Building Psychological Safety in the Workplace

A GUIDE FOR HR PROFESSIONALS

Beth Strathman, J.D., ACC, ITCA
Firebrand Consulting LLC
Salt Lake City, UT

Executive Summary

Psychological safety is a foundational dynamic for fostering an innovative, productive, and resilient work environment. When employees feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to express ideas, ask questions, admit mistakes, and challenge the status quo without fear of humiliation or retaliation. Human Resources (HR) professionals play a pivotal role in building and maintaining it across organizations. This whitepaper outlines the concept of psychological safety and significant research showing its impact in the workplace, as well as key strategies, best practices, and actionable steps that HR can carry out to foster a culture of psychological safety on teams and throughout the organization.

Introduction

Most organizations increasingly recognize their workforce is their most valuable asset, especially in today's fast-paced and complex business environment. For employees to bring their "best" to work each day to enable businesses to adapt and innovate, individuals must feel they work in an environment where it's safe for them to take risks, voice their concerns, and collaborate openly. The fundamental concept for creating such an environment is "psychological safety".

"Psychological safety", a term coined by Harvard professor Amy Edmondson, refers to the shared belief that the workplace is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. That team members can express themselves and know others on the team will give them the benefit of the doubt and continue to see them as valuable teammates. This concept is borne out decades of research that shows psychologically safe team members are more likely to learn together, contribute their talent fully, innovate, adapt, and attain higher individual & team performance levels.

It's vital for HR professionals to become aware of practices for embedding psychological safety due to their role shaping and implementing organizational norms.

Why Psychological Safety? Today There is More Complexity and Uncertainty than Ever Before

Today, employees in almost all industries face issues that make their jobs complex and the results uncertain. Within this complexity and uncertainty, organizations take risks to create solutions for the future. It's essential under these conditions to accept that learning and experimentation is often necessary to produce high performance.

Yet, the modern human nervous system has lagged behind the pace of change. When you consider that biologically and psychologically, humans still are neurologically wired like their ancient cousins, it's important to note that modern humans now respond to the psychological threats of today's workplace as though they face threats to their physical survival. Like physical threats, these psychological threats, such as being left out of the "in" group, receiving negative feedback, or facing a change to a process, have the potential to activate the fight-or-flight threat response.

When in threat response, unintentional biological processes will narrow an employee's focus of attention to address or avoid the threat. The consequences of this limited focus are that employees' brains are hijacked for survival and don't readily access the resources to fully engage in problem solving, creative insight, and analytical thinking while in this threat response. The result is that employees often feel fearful and stressed, as they are bombarded with the amount of complexity and uncertainty in the world and workplace today. In short, the workplace is full of "threats".

This is why people often check out, retreat into themselves, and remain silent. They simply don't feel safe to speak up, even when staying silent is detrimental to the organization, its stakeholders, customers, and innovation and growth. Being fearful and under stress is also why employees don't do their best thinking and learning.

This is why in today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world, teams and organizations must counteract employees' stress reactions with the psychological safety necessary to allow more collaborative and candid conversations that will further learning, greater engagement, and innovation.

What is Psychological Safety?

According to Harvard professor and researcher Amy Edmondson, psychological safety is "a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes, and that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking." In other words, it's the idea that an employee can speak up with what's on their mind without risking ridicule or other negative consequences from the rest of the team.

Psychological safety comes from respecting each person's need to …
- belong and be included;
- learn, grow, and develop mastery;
- have autonomy and be able to meaningfully contribute their talents; and
- improve the status quo and innovate.

What Psychological Safety is NOT

Most people misunderstand the concept of "psychological safety". They often jump to the conclusion that it means that every idea, comment, or question has to be accepted as valid, regardless of its truth, usefulness, or applicability to the task at hand. But they would be wrong. Indiscriminately accepting an employee's information, opinion, or results is <u>not</u> psychological safety.

Psychological safety is not about avoiding disagreements to avoid conflict or to "play nice". It's also not about giving or getting praise or unconditional support for everything said or done. And finally, it's not about accepting substandard work or protecting team members from consequences.

Rather, psychological safety comes from creating the conditions where team members can speak their minds and have robust and even loudly passionate discussions or disagreements about ideas without judging of negating each other's value as people. It's about disagreeing about the content of a discussion without being judgmental of the person.

The Research: Psychological Safety is the Proven Gateway to Greater Productivity and Performance

Research findings on psychological safety address many workplace dynamics, including factors that influence it and its implications in various contexts.

Research on the Factors Influencing Psychological Safety

Leadership and Organizational Culture: Leaders play a pivotal role in fostering psychological safety by demonstrating openness, humility, and responsiveness to feedback (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). Organizational cultures that encourage trust, respect, and inclusivity also support psychological safety.

Team Dynamics: Team cohesion, norms of trust and collaboration, and effective communication patterns significantly influence psychological safety within teams (Newman et al., 2017).

Individual Differences: Personal traits like self-esteem, risk tolerance, and past experiences shape individuals' perceptions of psychological safety (Carmeli, 2009).

Factors That Inhibit Speaking Up: Factors that keep employees from sharing their ideas, questions, and mistakes include being seen or labeled negatively, damaging relationships, avoiding embarrassing others, the belief that speaking up won't make a difference, and the fear of retaliation. (Morrison & Milliken, 2003)

Research on Psychological Safety's Effect on Team Dynamics

Conflict: Psychological safety transforms conflict from being "divisive" to "productive", resulting in improved team performance. (Bradley et al, 2012)

Performance and Innovation: Research suggests that psychologically safe environments foster creativity, innovation, and higher team performance (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

Learning and Development: Psychological safety facilitates learning and skill development by encouraging constructive feedback and experimentation

(Edmondson, 2019), the ability to weather failure better (Huang & Jiang, 2012), fewer errors and speaking up about errors more often (Leroy et al, 2012), fewer workarounds and process improvement (Tucker & Edmondson, 2003), and offering ideas even when not completely confident of the information (Siemsen et al, 2009).

Employee Well-Being: Feeling psychologically safe at work is associated with lower stress levels, higher job satisfaction, and reduced turnover intentions (Newman et al., 2017).

Case Study: Google's Project Aristotle

In 2012, Google conducted an internal study called Project Aristotle to understand what made their best teams most effective and to replicate those factors to uplevel other teams.

Their study found that demographic factors like education and experience didn't make the difference. Instead, five team dynamics made all the difference. Of those dynamics, psychological safety was the single most important factor that distinguished high-performing teams from the rest. The teams with high psychological safety reported greater engagement, retention, and innovation.

HR professionals can learn from Google's example by focusing on fostering an environment where team members feel safe to share ideas, take risks, and make mistakes. This includes encouraging leaders to be role models of vulnerability, humility, and openness.

Diversity: Psychological safety maximizes the benefits of diversity. Without psychological safety, employees from minority groups may experience higher levels of anxiety and exclusion, leading to less participation in decision-making processes and lower overall engagement (Randel et al., 2018).

However, research shows the presence of psychological safety allows employees from diverse backgrounds to voice their opinions and perspectives without fear of being marginalized. This can improve both individual and team performance by tapping into the full potential of diverse viewpoints (Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

Further, psychological safety reduces the risk of the "diversity paradox" (the potential for diverse teams to experience conflict and dissatisfaction due to

differences in perspectives) by fostering an environment where individuals express greater satisfactions with their diverse team due to feelings of being respected and free to express differing viewpoints without causing interpersonal friction (Randel et al., 2018).

HR's Role in Building Psychological Safety

HR professionals are uniquely positioned to drive the creation and maintenance of a psychologically safe workplace. From onboarding and training to performance management and leadership development, HR has the tools, perspective, and influence to shape organizational culture and ensure that psychological safety is embedded.

How HR Can Support Key Components of Psychological Safety

1. Open Communication
Through its role in fostering the organization's culture, HR can emphasize open communication to foster trust and transparency. This allows employees to feel confident that they can voice concerns, ideas, or mistakes without fear of negative consequences.

2. Inclusion and Respect for Diversity
Through its role in recruiting & managing talent, employee engagement, and promoting diversity & inclusion initiatives, HR helps build an inclusive culture where all employees feel valued and respected for their unique perspectives and contributions. This is a critical component of psychological safety.

3. Encouragement of Risk-Taking
Also related to HR's influence on organization's culture, teams that are encouraged to take calculated risks without fear of reprimand or punishment are more likely to innovate and experiment. Especially with complex work and work that is pushing the boundaries of what's been done before, it is critical to foster an environment where mistakes and failure are seen as a byproduct of execution and as a natural part of the learning process.

4. Supportive Leadership
Through the selection and training of leaders, HR can help ensure that those in leadership positions possess and develop the skills necessary to foster psychological safety through training and mentorship. For example, leaders who actively listen, seek

input from all levels, and show empathy contribute significantly to a psychologically safe environment.

5. *Non-Punitive Responses to Mistakes*
Related to HR's role in leadership selection and development and influencing culture, HR can emphasize the importance of learning and innovation in addition to executing on goals. Employees are more likely to take initiative and contribute fully to problem-solving when mistakes are treated as learning opportunities rather than reasons for reprimand or discipline.

Steps HR Can Take to Build Psychological Safety

1. *Assess the Current Workplace Culture*
HR can start building more psychological safety in the organization by evaluating the existing culture. Employee surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews can help identify barriers to open communication, leadership gaps, and areas where employees feel unsupported.

The focus can be on individual teams or on the organizational culture overall. (*See* the second to the last page of this .pdf of Amy Edmondson's 1999 research study for her 7 questions (under the heading "**Team psychological safety**").)

2. *Train Leaders to Model Psychological Safety*
Leadership behavior is an extremely important influence for creating psychological safety. HR can facilitate ongoing leadership training focused on emotional intelligence, active listening, empathy, and inclusive decision-making.

- Leadership Development Programs: Incorporate psychological safety as a core component in leadership development initiatives. Train leaders on facilitating open dialogues, encouraging feedback, and handling conflict constructively.

- Feedback Mechanisms: Equip leaders with tools to gather and respond to employee feedback effectively, creating a two-way communication channel that promotes transparency.

3. *Foster Open Communication Channels*

Create multiple communication channels where employees can raise concerns, share ideas, or report issues anonymously, if needed. Regular town halls, suggestion boxes, and anonymous surveys can help build trust and transparency.

- <u>Anonymous Reporting Tools</u>: Implement digital platforms that allow employees to submit ideas, questions, or concerns anonymously.

- <u>Regular Check-Ins</u>: Encourage managers to hold regular one-on-one meetings with team members to discuss performance as well as employees' well-being, challenges, and career aspirations.

4. *Develop a Blame-Free Culture*

HR can work with leadership to move from a culture of blame toward one that views mistakes as learning opportunities and helps employees debrief errors. When experimentation and failure are seen as a part executing toward goals and especially as part of the innovation process, employees are more likely to experiment and innovate.

- <u>Celebrate Failures as Learning</u>: HR should ensure that leaders communicate openly about failures and key learning takeaways. Publicly acknowledging and normalizing these instances sends a strong message about the organization's stance on appropriate risk-taking. For example, teams can celebrate the "Screw Up of the Month" for the mistake or failure that taught the team something important about their work or relationships with each other or stakeholders.

5. *Promote Relationship-Building Activities*

Teams with strong interpersonal relationships are more likely to experience psychological safety. HR can encourage leaders to organize team-building activities and informal opportunities to learn more about each other to foster trust, cooperation, and shared understanding among team members.

- <u>Team Workshops</u>: Consider offering workshops on conflict resolution, effective communication, and collaboration to build trust within teams.

- <u>Cross-Functional Collaboration</u>: Where beneficial, encourage the use of cross-functional teams and collaboration to break down silos, improve communication, and foster a sense of unity across the organization.

6. *Prioritize Inclusion and Diversity*

A key element of psychological safety is ensuring that all employees feel heard and valued, regardless of their background. HR can lead efforts to create an inclusive environment by championing diversity initiatives and addressing systemic bias.

- Inclusive Hiring Practices: Implement hiring practices that emphasize diversity and inclusion, ensuring that different perspectives are represented across teams.

- Bias Training: Provide ongoing unconscious bias training to leaders and employees to ensure that everyone is aware of their biases and how they can impact decision-making.

7. *Measure and Monitor Psychological Safety*

Psychological safety should be measured regularly through surveys, feedback mechanisms, and performance evaluations. HR can develop metrics to track progress, such as employee engagement, retention rates, and the number of reported incidents related to communication breakdowns or fear of reprisal.

- Psychological Safety Surveys: Conduct regular anonymous surveys to assess how safe employees feel in sharing their ideas, voicing concerns, and taking risks.

- Key Performance Indicators (KPIs): Track specific KPIs related to psychological safety, such as employee participation in innovation initiatives, the frequency of feedback exchanges, and team turnover rates.

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Challenges and Considerations When Building Psychological Safety

Resistance to Cultural Change

Some employees and leaders may resist the shift toward a psychologically safe culture, particularly if the existing environment has been highly competitive or hierarchical. HR will need to get buy-in from the CEO and other executives, then work closely with leadership at all levels to model and reinforce desired behaviors.

Balancing Psychological Safety and Accountability

While promoting a culture where everyone is encouraged to speak their minds is the basis of psychological safety, it is also essential to maintain accountability. HR should ensure that psychological safety does not lead to less responsibility for expected behavior and adherence to policy and processes or to lowering performance standards.

Sustaining Efforts Over Time

Building psychological safety is not a one-time initiative but requires continuous effort and commitment. HR is key for ensuring that psychological safety is integrated into every aspect of the organization's operations, from onboarding to exit interviews.
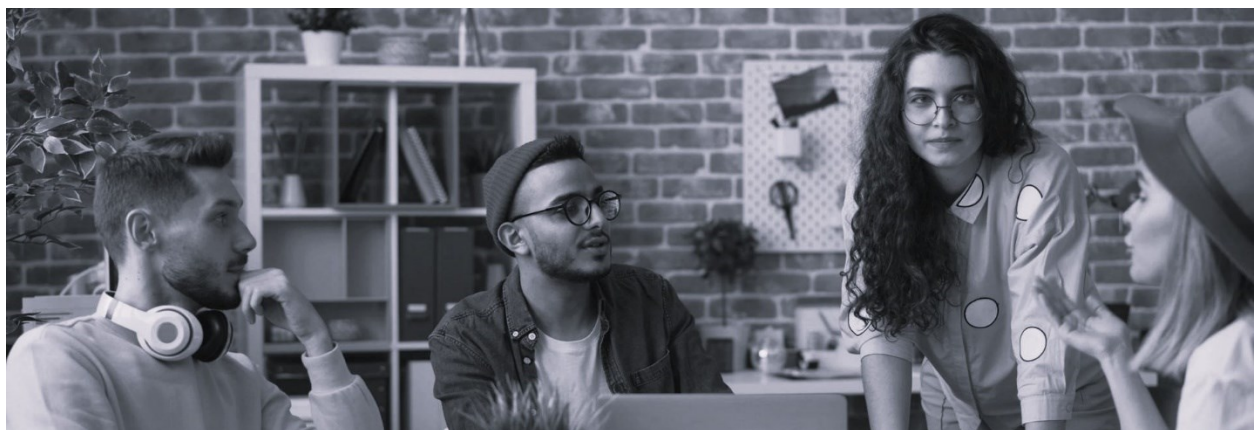
Conclusion

Psychological safety is a cornerstone of high-performing, innovative, and engaged teams. As the stewards of organizational culture, HR professionals have a unique opportunity to foster a psychologically safe environment that supports high-performance and increased innovation and productivity. By promoting open communication, supporting leadership development, encouraging risk-taking, and encouraging diversity & inclusion, HR can build a workplace where all employees feel encouraged and empowered to contribute their best work.

Not only is creating a psychologically safe environment a matter of employee well-being; it is a key driver of organizational success. With sustained commitment and strategic initiatives, HR can play a key role in ensuring that psychological safety becomes embedded as a fundamental aspect of the company's culture.

Building Psychological Safety:
An Action Plan for HR Professionals

1. Conduct a Psychological Safety Assessment– Survey employees to identify current levels of psychological safety and areas of improvement.

2. Train Leaders– Provide leadership training focused on empathy, inclusion, and fostering open communication.

3. Establish Feedback Mechanisms– Create multiple channels for employees to share concerns and ideas.

4. Encourage Appropriate Risk-Taking– Promote a culture where mistakes are treated as learning opportunities.

5. Measure Progress– Regularly assess psychological safety through surveys and KPIs to track improvement over time.

Author
Beth Strathman, J.D., ACC, ITCA
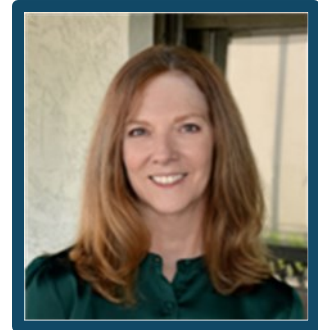
Beth Strathman has a passion for cultivating the best in others. She is a keen observer of people and has studied human behavior and performance throughout her careers in education, human resources, and coaching. She is known as a practical straight-shooter with a great sense of humor.

As a leadership and team coach, Beth works with leaders who want to have more positive impact within their organizations. Her clients achieve greater presence and composure, better focus, and more effective influence with their direct reports, colleagues, and other stakeholders. She also works with teams who want to work more effectively together to increase value for their stakeholders.

Contact Beth for:

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bethstrathman.com · beth@bethstrathman.com

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