



Good for business: Psychological Safety

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY NOT ONLY ENCOURAGES TRUST AND INNOVATION IN TEAMS,
BUT INCREASES OVERALL BUSINESS PERFORMANCE

In today's fast-paced, unpredictable environment, the skills required in a team are expanding well beyond simple execution of tasks. With talent at a premium, attracting and retaining the best people is an increasing priority – and the businesses that thrive are those fostering an environment which encourages learning, curiosity and innovation.

Developing these qualities within one team can be challenging. However, research conducted over the last 20 years by Harvard professor Amy Edmondson has identified one key team characteristic to help – 'Psychological Safety'¹.

Without Psychological Safety, teams will struggle to learn, collaborate and innovate. In unpredictable and agile market conditions, it is becoming almost a necessary pre-condition for leadership. To encourage Psychological Safety within a team, leaders can adopt a style that is authentic, tolerant, and even playful – which should then be reflected back by the wider team. Edmondson warns that too much focus on getting things done, and done right, can crowd out the curiosity, experimentation and reflection which is vital to the sustainable success of a team over the longer term.

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Edmondson describes this as “a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for inter-personal risk taking”. Briefly put, Psychological Safety is present when team members speak up and share what they are thinking openly, in an environment where ideas are listened to and respected.

BENEFITS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

- Engagement in achieving team goals
- Fosters heightened trust and collaboration
- Achieves more considered, optimal team decisions
- Results in a deeper understanding of, and better response to, risk
- Leverages diversity and provides an increased sense of inclusion
- Creates confidence and self-worth
- Adds creativity and curiosity

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PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IN ACTION: GOOGLE

Google’s Project Oxygen ² – a significant longitudinal study on work and life – was set up to explore which variables might be related to a team’s effectiveness. Four key components were uncovered, with Psychological Safety by far the most meaningful; characterised by the statement ‘I feel safe expressing divergent opinions to the team’.

Google also found the leaders who were seen to create higher levels of Psychological Safety in their teams had members who were less likely to leave, were twice as likely to be rated as effective by executives, and were more likely to feel empowered to harness diverse ideas from their teammates. From a commercial perspective, teams with high levels of Psychological Safety were found to bring in more revenue.

A healthy culture of debate and constructive challenge is created when team leaders and team members encourage and embrace potentially risky contributions. For advice on how to create a culture of Psychological Safety in your business, e-mail Stuart Schofield at ssc@mannaz.com ■

1 The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth - Amy C. Edmondson (2018)

2 rework.withgoogle.com/blog/the-evolution-of-project-oxygen/

3 www.gottman.com

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TEN STEPS TO PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

- 1. Acknowledge your own fallibility.** Research professor and author of The Power of Vulnerability, Brene Brown, tells us if we can be vulnerable as leaders, we increase trust within our teams. Acknowledging that we are not perfect encourages others to be less self-conscious about speaking up.
- 2. Practice active listening.** Don’t ‘listen to respond’, ‘listen to understand’, and try to clear your mind of your own opinions. John Gottman, the famous relationship counsellor, encourages us to take time to really listen to each other and put our-selves in others’ shoes ³.
- 3. Ask open questions.** Actively encourage team members to think through all solutions offered, rather than prioritising their own. This requires curiosity and willingness to put aside the notion that a leader must always deliver the answers.
- 4. Embrace diversity.** Leaders should allow team members to express the characteristics which make them unique, enabling people to be their ‘full selves’ at work. Leaders should also actively bring in those voices who are less often heard.
- 5. Foster constructive conflict.** A leader should not engineer conflict but, when it appears, be ready to constructively step in to it, with politeness and, again, listening to all points-of-view.
- 6. Encourage debate.** Psychological Safety can be increased when there is disagreement – provided this is handled constructively, prioritising group learning and growth. In Fierce Conversations, Susan Scott reminds us we can actively prepare for such situations and use a variety of processes to keep calm, curious and cogniscent.
- 7. Be vigilant.** Leaders can challenge behaviours which are seen to block, dismiss or ridicule other people’s opinions. Role-modelling this helps empower other team members to do the same, encouraging group responsibility.
- 8. Hold ‘after-action-reviews’.** Reflect on and take learnings from the efficacy and openness of your team meetings, discuss what took place, and feed into the running of future meetings.
- 9. Encourage humour.** Try fun, creative, competitive exercises in small groups – where there is little risk of getting something wrong. Then ask members of each group to give each other feedback on performance. This establishes trust, and leads to open and honest sharing.
- 10. Have regular check-ins.** It’s not enough for only a few team members to speak openly, while others remain reticent. The more people involved, the more trust is created.