



**EAPA-SA**

# **Practical Ways to Create Psychological Safety at Work**

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There is a large body of research that shows that leaders play a critical role in fostering employee motivation and satisfaction. The consequence is that it is not enough for managers to drive strong employee performance. They also need to take care of their team members' wellbeing. This includes the belief that individuals will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions and concerns – or owning up to mistakes. In teams, it refers to team members believing that they can take risks without being shamed by their colleagues.



**What is psychological safety?**

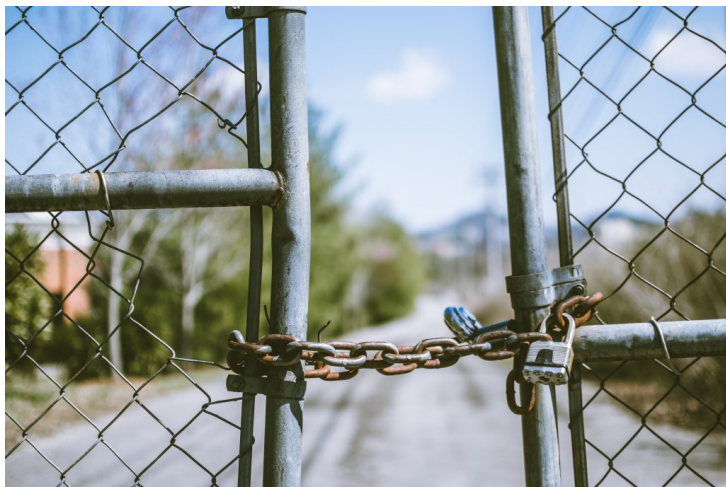
Dr. Amy Edmondson, a Harvard Business School professor, coined the term *psychological safety* in a 1999 journal article that explored its relationship to team learning and performance. She defines it as, “a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes” and is quoted as saying, “Psychological safety means an absence of interpersonal fear. When psychological safety is present, people are able to speak up with work-relevant content.”

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Edmondson has pointed to psychological safety as a critical factor for high-performing teams. Teams that feel psychologically safe are less afraid of any negative consequences that may result from:

- taking smart risks,
- making mistakes,
- sharing their opinions within their team,
- being candid with one another.

Source: <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/leadership/five-fifty-is-it-safe>



### **Why does psychological safety matter?**

Building psychological safety contributes significantly to employee wellbeing. In a psychologically safe environment, employees are less stressed and anxious, which improves their mental and physical health. It also leads to:

- better communication,
- employee engagement,
- increased performance,
- more traction in inclusivity and diversity initiatives
- greater innovation,
- higher job satisfaction and retention rates.

*“Building psychological safety contributes significantly to employee wellbeing.”*

#### **4 Stages of psychological safety**

In his book, *The Four Stages Of Psychological Safety*, Timothy R Clark describes a conceptual model of four stages of psychological safety that teams can move through, progressing from stage 1 to stage 4.

These four stages are:

1. **Inclusion Safety** – members feel safe belonging to the team. They are comfortable being present, do not feel excluded, and feel that they are wanted and appreciated.
2. **Learner Safety** – members feel enabled to learn through asking questions. Team members here may feel free to experiment, make small mistakes and admit to them, and ask for help.
3. **Contributor Safety** – members feel safe to contribute their own ideas, without fear of embarrassment or ridicule. This is a more challenging state, because volunteering your own ideas can increase team members’ psychosocial vulnerability.
4. **Challenger Safety** – members can question others’ ideas, including those in authority, or suggest significant changes to ideas, plans, or ways of working.

While this is a four-stage linear model, applied to the non-linear experience of feeling psychologically safe, it can be useful in helping leaders understand that psychological safety is not a stop-start incident, but an ongoing dynamic that changes throughout a team’s journey.

#### **Building psychological safety in the workplace**

Feeling psychologically safe allows people to perform at their best whether they work from home or “at the office”. In extensive research across many industries, psychological safety is consistently cited as one of the strongest predictors of team performance, productivity, creativity, and innovation.

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## **Here are 7 Guidelines for creating psychological safety in the workplace:**

### **1. Establish the organisation's aim to instil psychological safety**

Educate employees about the need for psychological safety in the workplace and how it benefits individuals and the organisation. Explain what behaviour is acceptable in support of psychological safety. This will establish a foundation for how everyone in the organisation is expected to behave and interact with each other. And it highlights what behaviour will not be tolerated. Consider incorporating these policies directly into your company mission or core values and develop procedures to take action should an employee be in breach of acceptable conduct.

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### **2. Promote teams to speak up**

To build psychological safety in a work environment, managers need to create a safe space where team members feel comfortable and are encouraged to ask questions, suggest ideas, discuss concerns, ask for help, or offer constructive criticisms. During meetings, note which team members speak up. There may be employees who rarely contribute, and this could be due to a feeling of nervousness or embarrassment. Instead of awaiting their input, it can be helpful to prompt participation from every member of the team by asking open-ended questions, such as:

- Do you have any questions about this?
- Would anyone specifically like to lead this project?
- Who feels that they need help with their tasks this week?

*“To build psychological safety in a work environment, managers need to create a safe space where team members feel comfortable”*

### **3. Offer mental health resources**

Mental health issues such as anxiety and depression can directly and indirectly contribute to a lack of psychological safety at work. Many companies use an employee assistance programme (EAP) to support workplace mental health. To encourage employees to use an EAP the organisation can:

- promote that the EAP can be accessed confidentially and free of charge,
- offer this resource to employees and immediate family members,
- educate employees on how and where to access this mental health resource,

- provide access to mental health professionals online or in-person and be flexible in allowing employees to meet with an EAP during working hours.

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#### **4. Encourage team-building exercises and social events**

Research has shown that trust is even more important than competence when it comes to building a psychologically safe team. The better employees get along outside of work, the greater the chance there is that they will work well together. Managers can enrol team members in formal team-building exercises that foster trust or social activities outside of work – scheduling fun events and getting the team involved to serve together in a community project.

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#### **5. Foster an environment of constructive criticism**

Nobody likes criticism that is designed to make a person feel put down. However, constructive criticism can be a powerful tool that helps a manager to address performance issues while still ensuring an employee feels respected. In a team setting, encourage employees to give and receive constructive criticism that is about the work, not the person, and is respectful and helpful. Leaders should make sure they are also open to such feedback, so employees feel empowered to help their leaders improve and grow.

#### **6. Reward and recognise employees for their effort**

Letting employees know that their hard work is appreciated can go a long way to creating a culture of psychological safety as well as encouraging engagement. Recognising employees immediately, regularly and publicly for their specific accomplishments can have a far greater impact than waiting for an end-of-year event to give employee accolades. Make it organisational policy for your management to show regular recognition for employees’ efforts in going the extra mile and not just for their achievements. Celebrating small wins and successes together builds trust and fosters a culture of teamwork and appreciation.

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#### **7. Encourage risk-taking and innovation.**

Innovation is essential for any organisation that wants to stay ahead of the competition by adapting to changing customer needs and market trends. Yet, innovation generally involves taking risks throughout the process. Fostering a culture that supports and encourages these behaviors is not easy. To do so, avoid reprimanding employees for failure. Instead, encourage team members to take risks and innovate. Ensure everyone understands that failure is not a dead end, but rather an opportunity to learn – and celebrate the hard work of employees even when they fall short of reaching a goal.

Psychological safety leads to team members feeling more engaged and motivated, because they believe that their contributions matter and they are empowered to speak up without fear of retribution. It can lead to better work outcomes as people feel more comfortable voicing their opinions and concerns, which leads to a more diverse range of perspectives being heard and considered. It supports culture of continuous learning through the organisation as leaders and employees feel comfortable sharing their mistakes and learning from them.

**Sources:**

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