

Is Your Team Psychologically Safe?



By Erin C. Landis
Vice President, Publications
American Gastroenterological
Association

“Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.”

– Helen Keller

Let’s imagine two team-oriented scenarios.

On Team A, members are constantly jockeying for position. When new ideas are proffered, they are criticized and dissected. At team meetings, members often interrupt each other or talk over one another. Sometimes there are side conversations. The team leader often demonstrates poor emotional control, and everyone is afraid to make mistakes.

On Team B, exchanges by team members are warm and friendly. During team meetings, discussions occur in conversational turn-taking, and members demonstrate good listening behavior by making eye contact and leaning toward the speaker. New ideas are received positively, and opinions and feedback are welcome. The team’s leader is direct and calm. There is no blame for mistakes or errors.

I’d wager to bet that most, if not all, of you reading this article would prefer to be on Team B. Team B is a perfect illustration of an environment that promotes and demonstrates psychological safety—a concept that is taking the business world by storm. Teams of all sizes, in organizations of all types, are beginning to explore the value of psychological safety. Given that most of us in the scholarly publishing profession work in some configuration of a team (or teams, in some cases), this article aims to provide you with a basic understanding of the power of psychological safety. Teams in our world can comprise co-workers, editors, vendors, consultants, publishers. These relationships present an opportunity to practice psychological safety.

What Is Psychological Safety?

In 1990, a professor of organizational behavior at Boston University’s School of Management, Dr. William A. Kahn, published a paper on the psychological conditions that lead to engagement and disengagement at work. In his article, he defines psychological safety as “The shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking and that members have the ability to show and employ one’s self without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status, or career.”¹

He also explains that in psychologically safe teams, members feel accepted and respected. His and others’ research have shown that team members want to share new ideas to improve outcomes but often are afraid to speak up for fear of being harshly judged. However, in teams where psychological safety is present, team members don’t focus on the negative consequences of sharing new ideas. Instead, they share thoughts and opinions freely and are motivated to improve their team or organization.

The Science Behind Psychological Safety

Kahn’s research on psychological safety in the early 1990s was the catalyst for a deluge of follow-up research throughout the subsequent decades. Perhaps the most well-known scientist in the field is Dr. Amy Edmonson, who is the Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School. In her 1999 landmark study published in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Edmonson defined psychological safety as “The shared belief amongst individuals as to whether it is safe to engage in interpersonal risk-taking in the workplace.”² After studying 51 work teams in a manufacturing company, she concluded that team psychological safety is closely linked to learning behavior—in other words, safety and supportiveness allows team members to accept error and thus enhance their ability to learn.

Later research also supports Edmonson’s findings about learning behavior. In 2010, a research group led by Ludwig Bstieler from the University of New Hampshire focused on the need for psychological safety in teams engaged in new product development (NPD).³ They examined 50 collaborative NPD projects with interorganizational teams—these teams often faced challenges because of vastly different

corporate cultures. Bstieler's group found that these challenges could be mitigated by improved learning behavior, which was facilitated by a psychologically safe environment. Ultimately, where such environments existed, teams were significantly more successful in their NPD outcomes.

Improved learning behavior isn't the only positive result of psychologically safe teams. Research has also shown benefits for communication and knowledge sharing as well. For example, in a study examining virtual communities at a major university, Zhang *et al.* found that psychological safety has a positive effect on members' intention to share knowledge.⁴ In other words, when people feel safe and free from the potential of negative recrimination, they are more likely to trust others and share information.

Perhaps most striking of the research, however, are the findings that psychological safety improves performance and cultivates positive employee attitudes. A study by Markus Baer and Michael Frese at the University of Giessen in Germany showed that employees' perceptions of psychological safety were strongly and positively related to organizational performance.⁵ Further, research from groups at the College of Public Administration in China and the University of Nebraska found that employees who believe they work in a psychologically safe environment are more likely to have positive attitudes toward work and teamwork.^{6,7}

The Whole Is Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts

How did psychological safety move from academic research in organizational behavior to the mainstream business world? We have Google to thank for that. In 2012, Google decided it wanted to build the perfect team and hence launched an immense, multi-year project to achieve that goal. Why was Google so focused on building the perfect team? Because they know, as many other successful organizations know, that effective teams have many advantages over employees working independently. Teams tend to innovate faster, see mistakes more quickly, find better solutions to problems, and increase profitability for an organization.

Coined "Project Aristotle" after the Greek philosopher's famous quote, "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts," Google launched its quest by studying over 180 teams within its organization. Project Aristotle comprised statisticians, organizational psychologists, sociologists, and engineers. After conducting hundreds of interviews, generating elaborate mapping, and collecting a whole host of data, the team was rather stumped—no patterns had emerged showing any particular mix of personalities, backgrounds, or skills that determined the level of a team's effectiveness.

Instead, what *had* emerged was the importance of psychological safety. In their research, teams that showed empathy, engaged in conversational turn-taking, and didn't fear recrimination felt as though they operated in psychologically safe environments, which maximized their effectiveness as a team (Figure 1).

How Can Your Team Become Psychologically Safe?

It's one thing to know what psychological safety is and it's another to make it a part of your team. What are the ways you can encourage psychological safety on *your* team? Here's a brief review of the journey I led for the executive management team at my organization.

Benchmark and build awareness

For the first step in instilling a sense of psychological safety on my team, I asked my team members to take a brief survey to benchmark the level to which they felt taking risks on the team was safe. I used the survey instrument that Edmonson used in her 1999 article mentioned earlier.² After collating the responses, I held a session with the team where I introduced the concept of psychological safety. To supplement the information I shared, I also played a [TED Talk by Edmonson](#). We then reviewed the results of the survey and discussed the areas where we needed improvement.

Connection

In the next phase of our journey, I asked everyone to complete personal maps—the gist of this exercise was for everyone to share details about themselves using a word map. Categories included hobbies, family, education, past jobs, *etc.* A [short video by Management 3.0](#) nicely illustrates how to create a personal map. Once everyone had completed their maps, we then took turns sharing each other's maps. Even though many of us have worked together for several

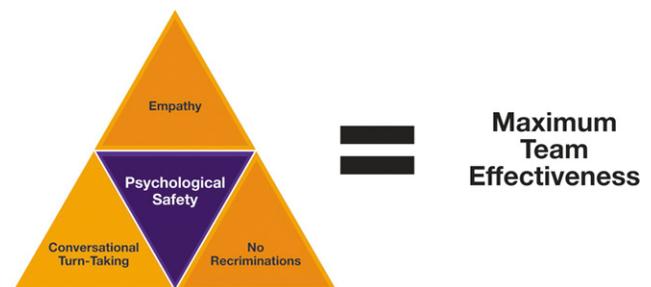


Figure 1. Psychological safety.

years, we learned new things and connected on levels previously untapped. The outcome of this exercise was that we built a foundation of connection and trust—two factors that are essential to creating an environment of psychological safety.

Review psychologically safe behaviors

To really turn this concept of psychological safety into something very practical the team could use on a routine basis, we used a [list of psychologically safe behaviors](#) created by Google to identify areas on our team where we were strong and areas where we needed improvement. For example, we discovered that as a team we were fairly good at demonstrating engagement such as asking questions, making eye contact, and responding verbally. However, we struggled with being routinely inclusive—for example, we didn't always step in when team members spoke negatively of each other. After reviewing the behaviors that promote a psychologically safe environment, we each committed to practice at least one behavior we each personally felt needed improvement.

Practice vulnerability

As the final step of the process, and perhaps the most challenging for my team, we discussed the cornerstone of psychological safety—vulnerability. To convey to the team the power of vulnerability, both in work and in life in general, we watched a [TED Talk by Brené Brown](#), one of the foremost experts on the subject. Brown defines vulnerability as “The courage to show up and be seen, even if it means risking failure, hurt, shame, and possibly even heartbreak.” In a talk she gave for a LinkedIn event, she explains that there is true value in being vulnerable at work—when people are vulnerable, they demonstrate and encourage trust, foster open and nonjudgmental communication, and fuel strong relationships. All of this collectively leads to greater organizational success. For our final exercise, my team practiced being vulnerable with each other by sharing one big worry or anxiety we were currently experiencing at work. This was by no means easy to do—it required a tremendous amount of trust. Surprisingly, everyone was frank and forthcoming—and truthfully, relieved. It was as though, when given the opportunity to be vulnerable and essentially “human,” we all felt an enormous weight lifted off our shoulders. We even did a little

problem solving with the various worries and anxieties we heard. The exercise was such a success that we committed to having a “worry/anxiety check-in” every quarter.

Henry Ford once said, “Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.” This quote perfectly encapsulates the value, yet challenge, of working as a team. While the benefits of teamwork are obvious, how to work successfully as one isn't always. With the knowledge of psychological safety and how it can provide a safe environment for your team to flourish, perhaps you're one step closer to following in Google's footsteps to creating the perfect team.

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