An Introduction to Psychological Safety

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"In a psychologically safe workplace, people feel free to share ideas, mistakes, and criticisms. They are less worried about protecting their image and more focused on doing great work."

This is Amy C. Edmondson speaking to Forbes [1]. Edmondson is a business professor at Harvard University who has been investigating the concept of psychological safety since 1999.

But just what is psychological safety, and how can you foster a workplace that prioritises it? In this track, we'll explore the concept and investigate the benefits.

In basic terms, a psychologically safe workplace is one where team members feel able to speak up without fear of being judged or criticised for doing so. It's an environment that empowers people to share their ideas and point out problems.

But it goes deeper than that. Not only do people need to feel comfortable making suggestions, but they also need to feel free to express who they are as an individual without fear of judgement.

Coach and advocate Gina Battye [2] regards this as a vital aspect of psychological safety. As she explains: "Psychological safety in the workplace means that every single person in an organisation is able to bring their whole self to work and feel safe to speak out. No hiding, no censoring, no code-switching."

Of course, this freedom and security is hugely important for staff and their wellbeing. But it's also crucial for the business too. Let's take a look at the wide-reaching benefits psychological safety can bring to an organisation.

Firstly, psychological safety means you can truly benefit from the people in your organisation. If people don't believe they'll be heard or are worried they might be criticised for speaking up, they won't make suggestions or point out potential issues. This keeps you from addressing problems in a timely way and taking advantage of opportunities when they come up.

It's also important to recognise the impact that constantly trying to conform or hide can have. Trying to fit in uses up the energy and cognitive resources that people need to do their job.

Additionally, if someone on your team feels they have to disguise part of their identity to fit in, it means they won't share valuable insights based on their lived experience. Diversity can be a huge force for good in an organisation, but only when people feel able to share their unique perspectives.

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Psychological safety also reduces the level of fear in the workplace. While the majority of organisations don't set out to make their staff afraid, anxiety and worry are still very common. Whether it's fear of being reprimanded, fear of being judged or fear of not fitting in, there are plenty of concerns that can affect people at work.

These fears not only affect someone's well-being, but they can also negatively impact performance too. As Andrew Carton, an academic at The University of Pennsylvania, explains [3]: "Fear leads people to panic and narrow their attention to such an extreme degree that they may overlook opportunities that unexpectedly present themselves."

In other words, employees become so focused on avoiding negative outcomes that they aren't able to see the bigger picture. When people aren't able to use their imagination, it stifles innovation and makes them much less adaptable.

Carton and his colleagues point out that an environment of fear may also prevent people from learning. If people don't feel able to admit that something didn't go to plan because they're afraid of reprisals, it causes a vicious cycle where the same errors occur again and again.

In brighter news, psychological safety can lead to increased levels of creativity, innovation and empathy. As Gina Battye explains: "When you have a psychologically safe environment and people feel safe to bring their whole self to work, people communicate and collaborate effectively, and a culture of curiosity and creativity is cultivated."

Creativity requires a wide range of existing knowledge that can be combined in fresh ways. An environment where people feel comfortable sharing insights means you instantly have a much bigger source of knowledge to draw on.

Taking calculated risks is also a big part of creativity and innovation. If members of your team feel secure, they will feel more confident pursuing new

angles and thinking outside the box. In fact, an internal study at Google discovered [4] that this ability to take risks without feeling insecure was the major factor driving the success of their most effective teams.

A climate of psychological safety also exposes people to different perspectives. This means they will find it easier to empathise with their colleagues. That really boosts their ability to collaborate with one another and helps to prevent conflicts.

Psychological safety can also improve employee engagement by showing people that their opinions matter and that their ideas can make a real difference.

Gallup reports [5] that only 3 in 10 workers in the US strongly agree that their opinions count at work. Their data suggests that by increasing that number to 6 in 10, an organisation could enjoy a 12% increase in productivity. It's easy to understand why: if people know their opinions are being heard and are being used to better the organisation, it gives them a real sense of purpose, responsibility and accountability.

Psychological safety is at the heart of Sir Richard Branson's philosophy for his various Virgin businesses. Speaking to Forbes [6], he explains that every leader at Virgin is asked to praise rather than criticise. They're also encouraged to actively listen to what their staff have to say and to put their suggestions into practice wherever possible.

As he puts it: "What makes Virgin particularly wonderful is the wonderful group of people who believe in what they're trying to do: [people] who are appreciated, who are praised, not criticized, and are given a chance to do a great job."

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Let's finish by looking at how you can increase the levels of psychological safety in your organisation.

In her interview with Forbes, Amy C. Edmondson cautions leaders against thinking that psychological safety is just about preventing harm [1]. While putting a stop to discrimination and harassment is an important part of establishing safety for staff members, organisations have to do far more.

That work should start at the top. Research by McKinsey [7] has found that one of the key drivers of psychological safety is strong and inclusive leadership. Researchers have identified three behaviours that managers at all levels need to display:

1. Consultative: Leaders need to ask for input and engage with what people have to say.

2. Supportive: They should show interest in the people in their team and prove they are concerned for them as people, not just members of staff.
3. Challenging: They should encourage people to challenge assumptions about the work they're doing and what it takes to succeed.

McKinsey reports that employees in workplaces that invested a lot in leadership development were more likely to see their leaders demonstrating these three desirable behaviours. So, to increase psychological safety, you need to empower your team leaders with the necessary knowledge and skills.

When you begin to work on psychological safety in your workplace, you should emphasise the very real impact it will have on the organisation and its success. While making people feel safer might seem like a concept everyone should get behind, linking it to business outcomes helps people to focus on it as a concrete goal with measurable results.

Professor Edmondson and Per Hugander, a strategic adviser on organisational culture, provide this advice in an article for the Harvard Business Review [8]: "share stories that portray how candor, vulnerability, and perspective-taking enabled successful outcomes. As more people start to practice these skills as part of their work, evidence of its effectiveness will grow."

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Finally, it's important to realise that psychological safety is something you will need to constantly work on as the business evolves. While there are processes that will help to maintain it, it isn't something you can perfect and then stop thinking about. It always has to be at the heart of the decisions you make and the way you interact with the people in your organisation.

Psychological safety empowers everyone to be themselves and do their best work. It enables your organisation to avoid mistakes and to act on new opportunities you might not have discovered if someone hadn't felt able to speak up.

Psychological safety means your business will benefit from greater creativity and a range of perspectives. It also means people can focus all their energy on the work they're doing rather than on trying to conform. The knowledge that their ideas will be heard, valued and used to better the business will inspire them to be even more productive.

It's really important for leaders to demonstrate the key behaviours that nurture psychological safety. By asking for input, showing appreciation and demonstrating concern about people as individuals, leaders can help to create a safe environment for their teams.

Today, identify a topic you could ask your team to give input on. Take time to really listen to what they have to say and show that you appreciate their contributions. Remember that you probably won't achieve instant results, but the more often you do this, the safer your team will feel to speak up.

Psychological safety takes time and care to establish. But it could make a world of difference to both your team and your organisation.

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[6] *Sir Richard Branson's Five Billion Reasons To Make Your Employees And Candidates Happy*, Pavel Krapivin (2018)
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[7] *Promoting Psychological Safety Starts with Developing Leaders*, Aaron De Smet, Kim Rubenstein and Mike Vierow (2021)
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[8] *4 Steps to Boost Psychological Safety at Your Workplace*, Amy C. Edmondson and Per Hugander (2021)
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