Article

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

– what, why and how?

By Rand Blak Barawy,
rabb@implement.dk,
Implement Consulting Group

Are you interested in creating an effective and high-performing team, or are you merely curious about how it can be done? Creating a workplace and a social climate that foster psychological safety is key to creating effective and high-performing teams.

If we want to support organisations in becoming more fit for humans, an important part is to work with both culture and behaviour in organisations, teams and individuals. Having worked with a broad range of clients on creating effective and high-performing teams, one key approach has been to foster psychological safety.

What constitutes the effective high-performing team?

In 2012, Google launched Project Aristotle in their quest to build the effective high-performing team. They wanted to find out what the main ingredients of the effective high-performing team were and gathered some of the company's best specialists,

including statisticians, organisational psychologists, sociologist and engineers. Project Aristotle's researchers reviewed half a century of academic studies looking at how teams worked and had also internally been collecting surveys, conducting interviews, making observations of groups and analysing statistics for almost three years.

In 2015, Project Aristotle's researchers concluded that understanding and influencing group norms were the keys to improving the teams of the company. In line with a 2010 study (Wolley et al.), they determined traits like social sensitivity and conversational turn-taking as instrumental ingredients in an effective high-per-

forming team. Since both traits are central aspects of the concept of psychological safety, the project team became very interested in the concept and dug into its core.

Psychological safety is daring to speak up and make mistakes

Psychological safety was defined by Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson back in 1999 as a "shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking".

A psychologically safe workplace is one where employees dare to speak up and make mistakes without the fear of humiliation and punishment. In psychologically safe teams, the team members give each other feedback and challenge each other. Thus, candour and authenticity are central elements. Also, healthy and constructive conflicts are a main part of forming a psychologically safe team.

If team members are kind and polite without being candour and honest, team members will miss out on the opportunity to communicate with and learn from each other. Valuing politeness over progress has by author Kim Scott (2017) been named "ruinous empathy" – an empathy that may make employees feel good in the short term but fail to help people grow or improve.

I find it important to highlight a distinction between psychological safety and interpersonal trust, as psychological safety involves and goes beyond interpersonal trust. It describes a team climate characterised by interpersonal trust and mutual respect, in which people are comfortable being themselves. We must thus understand psychological safety as a team concept rather than a concept that describes the relationship between two individuals (Edmondson, 1999).

Creating psychological safety is difficult – a neuroperspective

Even though psychological safety in theory might sound simple and easy to implement, it has proven to be quite difficult. Otherwise, we would assume that psychological safety in teams would be the norm.

When we perceive an interaction or setting to have minimal interpersonal risk, and we thus feel psychologically safe, we share thoughts without worry of negative consequences. In contrast, when a setting is psychologically unsafe, individuals are less likely to share (Edmondson & Nembhard, 2009).

Behaviours like asking a question, providing input, seeking feedback, reporting a problem or making a suggestion can make us susceptible to the risk of appearing ignorant, incompetent, unable, disruptive or negative in front of others. This may lead to embarrassment, rejection or punishment and is therefore perceived as potentially unsafe.

In many of these situations, we unfortunately tend to act in ways that inhibit learning, as we fear to face potential threat, embarrassment, rejection or punishment. We tend to rather stay silent than to speak up, even if it could provide benefits for the team or organisation. But every time we withhold, we rob ourselves and our colleagues of small moments of learning, and we simply miss out on the possibility to innovate.

Often, we are so busy managing impression, at least unconsciously, that we don't contribute to creating a better organisation (Edmondson, 2014). But our eagerness to manage impression also tells us something about the social and cultural climate we navigate in.

Zooming in on the neuroperspective

If we zoom in on the brain, it can help us better understand why the creation of psychological safety is difficult. When we encounter something unexpected, our amygdala, a part of our limbic system, is aroused, and if the perception is danger, then the response becomes a pure threat response – also known as the fight, flight or freeze response.

The latest research suggests that we trigger the same neural responses that drive us toward survival when we perceive the way we are treated by other people. Some studies even show that the brain equates our social needs with our survival (Rock, 2009). And as vital as our threat response was to our ancestors' survival in the savannah, it is almost as vital today to understand that a social threat or failure isn't life-threatening even though our brains are trying to convince us of something else.

In other words, when you are criticised, reprimanded, rejected or anything the like, your brain will react as if your life is threatened. And in that light, it is obvious that most of us will try to minimise the risk of being in a situation that is perceived threatening by the brain – if we can.

Another interesting study by Naomi Eisenberger et al. (2006), a leading social neuroscience researcher at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), indicates that physical pain and social rejections share neurocognitive substrates. When researchers looked at brain images from the study, they found activity in the dorsal portion of the anterior cingulate cortex, which is the same neural region that is involved in physical pain. This means that the feeling of being excluded provoked the same sort of reaction in the brain that physical pain might cause.

Matthew Lieberman, one of Eisenberger's fellow researchers at UCLA, hypothesises that human beings evolved this link between social connection and physical pain within the brain because social connection to caregivers is necessary for mammals to survive. The brain doesn't differentiate between you being at work or in a private setting. Instead, it experiences the workplace as being first and foremost a social system.

If we want to create a psychologically safe workplace, we must handle and cope with the neural impulses that can perceive aspects of social interactions as both threats and physical pain.

Why psychological safety is good: Effects of psychological safety

There are several reasons as to why the creation of psychological safety should be prioritised. Firstly, psychological safety in teams affects learning behaviour, which in turn affects team performance (Edmondson, 1999). Secondly, studies show that psychological safety allows for moderate risk-taking, speaking your mind, creativity and sticking your neck out without fear of having it cut off (Delizonna, 2017). Thirdly, psychological safety frees up energy since you no longer spend mental resources on impression management and avoiding mistakes.

As an example, it is both mentally taxing and deadly to the productivity of both persons and organisations to handle the threat response. The threat response and the energy you spend on handling the threat response occupy your brain and impair analytical thinking, creative insight and problem-solving. In other words, when you need your mental capabilities the most, your brain's internal resources are taken away from you (Rock, 2009).

In a psychologically safe workplace, we feel free to share ideas, mistakes and criticism. We are less worried about protecting our image and more focused on doing great work. That is, we're free to focus on and contribute to the company's mission (Edmondson, 2018). According to Edmondson (Edmondson & Nickisch, 2019), another issue with the lack of psychological safety is that we are not tapping into all the latent talent that exists in our organisations since we are not making it psychologically safe enough to get to that talent and put it to good work.

In sum: If you want your employees to be satisfied, empowered, engaged, motivated, creative, innovative, candour, learning, growing, sharing information and high-performing, then you might want to work hard on creating a workplace and a social climate that foster psychological safety.

10 ways to create psychological safety

As I see it, there are two different approaches as to how you can foster psychological safety in teams. One approach is to work with behaviours, especially leadership behaviour, and another approach is to hack the structures around you.

In the following, I will introduce you to five behavioural and five structural ways to create psychological safety in your team.

Behaviours that create psychological safety:

1. **Dare to be vulnerable and show fallibility**

   Show your colleagues that it is OK to make mistakes by demonstrating vulnerability and directness. When you articulate that no one is perfect, you can accelerate a new culture in your team where making mistakes is appreciated and celebrated for the sake of creating more boldness and innovation. Showing fallibility also has a positive effect on interpersonal empathy. According to Edmondson, it can even be effective for leaders to apologise for not facilitating trust and safety in the past.

2. **Be curious and humble**

   Have an open mindset and be curious. The great team consists of team members who are humble in the face of the challenges that lie ahead, and it is curious about what others bring. Situational humility combined with curiosity creates a sense of psychological safety that allows you to take risks with strangers (Edmondson, 2017).

3. **Respond productively and forgive mistakes**

   It is OK to be disappointed as a leader, but the disappointment may never be so dominant that you can't help your team member to get back on track and to solve the issue at hand. No one likes to screw up, and the last thing we need is a leader telling us that it is bad that we screwed up. We need help figuring out how to get back on track. If someone is screwing up repeatedly, we have an obligation to help solve the issues and challenges (Edmondson & Nickisch, 2019). Furthermore, nothing kills psychological safety quicker than a negative reaction to an error. Instead, focus on the positives: A mistake was caught, it can be fixed, and there's something to learn from the experience. Above all, a psychologically safe environment protects employees from the fear of being wrong.

4. **Ask for and give feedback**

   Ask for feedback on how you delivered your message. It disarms your opponent, illuminates blind spots in communication and models fallibility, which again increases trust (Delizonna, 2017). Asking for feedback has no hierarchy. If seniors, leaders or experienced colleagues practice willingness to learn and curiosity towards their own appearance, it will have an impact on the organisational culture. Give feedback when you can, and when you do, be specific, constructive and appreciative, but remember: No matter how constructive you believe you are, feedback can trigger defence mechanisms in the recipient, making them less receptive to new ideas. Separate feedback from evaluation where you can, clearly make your feedback focused on development and problem-solving and evaluate on performance separately.

5. **Welcome questions, doubts and bad news**

   Ask for questions and opinions and be proactive in inviting input. When you ask your employees for their opinions in group settings, they will not only feel more involved and accountable but also empowered to innovate (Slack, 2019). Managers should show appreciation when employees speak up about unrealistic timeliness or ask for clarification on a project.

Thank them for voicing their concerns, and then help them decide on next steps (Slack, 2019). Finally, leaders must respond to good ideas and bad news alike with appreciation. The practices above help to build and reinforce a culture of psychological safety.

Structures and designs that create psychological safety:

6. Setting the stage

Building a culture of psychological safety, paradoxically, starts with being open and explicit about the many challenges that lie ahead. Amy Edmondson call this "setting the stage". Setting the stage means getting people on the same page about the nature of the work they are doing (Edmondson & Nickisch, 2019). Most companies today operate in complex and uncertain environments. They face constant risks – risks of obsolescence, of new nimble competitors, of employee burnout and more. It may seem strange to argue that leaders should emphasise such risks but doing so builds psychological safety by clarifying the rationale for speaking up. It helps people understand that their input is critical to the company's ability to keep learning – as it must to remain viable. Leaders need to make sure people know that they're operating in complex knowledge-intensive businesses that live and die based on thoughtful input and intelligent risk-taking (Edmondson, 2018).

7. Conversational turn-taking

Tom Carmazzi, CEO of manufacturing company Tuthill in the US, uses index cards to create a safe space in his meeting rooms. All meeting participants write down something they want to share on a flashcard. This gives everyone a chance to share their opinions and goals and sets the stage for co-workers to ask clarifying, non-leading questions for more insight (Slack, 2019). By structuring turn-taking this way, you can control that everybody gives their input to any given topic at hand. In Google's Project Aristotle, they noticed that in the effective teams, members spoke proportionally the same amount of time, a phenomenon that researchers referred to as "equality in distribution of conversational turn-taking". If only one person or a small group speaks all the time, the collective intelligence will decline (Duhigg, 2016).

8. Feedback sessions and giving employees a voice

Set up meetings and sessions that are designed in thoughtful ways to make it easier for the team to give each other candid feedback or to really critique the work at hand (Edmondson & Nickisch, 2019). Create liberal pathways to leadership, provide channels for feedback and encourage conversation. Upward communication can be a vital force in helping contemporary organisations learn and succeed. By speaking up to those who occupy positions to authorise actions, employees can help challenge the status quo, identify problems or opportunities for improvement and offer ideas to improve their organisations' well-being (Attfield, 2019).

9. Empathy training – storytelling

Create sessions where every member of the team shares a story with team members to raise the level of interpersonal empathy. Storytelling is a good method for that purpose. By sharing personal stories, you support the creation of an environment and culture where employees can bring their full selves to work. No one wants to leave their personality and inner life at home. We want work to be more than just labour. Building bonds is essential and telling and sharing stories with team members can help cultivate the bonds.

10. Prototype, test and evaluate

Create sessions where employees and leaders prototype the behaviours they want themselves and each other to practice. Test it in real life and use different formats to evaluate how it works. Is something hindering our intended behaviours? Can we hack that "something" and more successfully implement the well-intended behaviours and social practices?

References

Attfield, B. (2019). 7 ways to create psychological safety in your workplace, Jostle

Duhigg, C. (2016). What Google learned from its quest to build the perfect team. The New York Times Magazine, 26, 2016.

Edmondson, A. C. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. Administrative science quarterly, 44(2), 350-383.

Edmondson, A. C., & Nembhard, I. M. (2009). Product development and learning in project teams: The challenges are the benefits. Journal of product innovation management, 26(2), 123-138.

Edmondson, A. (2014). Building a psychological safe workplace. Ted Talk.

Edmondson, A.C. (2017). How to turn a group of strangers into a team. Ted Talk.

Edmondson, A. C. & Nickisch, C. (2019). Creating psychological safety in the workplace. Harvard Business Review.

Eisenberger, N. I., Jarcho, J. M., Lieberman, M. D., & Naliboff, B. D. (2006). An experimental study of shared sensitivity to physical pain and social rejection. Pain, 126(1-3), 132-138.

Delizonna, L. (2017). High-performing teams need psychological safety. Here's how to create It. Harvard Business Review, 24.

Rock, D. (2009). Managing with the brain in mind. PwC Strategy & Edmondson, A. (2018). How to build work cultures of psychological safety rather than fear. Interview with Kathy Caprino, Forbes.

Scott, K. (2017). Radical Candor: How to Get What You Want by Saying What You Mean. Pan Macmillan.

Slack. (2019). Psychological safety first: building trust among teams. From the team behind slack.

Woolley, A. W., Chabris, C. F., Pentland, A., Hashmi, N., & Malone, T. W. (2010). Evidence for a collective intelligence factor in the performance of human groups. science, 330(6004), 686-688.

FAST FACTS ABOUT IMPLEMENT

Founded: 1996
Number of employees: 900
Offices: Copenhagen, Aarhus, Stockholm, Malmo, Oslo, Zurich and Munich
implementconsultinggroup.com