around the organisation's purpose and vision. When employees are united by the organisation's purpose, they will know they are working to achieve the same ultimate outcome.

Encourage role-modelling of ideal behaviours

The role modelling of ideal behaviours by leaders is critical to help cultivate psychological safety. This simple act can serve as a catalyst for others in the organisation to exhibit and reinforce the behaviours they expect from the rest of their team, thus enabling those behaviours to cascade through the organisation.

Tip: Start by making incremental changes to these ideal behaviours. Incremental changes will bring about incremental wins, which can have a significant contribution to workplace culture and employee mindsets.

Promote interactions and conversations

You should actively encourage conversations in and among teams within the organisation – especially when employees are working remotely. Open conversations and dialogue are important as they assist in building trust among team members. Improved conversational skills, combined with a psychologically safe environment, will encourage colleagues to share unspoken reservations and propose solutions that are more rigorously tested before implementation.

Tip: Work with relevant departments to set up internal social meetings, pairing individuals and teams with others who they may not have had much interaction with. This approach allows for more collaboration with people who you may depend on in your day-to-day tasks and will ensure goals are achieved within the organisation.

Sources

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