

# The Impact of Psychological Safety on organisational culture



# What is Psychological Safety?

Psychological safety is a buzzword often used in the modern workplace. But what does this actually mean? Everyone looks for a definition however, for us, psychological safety is rather the collaboration of four definitions:

## **INCLUSION**

A core value ensuring equal participation and involvement of all organisational members in activities and decisions, regardless of background or identity.

## **SAFE TO LEARN**

A nurturing environment where individuals can freely acquire knowledge, develop skills, and collaborate without fear of judgment, fostering psychological security and support for personal growth.

## **SAFE TO CONTRIBUTE**

A culture that cultivates openness and trust, enabling employees to freely voice their perspectives, ideas, and concerns, thereby fostering a sense of ownership and collective progress.

## **SAFE TO CHALLENGE**

A supportive environment where individuals are empowered to question established norms, policies, and concepts constructively, fostering a culture of innovation and continuous improvement without fear of backlash or retribution.

# The Impact and Understanding behind Psychological Safety

It is through this that we can create an organisational safety net for our employees' minds when they enter the door to work. It's the feeling we get when we know we will not be judged or punished for speaking up, sharing ideas, or making mistakes. We want to create a workplace where everyone feels comfortable walking through the door, voicing their thoughts, and taking risks without fear of negative consequences or reprisal.

The imperative understanding that we must acknowledge when implementing psychological safety is its underpinning theories of cognitive psychology. Much of the work on psychological safety started in the 1950s particularly with psychotherapist Carl Rogers [1] about how to establish the conditions in an environment where creativity can excel.



## How does psychological safety impact our environment?

Amy Edmondson [2] evaluated recently, that as the world enters more unknowns, the ability for an organisation to thrive often rests upon the ability for individuals to cohesively thrive in the best conditions. This is why psychological safety is imperative. It's not just simply a wellbeing tool, it's an economic impactor.

When psychological safety is well in place, an organisation sees growth. This does not just have to be seen financially but perhaps from innovation stand points, creating processes that are more streamlined and efficient for future financial growth. People feel empowered to contribute their best ideas, collaborate openly, and take calculated risks. On the other hand, low psychological safety breeds fear, stifles creativity, and can even lead to burnout and turnover as people feel unable to express themselves or make mistakes without consequences [3]. This limits the company; consistent turnover is a root cause to stifled growth – whilst teaching an individual process A you have to look for person B leading to reiteration of learning tools but no growth of the tool kit [3].

The expectation can sometimes lie with the leadership teams in implementing the psychologically safe environment. However, what becomes clear in our 4 areas of psychological safety, is that inclusion is imperative for it to flourish. Therefore, though leadership may be the provider of policies and initiatives to begin the process, every single individual is expected to be a supporter in the process, to cheerlead the subject, and to display the desire to help the environment thrive.



## Overcoming Barriers to Psychological Safety

Despite how important Psychological safety, and general wellbeing is to all, one thing that remains abundantly clear are the barriers preventing us from making the steps towards the solutions.

Some of the common barriers to psychological safety include, fear of judgement, fear of change and power dynamics. Simply put these are the opposite in essence, to the psychological safety areas. Therefore, to overcome the barriers we must start at the base of the problem: the development of the strategies and initiatives. Though we have named our suggested strategies below, an organisation will know its own policies better than what the generic statements above could provide. However, one constant is the WAY in which we implement anything. Change does not have to be something we fear if it is gradual, calculated, and inclusive for example.



# Strategies and Initiatives for Developing Psychological Safety

How then do we go about supporting each of the 4 areas of psychological safety, ensuring everyone is involved in tackling what barriers there may be organisationally? At The Stress Management Society in collaboration with International Wellbeing Insights, we have a few strategies that you could use to help foster a psychologically safe environment. Here are some of our suggested strategies:

## LEADING THROUGH EXAMPLE

Though nothing should be taken as only a top-down approach, leading by example can have great influence on the implementation of any method, process or strategy in an organisation. Managers and leader should model open communication, positive vulnerability, and acceptance of constructive feedback.

## EMBRACE NEW PERSPECTIVES

Any individual, even in our personal lives, should aim to actively seek out and value different view points and experiences to encourage ourselves and others through collaboration.

## CLEAR VISIONS, CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Just as everyone would like the vision of an organisation to be clear, the expectations alongside this must also be clear. Ensure everyone understands that mistakes are opportunities for learning and growth, not reasons for blame and shame.

## EMPATHETIC ENGAGEMENT

Something integral to us at the Stress Management Society is the encouragement and understanding of our colleagues and others surrounding us. To provide challenge and perspectives on a topic of discussion we must do so with empathy to promote a psychologically safe environment.

## CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK CULTURE

Feedback for many of us is an invaluable tool. Constructive feedback even more so. With feedback we promote innovation. Find what solution works best with in your team to create a feedback loop and implement this maybe once a month to help yourself and individuals around you grow.



[1] Clark, T. R. (2020). The 4 stages of psychological safety: Defining the path to inclusion and innovation. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

[2] Edmondson, A. C. (2018). The fearless organization: Creating psychological safety in the workplace for learning, innovation, and growth. John Wiley & Sons.

[3] Abror, A., & Patrisia, D. (2020). Psychological safety and organisational performance: A systematic literature review. Personality and Social Psychology Review, 16, 7-21.

