

Psychological Safety and Leadership

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Psychological Safety And Leadership

A leader's most important function is to create psychological safety for his or her team. Research at Google shows a culture of psychological safety boosts productivity. Productivity is the ability to get complex, time-consuming tasks completed with minimal distractions and interruptions. Teams with a culture of trust and psychological safety, with meaningful work and clarity, see significant productivity benefits.

And yet, in all of leadership training, we never hear about the idea of psychological safety and leadership. This is certainly not something that is taught in business school or in undergraduate business programs.

What Is Psychological Safety?

Psychological safety refers to an individual's perception of the consequences of taking an interpersonal risk. It is a belief that a team is safe for risk-taking in the face of being seen as ignorant, incompetent, negative, or disruptive. People in organizations are often reluctant to disclose mistakes or are unwilling to ask for help for fear of appearing incompetent. This fear exists even when admitting to error or seeking help would benefit the team and the organization.

In a team with high psychological safety, teammates feel safe to take risks around their team members. They feel confident that no one on the team will embarrass or punish anyone else for admitting a mistake, asking a question, or offering a new idea.

When we talk about psychological safety, we're really talking about five different types of safety.

Emotional Safety

The first is emotional safety. A leader creates emotional safety through a process called affect labeling. Affect labeling is nothing more than reflecting back the emotions of other people. It is the only empirically-tested way of calming strong emotions. When you, as a leader, are able to validate the emotional experiences of your team members, you build deep emotional safety.

Physical Safety

Physical safety means that there are no perceived threats on your team. We don't see true physical threats in the workplace very often, but oftentimes people try to intimidate others through non-aggressive physical behavior. In addition, the problem of sexual harassment remains a real threat despite policies and training. There are many different nuanced and very subtle ways that there can be a lack of physical safety. As a leader, your responsibility is to make sure there are zero perceived threats of physical safety. Even though we would expect no threats in a workplace, they are still there, and you, as a leader, have to stop them.

Moral Safety

Moral safety means that there is no fear of calling out morally questionable decisions. This is difficult for several reasons. First,

what one person considers morally questionable may be morally acceptable to another. Second, calling out a morally questionable decision is a challenge to power.

You have to be able to deal with some very difficult problems. Maybe the issue has to do with politics, racism, or economic inequality. Whatever it might be, as a leader, you must make sure that your team is safe around even the most difficult questions it might confront.

Cognitive Safety

The third type of psychological safety is cognitive safety. Two things are important. First, all ideas are welcomed and encouraged. There is no such thing as a stupid question. Admitting a mistake is welcomed and encouraged. Asking for help when truly needed is expected.

And most importantly, as a leader, you must protect your introverts. Your introverts must have a voice. You make sure that your introverts are not stampeded by people who think power is everything and will crush anybody they perceive as weak.

Spiritual Safety

Most leaders do not think about spiritual safety. This is really protecting entire belief structures as human beings. All beliefs are welcome and respected because they provide a great intellectual foundation for solving difficult problems within your team.

<https://youtu.be/6paVVOiBqhY>

How Do Leaders Build Psychological Safety on Teams?

So how do you, as a leader, go about building psychological safety?

Master Your Emotions-Become Emotionally Competent

The first thing you have to do as a leader is master your own emotions and become emotionally competent. Emotional mastery takes work. This is not something that is intuitive, and it is not something you are born with. You have to learn how to be emotionally competent. Unfortunately, this is not something that is taught in formal education. You have to seek out people who know how to teach you emotional mastery.

Emotional competency includes:

- Emotional self-awareness
- Emotional self-regulation
- Emotional trigger recognition and management
- Anxiety self-management
- Emotional expression and communication
- Reading the emotional data fields of others
- Reflecting emotions through the process of affect labeling
- Proper use of emotions in decision-making

- Understanding that humans are 98% emotional and 2% rational
- Learning how to listen others into existence

Model Emotional Competency and Emotional Intelligence

Second, you have to model your emotional competence and practice it so that you can demonstrate to your team that you are an emotionally competent human being. A leader's behavior deeply affects the psychological safety of the team. Team members pay very close attention to leadership behavior to measure action against words.

If the leader is supportive, coaching-oriented, and has non-defensive answers to questions and challenges, team members will conclude that the environment is safe. If, on the other hand, the leader is authoritarian or punitive, team members will be unwilling to discuss errors, ask for help, or take interpersonal risks.

Teach Your Team Members Emotional Competency

As a leader, you are a teacher. You have to teach your team the same emotional mastery that you have learned. If they do not have emotional mastery, psychological safety will be difficult to achieve.

The Leader's Fundamental Role Is To Create Psychological Safety

Remember that your number one rule as a leader is to create psychological safety. When you do that, your team's performance will dramatically rise, and you will be able to advance your career by leaps and bounds. You will find training resources on emotional competency on [this website](#). Join our list to get the latest thinking and news of new courses.



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