



A Workplace People Don't Need to Recover From:
Psychological Safety & Mental Wellbeing in the
Workplace

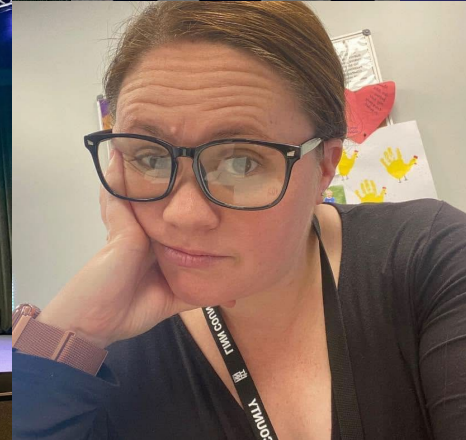
Learning Objectives

- Explain what psychological safety actually means and what the experts say it is, not just what we hope it means.
- Take an honest look at where their team falls, from “we can talk about hard things” to “everyone goes quiet when the boss walks in.”
- Recognize the everyday behaviors that help people feel safe or make them start drafting their resignation.
- Use practical tools to create a workplace where people can speak up, ask questions, admit mistakes, and disagree without fearing professional doom.

Who Am I?



No but
really...
who am I?





Who Are You?

Take 60 seconds and jot it down

Take 60 more seconds to tell someone



When Did Psychological Safety Enter the Chat



Psychological Safety 101



Psychological Safety 101

Psychological safety is the belief, in a group, that we are safe to take interpersonal risks. It's the belief that we are able to speak up with ideas, questions, concerns and mistakes, and that we won't suffer negative social or professional consequences as a result.

psychsafety.com

“iterum

Study of errors was...wrong?



Researching errors reported in different professions



Another researcher studied relationships between pilots and errors reported. Research found is what led to drastic changes in teams of people on an airplane.



Does better teamwork in the hospital lead to fewer errors?



Study included working with teams of nurses who would track errors; when error was determined, Amundson would interview everyone involved and work to find correlations



First subset of data came in with a correlation, but in the opposite direction as predicted: The higher performing teams had more errors reported, not less.

Now What?

- Questioned things about what specifically was different between the two teams and was it really tied to higher performance or something within the team?
- Doubt...Lots of Doubt
- Need for additional data to study and one question stuck out
 - “If you make a mistake in this unit, it won’t be held against you?”
- The more people believed that making a mistake would not be held against them, the higher the detected errors in their unit
- Performed a double -blind experiment with a neutral research assistant and found more statistically plausible connections to how “open” a team is
 - When people felt unable to reveal errors, many errors remained hidden
 - Better teams probably don’t make more mistakes, but they are more able to discuss mistakes.

The Beginning of Something Good

- Psychological Safety is born
- Started its own branch in Organizational Psychology



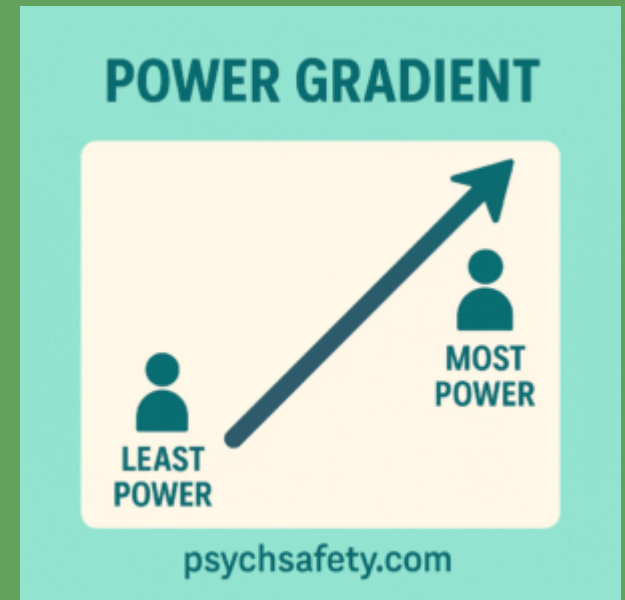
Should I say Something?

- One can't understand psychological safety without understanding why people stay silent
 - Decision to speak up = taking a calculated risk
 - Cost vs Risks
 - Four possible outputs:
 - Say the thing fully
 - Stay silent
 - **Soften and dilute what we meant to say**
 - Change it entirely to please the listener
 - Key to weighing the 4 options is really weighing one thing: Vulnerability
 - Positive Interpersonal Predictability: No one wants a vague sense of comfort, but enough confidence in how a group will respond to make the risk worth taking
 - Runs on data you already know
 - What happened to others when they did this
 - Norms of the group
 - Past experiences (even ones not directly connected to this scenario)

Understanding the Role of Hierarchy

Has this ever happened?

- Power gradient is critical
- Steeper the hierarchy = the higher risk in speaking out
- Greater the difference between the person with something to say and the person they need to say it to = the higher the risk
- History shows us power differentials suppress voices, which could cause large impact



Core Concepts of Psychological Safety

- When people within a group possess psychological safety, they can predict that others will react positively when they speak up, ask for help, admit a mistake, or challenge an idea.
- That positive predictability makes the risk feel worth taking because the better we can predict how a group will respond to us, the more willing we are to be honest within it.

What Psychological Safety Isn't



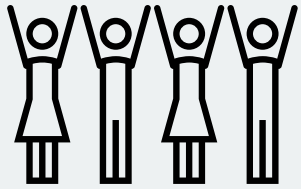
- It is not just being nice
- It is not just about making people comfortable
- It is not free of conflict and disagreements
- It is not something just handed down from leadership
 - It is both vertical and horizontal on the team
- It is not the same for everyone
 - The team is only as safe as the least safe person feels

What About Accountability?

- Errors categorized into three categories
 - Slips/ Lapses: small errors every human makes
 - Mistakes: decisions made but turned out wrong
 - Intentional Violations: ill intent
 - Culture of Accountability (Safe) responds proportionally to each differently (Learning and Just Consequences)
 - Culture of blame (Unsafe) treats them the same (People will cover instead of learn)

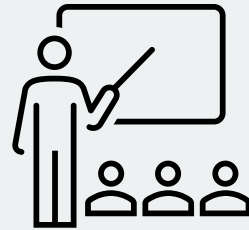
Psychological Safety does not mean you'll never experience anything that is uncomfortable but knowing accountability is fair, respectful, evidence based, and free of retaliation.

4 Stages Theory of Psychological Safety



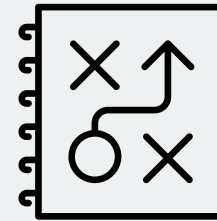
Inclusion Safety

Feel like you
belong to the
team



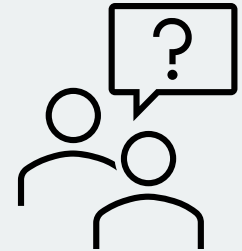
Learner Safety

Able to learn,
ask questions,
make mistakes
& ask for help



Contributor Safety

Can share their
own ideas
without
embarrassment



Challenger Safety

Can challenge
ideas and
suggest changes
to others (even
authority)

Pros and Cons of 4 Stages Theory

Pros

- Can show a team what can and should happen within a safe team
- Can show us when team members are experiencing different levels of safety
- Can show us that safety isn't binary, but a complex dynamic
- Creates simple language to discuss tangible situations that most teams understand

Cons

- Appears as a linear model to a non-linear concept
- Really aren't "stages" but "aspects" and one isn't more important than others
- Gives no emphasis to role experiences play

I still have questions.

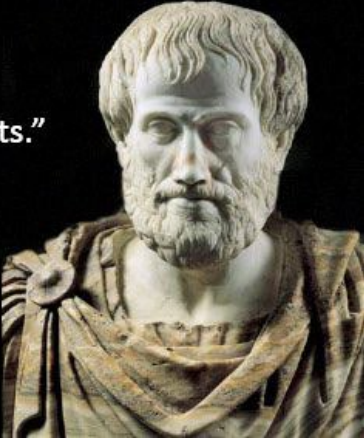
We should study it
some more.

1999-2012

Here Comes Google

“The whole is greater
than the sum of its parts.”

-Aristotle



Pivot from Academia to the Workplace

- Google’s Project Oxygen- looked at what made great managers/ leaders
- Julia Rozovsky- project to look at what made teams perform at high levels and be successful
- Goal: to identify patterns and behaviours within teams that led to high performance.
- Project set out to show that people achieve greater results working together than alone.
- Key part was to define “Team”
 - “Group of people who depend on each other to achieve a goal”

Project Aristotle

Methodology

- Spent two years studying 180 teams (115 Engineering & 65 Sales)
- Teams had 3-50 people (average: 9)
- Examined 250 team attributes
- Prediction: Recipe for a successful team would be a combination of high performers, an experienced manager and unlimited free resources

Data

- Quantitative metrics, such as sales performance data
- Qualitative evaluations of the teams by executives, managers and team members.
- Team composition – such as personality traits, interpersonal skills, and demographics
- Team dynamics, like what it feels like to work with teammates, influence team effectiveness.
- Double-blind interviews with leaders and existing survey data (annual employee engagement survey and Google's longitudinal study on work and life)
- Demographic variables such as tenure, level, and location were also collected.

Project Aristotle

Initial Findings

Four key factors that created a successful team:

Dependability, Structure and Clarity, Meaning, and Impact

BUT

Teams that scored highly in all these areas on these still showed large differences in performance

THEN

Researchers looked to other studies and found Dr. Amundson's research

Looked back at the 180 teams and found those who were highest performing were also those where team members felt comfortable expressing their thoughts and ideas openly, leading to more productive discussions and innovative solutions

Conclusion

High performing teams were the ones with greatest psychological safety

Project Aristotle

Implementation of Findings

- Goal: Create more psychologically safe environments by encouraging open communication, empathy and understanding
- Redirected their resources into making sure their 5 key factors were fostered in a team
- Creation of a [Team Effectiveness Discussion Guide](#)



↑ Scan me!

The Five Keys to Successful Teams

Google - Aristotle Project



[Google re:Work](#): Google's website with studies and documents to assist businesses



Psychological Safety & Mental Well-Being

Psychological Safety & Mental Well-Being



Psychological Safety is NOT Mental Well-Being

A belief that it's safe to take interpersonal risks vs being comfortable, healthy and happy at work

Connection: if you can raise issues and advocate for yourself without fear, it makes sense that you'll feel better, in large part because you can ask for support when you need it

2022 Study: Psychological safety significantly impacts overall wellbeing

Conclusion: Employees in psychologically safe environments were more motivated, positive, and satisfied with their work and personal lives BUT when they were struggling with well-being (mental health and substance use), they felt to be authentic and had no fear of normalizing asking for help for their struggles

Psychological Safety, Well-Being & Elite Athletes

- Sports Psychology explosion in 2000's
- Impact of mental health on high level productivity
- Recent dedication given towards Olympians and suicide risk
- “Weight of Gold”- HBO Documentary narrated by Michael Phelps
- Discusses suicide "epidemic" among Olympians
- Highlights the severe post-Olympic crash, financial stress, and lack of systemic mental health resources provided by Olympic committees

Athletes are
popular and
strong, right?

Why wouldn't they
speak up if they
were struggling?



Maybe, Perhaps?



"When he talks I'm like, what the hell is he saying and what is he trying to say man? I'm just sick of the whole Kyrie saga to be honest with you... and he's never going to grow up and be a man and say 'Hey, you know what, maybe I need to grow up and change myself.'"



Psychological Safety in Elite Sports

- Repeatedly shown that athletes in high-performance contexts are fearful that speaking openly about a mental health problem
 - Fears around de-selection, reduced perception of competence and toughness
- Many individuals in elite sport perceive that to disclose their mental ill-health = weakness or reduced “mental toughness” to those in positions of influence
- When athletes feel a need to hide their mental health problems, they may be less likely to receive adequate professional support.
- The need for a commitment in normalizing and supporting the mental health needs of all athletes and staff within elite sports environments
- Note: Concept of “mental toughness” is viewed as critical to success in elite sport but can be in competition with what good mental health is

2021 IOC Mental Health Toolkit for Elite Athletes

Goal: “Athletes are comfortable being themselves, can take necessary interpersonal risks, have the knowledge and understanding of mental health symptoms and disorders, and feel supported and comfortable in seeking help if needed”

incorporates aspects of mental health literacy, a critical underlying aspect that is necessary for individuals to recognize a need to both seek help and support others

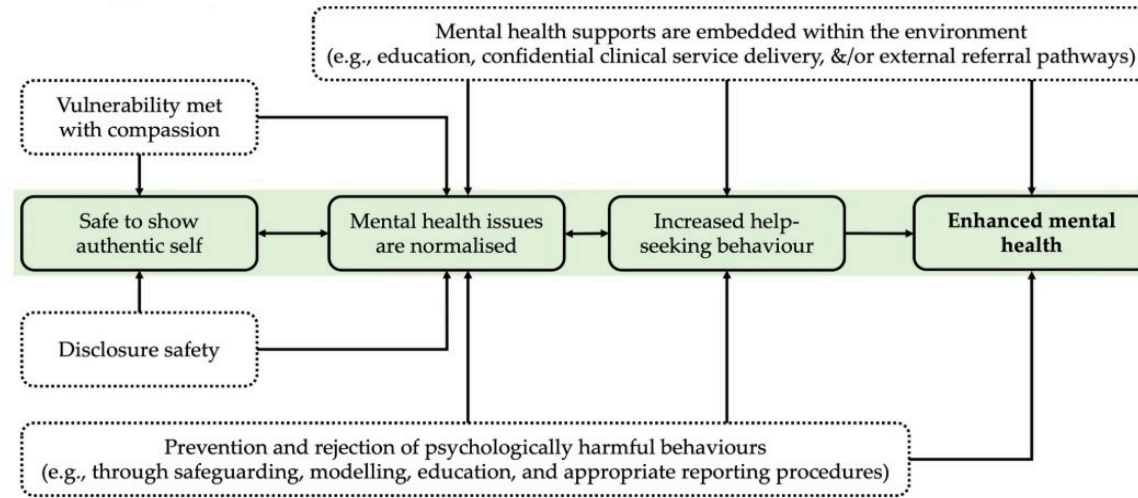
The Sport Psychological Safety Inventory - aims to identify an individual’s perceptions of their sports environment with regards to stigma towards mental ill-health and their capacity to identify and disclose mental health concerns to others within their sport

Goal of Tool: If sports organizations reinforce and promote environments which support safety around disclosures and management of mental ill-health, individuals will likely report better engagement with clinical services and subsequently mental health outcomes



Fig. 2

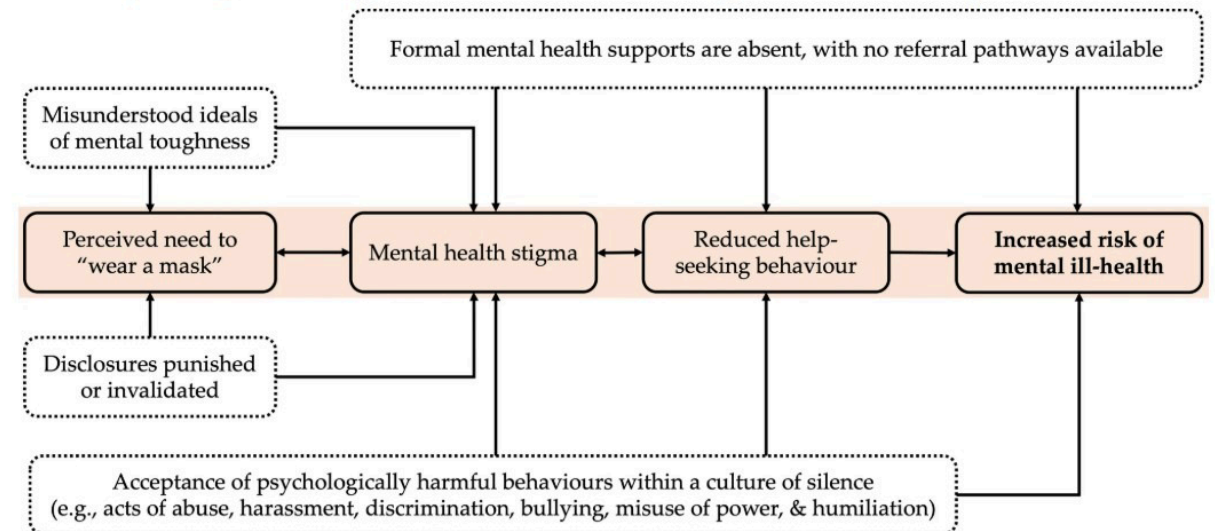
From: **Psychological Safety for Mental Health in Elite Sport: A Theoretically Informed Model**



Representation of a psychologically safe environment. Boxes within the central green area represent the primary process in which psychological safety contributes to mental health, with checked boxes indicating key cultural influencers

Fig. 1

From: **Psychological Safety for Mental Health in Elite Sport: A Theoretically Informed Model**



Representation of a psychologically unsafe environment. Boxes within the central red area represent the primary process in which psychological safety contributes to mental health, with checked boxes indicating key structural or cultural influencers

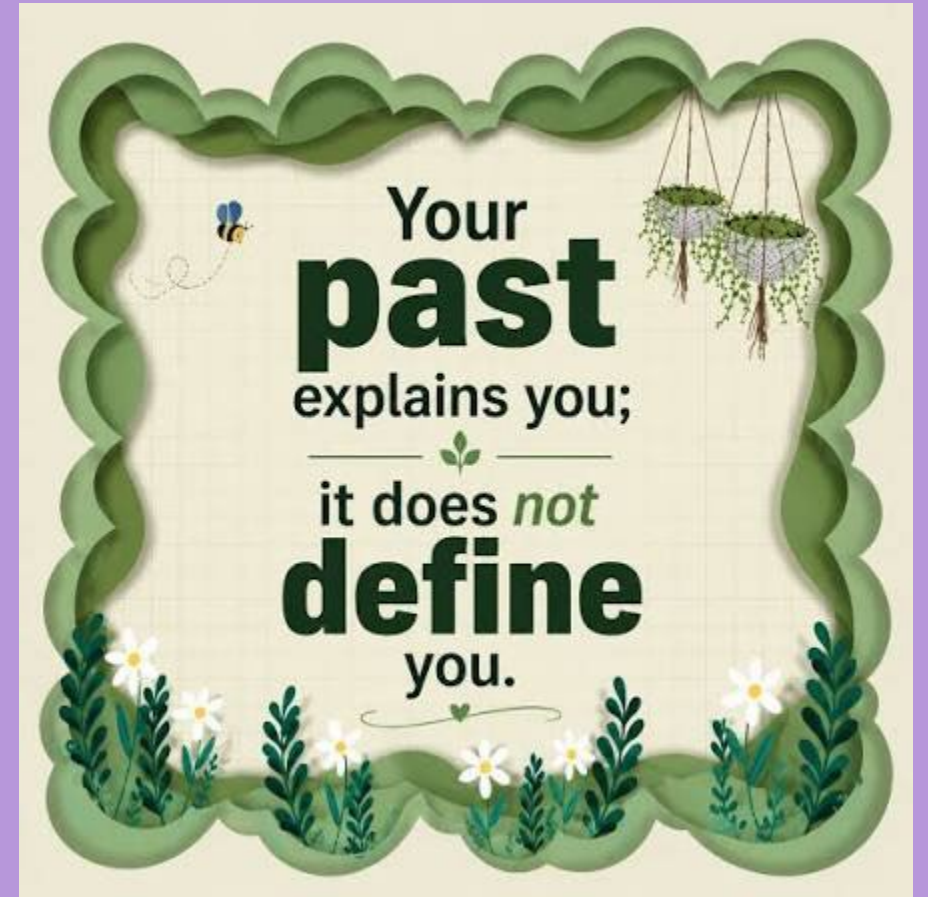
Core Concepts of Psychological Safety

- One can predict that others will react positively when they speak up, ask for help, admit a mistake, or challenge an idea
- Which makes the risk feel worth taking because the better we can predict how a group will respond to us, the more willing we are to be honest within it.
- Embedded throughout this model are concepts of autonomy, authenticity and open, honest communication
- These in turn support innovation, team cohesion and effectiveness
- Which are essential elements of sustained peak performance (both individual and team)



Sounds Great! Where Do We Start?

From a Leadership Role



What do you mean I have to look at me first?



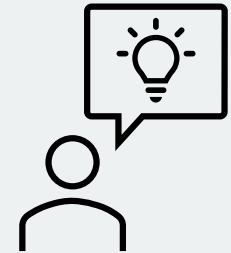
Aligning with
team



Shaped by
your past



Core Values
& Pressure



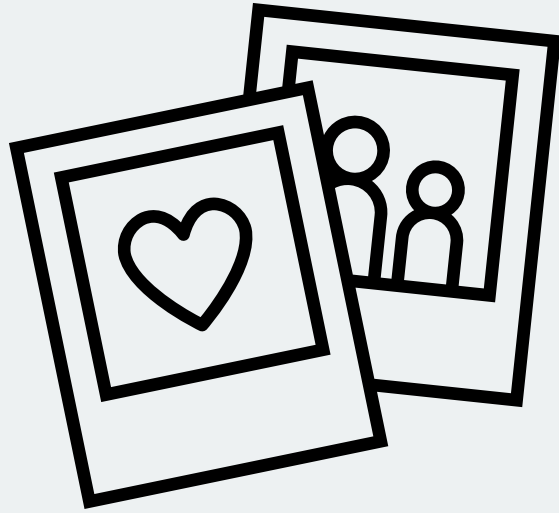
Beliefs Take
Shape



Aligning with your team

Starts with

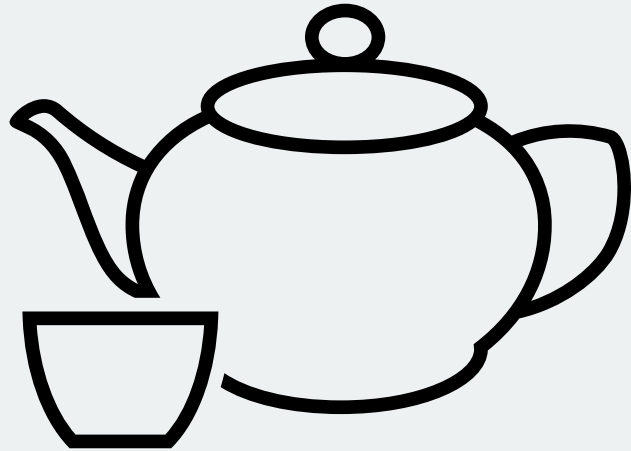
- Self-Awareness
- Values of team
- Beliefs of team
- Intentions
- Curiosity



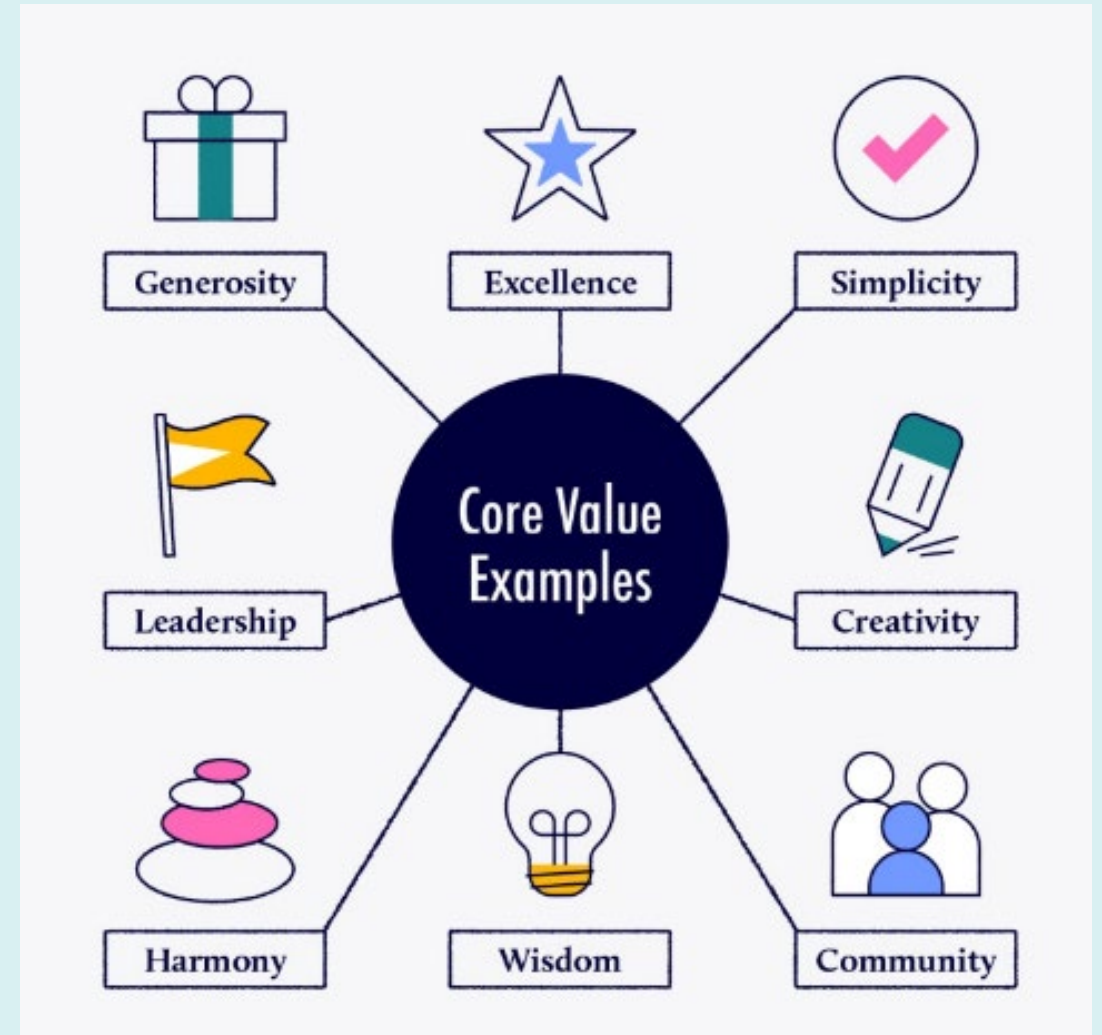
Shaped by your past

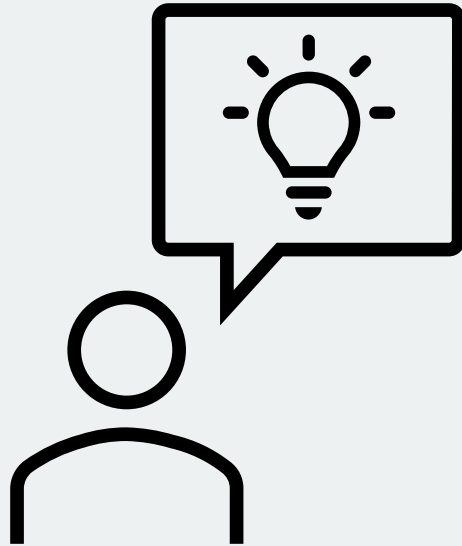
Ask yourself the following questions:

- What do my behaviors say about how I lead?
- What do I believe to be true about my team?
- How has my past affected any of this?



Core Values & Pressure





Beliefs Take Shape

Our beliefs are the foundation of our behaviors

If I believe...	I'm more likely to...
People really want to do well	Coach while correcting
Mistakes are a chance to learn and try again	Get all the information needed on a situation before jumping to conclusions
People need support AND accountability	Have high expectations but also strong relationships
Everyone should an opportunity to learn and succeed	Develop and empower through delegation and autonomy



Becomes



TEN WAYS TO FOSTER PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IN THE WORKPLACE

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01

Reduce power gradients

Lower the visible power or status gap between people in the group.



02

Establish shared norms

Create team/social contracts that clarify acceptable and unacceptable behaviours.



03

Listen effectively and give space

Expect, make space for and hear all voices, valuing their contributions.



04

Communicate with empathy

Make communicating clearly, intelligently and compassionately the norm.



05

Reward speaking up

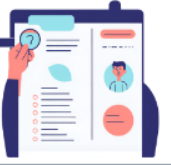
Emphasise the value of speaking up, ensuring it becomes natural.



06

Frame work as experiments

Encourage continuous improvement and learning through experimentation.



07

Use retrospectives and futurespectives

Review past incidents and imagine future scenarios to intentionally learn from work.



08

Address problematic behaviour

Uphold agreed boundaries, addressing persistent issues swiftly and firmly.



09

Embrace differences

Recognise that psychological safety doesn't look the same for everyone.



10

Accept human error as normal

Prioritise improving environments, tools, and systems over blaming individuals.



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These are based upon years of practice and research in teams and organisations around the world. Find out more at psychsafety.com

More Information for Leaders



Addressing
Problematic
Behavior &
Accountability



Embracing
Differences:

We don't
experience safety
the same



Ask A LOT of
Questions

But What Questions Do I Ask?

Questions to Discuss Psychological Safety

- Do you feel like you can share ideas or fears without consequences?
- Do you feel nervous about speaking up against something?
- Do you feel your input is valued?

Questions to Create Safe Conditions

- How would you feel more supported in meetings?
- What's a change we can make to make work feel safe?
- Are there things I can advocate on for you?
- If you were in charge, what would you change?

Questions to Build Trust

- How are things feeling at work lately?
- Are you struggling with anything specific?
- What does support look like for you?

Questions to Discuss Fear or Discomfort

- Are there things you feel like you have to “brace yourself” for at work?
- If something is wrong, are you afraid to say it?
- Are there experiences from your past that make you feel uncertain about doing these things?



If the comfort level is not there...

- [Edmundson Psychological Safety Survey & Resources](#)
- [Psychologically Safe Team Assessment & Workplace Strategies for Mental Health](#)



For the Leader & Team



What Can We Do Together?

To create psychological safety in the workplace, start by building self-awareness in your team.

Anonymous 7 Question Survey

On a score of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), rank the following

1. **Mistakes are held against you:** If you make a mistake on this team, it is often held against you. (Reverse-scored)
2. **Raising tough issues:** Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.
3. **Rejecting differences:** People on this team sometimes reject others for being different. (Reverse-scored)
4. **Safe to take risks:** It is safe to take a risk on this team.
5. **Difficult to ask for help:** It is difficult to ask other members of this team for help. (Reverse-scored)
6. **No deliberate undermining:** No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.
7. **Valued skills and talents:** Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized.

Scoring Guide

Flip the Reverse Scores: For Questions 1, 3, and 5, convert the raw answers using this simple rule: 5 becomes 1, 4 becomes 2, 3 stays 3, 2 becomes 4, 1 becomes 5

Calculate individual average for each team member

Calculate average for entire team for each question

Calculate average for entire team

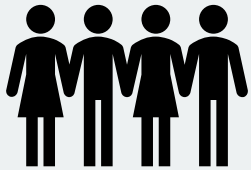
Scoring Guide:

4.0 to 5.0 (High Safety): The team feels comfortable taking risks, speaking up, and admitting errors. Focus on maintaining trust.

3.0 to 3.9 (Moderate Safety): The team is cautious. They might speak up occasionally but hold back on highly sensitive or controversial topics.

1.0 to 2.9 (Low Safety): A protective climate. Team members likely hide mistakes, avoid asking for help, and agree with the status quo to avoid conflict.

We are NOW Self-Aware

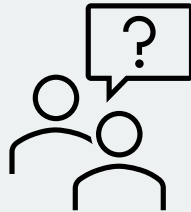


**Demonstrate that
you see individuals
as People**

Check in on them

Take interest in
them

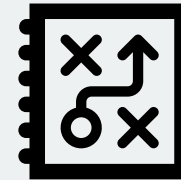
See them as their
whole selves, not an
employee



**Ask Questions to
instigate
conversation**

Wait for the
processors

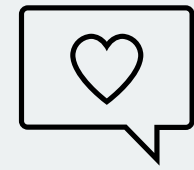
Train yourself to
pause and wait for
input



**Create multiple
ways for feedback to
occur**

Meetings, written,
anonymously, etc.

Being active and
open to different
ways shows you
actually care about
receiving it



**Show value and
appreciation for
ideas**

Create environment
where new ideas are
welcome

Don't need to act on
everyone, but thank
for contributions

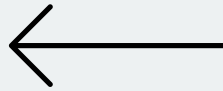
We are NOW Self-Aware



**Promote positive
dialogue and
discussion**

Word Changes:
Challenges =
Opportunities

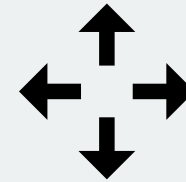
Affirmative
language studied to
increase motivation



**Clear Expectations,
information, and
commitments**

Team must trust you
and your word and
vice versa

Be accurate &
realistic



Explain changes

Give time to process
and ask questions

Positive outcome
directly tied to trust:
Trust Bank



Own mistakes

Failing is scary so
lead by example and
own mistakes

Show that mistakes =
learning opportunities

Show owning and
learning is better than
hiding and not fixing

Final Thoughts:
Let's Bring It Home

Final Thoughts: Let's Bring It Home



Saying sorry when
you mess up

Repairing is a
leadership skill



Brain needs
connection before
correction

Without it, your
brain won't problem
solve



Inconsistency
ruins any work
you put in.



Small Moments
=
Big Culture

Final Thoughts:
Let's Bring It
Home

Psychologically Safe Teams Experience

Open Communication: Members freely share half-formed ideas, ask questions, and raise difficult issues instead of hiding problems.

Vulnerability and Honesty: People admit mistakes early, allowing the team to treat failures as learning opportunities rather than reasons for blame.

Higher Innovation: Creativity thrives because divergent thinking and bold experiments are welcomed rather than silenced by groupthink.

Better Productivity: Energy goes into doing the work instead of wasting time on self-protection or managing interpersonal risk.

Greater Resilience: Teams recover from setbacks faster because problems can be discussed openly and fixed before turning into crises

Final Thoughts: Let's Bring It Home

Psychologically Safe Teams Experience

Genuine Collaboration: Team members build stronger interpersonal bonds, transforming from a group of coworkers into a cohesive, supportive community.

Optimistic Problem-Solving: Challenges are approached with a solution-oriented mindset rather than dread or frustration.

Increased Discretionary Effort: Happy employees are more engaged and willing to go the extra mile to support their teammates and clients because they feel valued.

Enhanced Customer Experience: Internal happiness is contagious. Teams that enjoy their workplace naturally provide more empathetic, high-quality service to external clients.

Healthy Work-Life Integration: Employees feel supported both in their professional roles and their personal lives, reducing burnout and emotional exhaustion.

Elevated Retention: People stick around. Employees who report being happy at work are significantly less likely to look for outside opportunities, saving companies heavy turnover costs.

Better Health Outcomes: Positive environments drastically lower chronic workplace stress, leading to fewer sick days and improved mental and physical well-being.

One Final
Request

“Prove It”



Thank you!

Erin Foster, MSOL

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Additional Resources Used & Referenced

Psych Safety by iterum: [Psychological Safety: Workplace Training, Online Workshops and Consultancy - Psych Safety](#)

Psychological Safety for Mental Health in Elite Sport: A Theoretically Informed Model: [Psychological Safety for Mental Health in Elite Sport: A Theoretically Informed Model | Sports Medicine | Springer Nature Link](#)

American Psychological Association: What is Psychological Safety at Work? – Dr. Verlezza: [What is psychological safety at work? Here's how to start creating it](#)

Tanager Meraki Institute of Learning: [Outreach | Tanager | Meraki Institute of Learning](#)