

Psychological safety

It's now well-understood that organisations benefit in their performance and innovation from fostering diversity of thought. But...what if some executives don't feel psychologically safe offering their views or asking challenging questions? If your team has members who hold back because they are worried about being rejected or falling into disfavour with colleagues and the 'boss', then your organisation and all its stakeholders are the poorer.

Research shows as many as 30% of staff agree with the statement 'My opinion doesn't count at work'. And the proportion is higher in remote working situations, particularly for women. 20% of senior female executives report feeling overlooked or ignored during video meetings.

The conclusion? A lack of psychological safety at work has material negative cultural and bottom-line consequences.

Defining psychological safety and its importance

Psychological safety is a person's belief that they won't be humiliated or punished for expressing concerns, asking questions or reporting mistakes. At work, it's a shared belief held by members of a team that others on the team will not reject or embarrass you for speaking up. People feel okay to be authentic and put themselves on the line if they are psychologically safe.

In organisations that are not psychologically safe, people don't feel comfortable discussing suboptimal processes like sales shortcomings, OHS risks or production inefficiencies. This reluctance compromises continuous improvements and innovation and risks failures and compliance breaches.

Being a psychologically safe organisation does not mean everyone is 'nice' all the time. Embracing conflict and dealing constructively with differences are encouraged and supported, starting with the example set by the 'boss'.

Progressing through the 4 stages of psychological safety

To build a psychologically safe team, each member has to grow through 4 stages according to **Dr Timothy Clark**. As they work through the stages, they feel progressively free to express their views and challenge others.

These are the 4 stages:

- ✓ Stage 1 – **Inclusion safety** meets the human need to belong and connect. You feel safe to be yourself and accepted for who you are.
- ✓ Stage 2 – **Learner safety** satisfies the need to learn and grow by asking questions, giving and receiving feedback and experimenting.
- ✓ Stage 3 – **Contributor safety** enables you to make a difference and feel safe to use your skills and bring your experience to bear in ways that contribute.
- ✓ Stage 4 – **Challenger safety** satisfies the need to improve things so you are empowered to speak up when you see an opportunity to change the status quo or improve.

Building a psychologically safe workplace

Building a psychologically safe team at work requires deliberate effort from both leaders and followers. It requires a climate ('How we feel about things around here') and a culture ('How we do things around here').

Policies and processes determine the context in which people work, so it's here that leaders must focus.

The graphic shows 5 practical ways to create psychological safety at work.



1. Establish psychological safety as an explicit priority that is everyone's responsibility.

Talk openly about creating a psychologically safe workplace. Connect the idea with greater productivity, more innovation, faster growth, happier customers, joyful staff and a great reputation in the marketplace.

2. Make it easy for everyone to speak up.

Show genuine interest in others' points of view. Be empathic by listening intently. Ask questions that demonstrate you care and want to know. Quietly applaud when a more junior person challenges the status quo or questions a decision about which they have concerns.

3. Establish public norms for the handling of mistakes and failures.

Never punish experimentation and, within reason, risk-taking. Let everyone know that you regard mistakes, failures and disappointments as learning opportunities. Share your lessons from failing in the school of hard knocks. Doing so will foster, not stifle, innovation.

4. Create spaces for new ideas and encourage those from left field.

When you challenge someone's idea, do so in the context of support, not as a put-down. Don't only foster well-tested ideas. Stimulate out-of-the-box suggestions. Use and teach others **Edward de Bono's** famous lateral thinking methods. This short YouTube video is an excellent refresher on **lateral thinking**.

5. Embrace productive conflict.

Promoting dialogue and provocation and ensuring conflict and differences of opinion are resolved creatively and harmoniously. One of my mentors was fond of saying "*By all means, sleep on it, but never leave a conflict unresolved*". With your team discuss questions like these:

- ✓ *In what ways can team members share their concerns about a process that isn't working?*
- ✓ *How can reservations be shared with colleagues respectfully?*
- ✓ *What are our norms for handling conflicting views?*
- ✓ *What are the options for calling out the team leader when s/he is not contributing to psychological safety?*

Conclusion

The work required to build a psychologically safe workplace is more often than not daunting and difficult, especially if there have been detrimental incidents that people remember. But the rewards are great. Each team member has a role to play. The time to start is today!

Acknowledgement

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