



Building Psychological Safety in your Teams

What is Psychological Safety and why it is important?

Psychological safety is the belief that one can speak up with ideas, questions, concerns, or admit to mistakes without fear of punishment or humiliation. This concept is foundational for fostering an environment of innovation, growth, and open communication. It's particularly crucial in high-stakes environments, where the ability to openly discuss safety concerns, learn from errors, and challenge decisions can significantly impact team performance and safety. Creating psychological safety requires trust, humility, and effective communication within the team, emphasising that it's safe to take interpersonal risks for the benefit of learning and improving collectively.

Psychological safety, at its core, is about creating an environment where individuals feel secure enough to share ideas, raise concerns, ask questions, and admit mistakes without fear of punishment or humiliation. This concept is pivotal in high-risk environments, where open, honest communication can directly impact the safety and wellbeing of the team, the safety operation of the activity, and ensure that reputational risks are understood and managed.

Foundational Pillars of Psychological Safety:

- **Trust:** The belief that one can speak up without fear of negative consequences is essential. Trust is built through integrity, demonstrating that we will do as promised, and benevolence, showing concern for the well-being of others.
- **Humility:** Acknowledging that no one knows everything and that everyone has something to contribute encourages a culture where learning from one another is valued.
- **Open Communication:** Encouraging the sharing of thoughts and ideas, and actively listening to understand, fosters an environment where everyone feels heard and valued.
- **Feedback:** Openness to giving and receiving feedback promotes continuous improvement and learning.

How to Build Psychological Safety in Teams

This guide provides a series of ten activities that you can perform or practice that sit under the Four Stages of Psychological Safety as defined by Dr Timothy Clark: inclusion safety, learner safety, contributor safety, and challenger safety.

Stage 1: Inclusion Safety

How do you invite others to feel included?

- Introduce yourself at the first opportunity. Be proactive to introduce yourself to those who are new or you don't know. Once you break the ice and display warmth and acceptance, a sense of inclusion forms rapidly.
- Listen and pause. Listen with intent to comprehend rather than the intent to respond. Do this by listening, pausing to reflect, and then responding thoughtfully. Have you ever been talking to someone and you can tell that they're simply waiting for you to finish your sentence so they can jump in? That's not always a problem, but if that's the pattern, it does become a problem.
- Ask twice as much as you tell. When you ask someone a question, it's an invitation to engage and a form of validation. Telling can be fine too, but if you tell too much, it's self-serving and it signals selfishness, arrogance, and dominance, all of which are off putting.
- Define and communicate the purpose and values of your team. To feel a part of the team, the individual must understand why the team exists, how it works, and what it stands for. The team must first define its values, purpose, and goals and continuously communicate those things to team members.
- Conduct frequent, brief touch points. Humans are hyper-social creatures, born to connect. Short, frequent interactions are far more effective than long but infrequent ones. It's the frequency that builds and strengthens the connection.

Examples of how I will personally do this

- Make yourself available and interruptible. Everyone's busy, but if you try to make yourself a little more available and interruptible, it sends a strong message that you value people more than tasks.
- Never hide behind title, position, or authority. These are simply artifacts the organisation gives you to get work done. Don't confuse these things with your own identity. If you hide behind these things out of insecurity, it creates a barrier to inclusion.
- Respond to messages promptly. In part, the timeliness of your response communicates your respect for that person. Although there are times that justify a delayed response, try to respond promptly to those who leave you inquiries. When you are consistent in your response pattern, you communicate inclusion.
- Ask about needs and challenges. Your team members will often not say anything when they are experiencing a problem or challenge. At the right time, be explicit in asking your team members what needs they have or challenges they are experiencing. Sometimes those needs are job-related. Sometimes, they are more personal. People often simply need to be asked before they open up and give you the opportunity to offer your support.
- Ask for feedback and help. When you run into a problem or challenge, don't be afraid to ask others for help. This does two things: First, it acknowledges the fact that you're human and you need help. Second, gives others a legitimate opportunity to help you in a meaningful way, which always serves to strengthen your relationship. We often fail to ask for help because we are too proud or embarrassed. Don't make that mistake.

Examples of how I will personally do this

Stage 2: Learner Safety

How do you invite others to feel safe and motivated to learn?

- Unite your team with learning. Learning shouldn't be a divisive competition. You can create learning competitions that are fun, but don't make learning a competition that divides. If your team perceives that it is, the highly competitive people will want to play, but those who don't will opt out. Help your team understand that learning is a highly individual process. Help your team members understand that they have a responsibility to help their colleagues learn.
- Share what you are learning. One of the most powerful ways to encourage others to learn is to share what you are learning. Share the topic, the insights, and most importantly the joy and satisfaction you have gained in the learning process. Optimism & enthusiasm for learning is contagious.
- Share past mistakes. It's hard to learn from mistakes if a team has a culture that hides its mistakes. Take the opportunity to mention some of your mistakes, laugh at them, and share what you learned from them. This will encourage others to be more comfortable sharing their mistakes and learning. Talking about failure and showing vulnerability are crucial to encourage others to learn.
- Frame problems before you solve problems. Teach your team to frame problems before they solve problems. When we don't do that, we often end up solving the wrong problem. Find a problem and say, "I'd like you to help me frame this problem, not solve it. I want to make sure I'm defining the problem correctly before I try to solve it."
- Help team members set learning goals. Some members of your team may set their own learning goals, but you will find that many will not. Individuals learn more effectively and consistently when they have set clear goals about what they want to learn. Help them think through what learning goals might be appropriate given their roles, responsibility, and goals.

Examples of how I will personally do this

- Dedicate time and resources to learning. If you talk about the importance of learning but don't dedicate any time or resources to it, it's really not a priority. Formally allocate some budget and dedicate some time to learning. It might be online learning, collaborative team learning, on-the-job learning, individual or team learning. Just make sure that you do it consistently.
- Admit your own ignorance and say "I don't know." We all have areas of skill and knowledge where we feel comfortable and confident. When we step out of our areas of competency, we often feel insecure. It's refreshing to your team if you can confidently acknowledge your ignorance in areas that go beyond your know-how. Learn how to confidently say, "I don't know."
- Incorporate a daily learning segment. Learning doesn't have to take long. In fact, micro-learning segments can take as little as five minutes. Make it a habit to do short learning segments in your regular meetings. Rotate the assignment to teach among all team members. Have learning segments include a single-point lesson on a particular topic.
- Model an example of taking notes. Taking notes is perhaps the most obvious outward sign that a person is actively learning. Whether on paper or an electronic device, take notes. Capture facts, insights, and observations that you want to remember and ponder later.
- Ask for feedback at the moment of need. It's normal to encounter questions, problems, or challenges in the course of normal workflow. What do you do? Unless it's an obvious solution, teach your team to formulate a learning response (not an answer) to the problem and then ask a colleague to give feedback (not an answer). This habit will create a team norm of collaborative learning which increases learner safety.

Examples of how I will personally do this

Stage 3: Contributor Safety

How do you invite others to feel safe to contribute and make a difference?

- Clarify roles. More complexity requires greater teamwork, and yet more role ambiguity causes people to make assumptions about how to contribute. Clarify roles at the beginning to reduce both anxiety and ambiguity. You will need to do this periodically to ensure role clarity.
- Recognise accomplishment. Certainly accomplishment is its own reward, but receiving genuine recognition from your peers makes it all the sweeter. As a leader, recognise the successes of your team quickly. Never delay and never resent the opportunity. the successes of others and show genuine excitement for their accomplishments.
- Don't correct with anger, blame, or shame . Things won't always go right. People make mistakes, and sometimes those mistakes are due to complacency and carelessness. Even in that situation, don't correct with anger, blame, or shame. Any kind of public ridicule is off limits. Instead, coach the person to see his or her mistakes and help them take responsibility for them.
- Shift from tell to ask. A leader's coaching continuum ranges from telling at one end to asking at the other. A good leader uses the entire continuum. Too much telling breeds dependency and learned helplessness. Shift as much as you can to the ask end. Lead through questions more than answers.
- Set ground rules. After sharing your values, set practical terms of engagement with your team tied to your values. Once team members know the ground rules, they will be more likely to engage because they know what's expected.

Examples of how I will personally do this

- Give stretch assignments. Move your people out of their comfort zones. We build the more capacity to contribute when we're stretched and out of our comfort zones. Of course you can stretch too much and then it becomes destructive. But stretching is the way that we grow and develop. Give your team members stretch assignments, but so that the exhilaration outweighs the discomfort.
- Help others see their strengths. Many team members deliver mediocre performance because they don't realise their strengths. They don't know themselves. When someone points out their contribution and strengths, they're shocked and accelerate to a higher level of performance. Identify the hidden or undervalued strengths that your team members have and bring them to their attention.
- Keep focused with trade-offs. If your team is chasing too many priorities, it will lose its steam and desire to contribute. Teams that lack a clear focus become confused and dilute their efforts. Eventually, team members become disillusioned, disengage, and then quit. Your job is to keep the team focused by saying no to other options and priorities. Remember, your success is based on the intelligent allocation of scarce resources. You can only protect your team's focus by making these important trade-offs.
- Avoid shutdown statements. Some team leaders use statements such as, "Bad idea," "Nice try," or "I told you so." Those statements are borne of ego and insecurity and quickly trigger the self-censoring instinct of team members. Avoid any statement that would shut down rather than draw out the discretionary effort of your team members.
- Accept bad news. Bad news is part of the experience of every team. Show your team that you want to hear bad news because it's a measure of performance, and performance can't improve until we know and accept where we are today. You may be disappointed, but express appreciation to those who bring bad news.

Examples of how I will personally do this

Stage 4: Challenger Safety

How do you invite others to feel safe enough to challenge the status quo, innovate, and make things better?

- Assign dissent. If you assign specific members of your team to challenge a course of action or find flaws in a proposed decision, you remove much of the individual's personal risk and replace it with institutional permission. This allows intellectual bravery to become the norm rather than the exception. Be explicit in telling the members of your team that you have given them a license to disagree, and you expect them to use it.
- Respond constructively to disruptive ideas and bad news. Your positive emotional response to disruptive ideas and bad news is a clear signal that you have a high tolerance for candor and will protect your people in their right to dissent.
- When you reject feedback, explain why. When you reject a team member's input or suggestion, explain why you didn't adopt it. Your considerate response will embolden the individual to continue giving feedback.
- Weigh in last. Speaking first when you hold positional power softly censors your team. Listen carefully, acknowledge the contributions of others, and then register your point of view.
- Reward vulnerability. Remember, challenger safety must project the individual and the team at the highest point of personal and interpersonal vulnerability. Challenger safety is about generating and then harnessing diverse perspectives and even disagreement without emotional escalation and destructive social friction. If you reward a pattern of vulnerability to challenge the status quo, it will become the norm. Use positional power to escort them through the vulnerability by encouraging them.

Examples of how I will personally do this

- Define what is in and out of scope. Define what can and should be challenged based on the team's defined scope of activity. This will avoid needless frustration that results when team members challenge out-of-scope or irrelevant issues.
- Ask for bad news. This may seem counter-intuitive but asking for bad news is a way of speeding up the process of identifying areas for experimentation and innovation. When there's bad news, it allows us to challenge the status quo more easily because something is already broken or not working right.
- Look for R.O.T. Everything we do eventually becomes obsolete. Every source of competitive advantage we have is temporary. It's like ice. The only question is the rate of the melt. Engage your team to look at the way you do things. Identify anything that is redundant, obsolete, or trivial (R.O.T.). Sources of R.O.T. represent the low-hanging fruit of the status quo that needs to be dismantled.
- Protect your team from groupthink. When team members start to think alike, we call that groupthink. It's dangerous to create an environment that can incubate innovation. Team members sometimes become more concerned about fitting in with the conventional thinking of the group instead of performing the hard labour of critical thinking. Get into the habit of asking your team to disagree with you. Say, "I don't want an echo chamber. What's another way to think about this?"
- Bring in outsiders. To deliberately rattle and disrupt your team, bring in outsiders to present alternative ideas and thinking. It's one thing to have diversity of thought within your team, but it's still typically within a narrow range. Bringing in outsiders can recharge your team with energy and fresh thinking. It can explode your assumptions and elevate your vision. It can push out the limits of what you believe is possible.

Examples of how I will personally do this

SUMMARY

In the guide to psychological safety and its four essential stages, we've covered the prerequisites for creating an environment conducive to safety, growth, and innovation within teams operating in high-risk environments. Psychological safety represents the bedrock of high-functioning teams, enabling individuals to voice concerns, ask questions, and learn from mistakes without fear of humiliation or retribution. Leadership's role in cultivating psychological safety is paramount, transcending the technical skills normally associated with leadership and management roles to include interpersonal awareness and humility.

Inclusion Safety: This foundational stage initiates the journey towards psychological safety by fostering a sense of belonging. Teams thrive when diversity, both surface and cognitive, is embraced, creating a welcoming atmosphere for all. Without feeling part of the team, the opportunity to feel safe is extremely limited.

Learner Safety: Emphasising the importance of making and learning from mistakes, this stage encourages an environment where it's safe to admit to and learn from failures, facilitated through constructive feedback and a non-punitive approach by instructors and team leaders. Team members will look for learner safety before they push their own boundaries, looking to see what happened to the last person who made a mistake.

Contributor Safety: This stage empowers team members to offer their knowledge and skills confidently, ensuring their input is valued. It challenges the "we've always done it this way" mentality, fostering a culture open to new ideas and approaches.

Challenger Safety: The pinnacle of psychological safety, allowing team members to raise concerns and challenge practices without fear. This stage is crucial for any high-risk, high-consequence environment, where the stakes can be life-threatening or reputation damaging, ensuring that all team members feel comfortable voicing their concerns.

Creating psychological safety requires a shift in team dynamics and leadership approaches, fostering trust, humility, and open communication. This guide underscores the necessity of these stages for in high-performing teams, promoting an environment that balances safety with the inherent risks of the activities being undertaken.



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