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Career Compass No. 69: Psychological Safety: The One Key Determinant of Team Effectiveness

To determine what made great teams, Google undertook "Project Aristotle," and found that the key determinant of team effectiveness is "psychological safety."

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I'm a team leader of a group in charge of the design and construction of a new multifunctional public safety building. This new public facility is a major priority for the city council and our organization. My team leadership responsibility is a significant assignment for me.

The project team is very diverse with members from public works, planning, finance, police and fire, and community services departments, as well representatives from the design and construction firms. I find that the team has problems generating creative solutions. In addition, I have noticed that several members of the team are somewhat timid about stating their views. We sometimes make decisions that are not well-informed by the diverse expertise and perspectives of everyone on the team. We then have to backtrack or reverse the decision after we experience an on-the-ground problem.

As the team leader, what can I do to help make this multifunctional team more effective?

We in local government often rely on diverse multidepartment or multifunctional teams because the big challenges (climate protection, homelessness, gangs, economic vitality, a major capital project) cannot be addressed in department silos. Therefore, we typically utilize multifunctional teams involving different department representatives and often outside partners. The problem is that the performance of these teams is often sketchy.

This issue of team effectiveness confounds all sectors. To determine what made great teams, Google undertook "Project Aristotle." (Google named the project after Aristotle because of his famous quotation "the sum is greater than its parts.") This massive research project analyzed 200+ factors from 180 active teams across Google. The key determinant of team effectiveness was "psychological safety." (See Julia Rozovski, *re:Work*, "The 5 Keys to a Successful Google Team," Nov 17, 2015.)

What is "psychological safety"?

Psychological safety in a team is when group members feel safe to express themselves. In a team characterized by psychological safety, team members

- Feel that they can give voice to their ideas and perspectives without fear of reprisal or rebuke.
- Believe that if they make a well-intentioned mistake, others won't penalize them or think less of them.

Psychological safety allows team participants to regard mistakes and failures as pathways to learning and growth and better performance over time.

In teams that are safe, group members demonstrate "social sensitivity." People are sensitive to each other's moods and share personal experiences, emotions, and stories.

Why is psychological safety so important?

Psychological safety is the key determinate of team effectiveness for several reasons. First, without psychological safety, the team cannot fully leverage the diverse knowledge and expertise from the different team members or benefit from their unique experiences. Safety allows for synergy.

Second, in an environment of fear, there is very little creativity, which is required to address complex challenges.

Finally, people want to bring their authentic selves to work. If people don't feel safe to express who they are, what they feel, and what they believe should happen, it is a limiting personal, as well as professional, experience, and certainly not very exhilarating.

As a leader, how can you promote psychological safety?

If you accept the research that psychological safety is the key determinate of team effectiveness, then the leadership challenge is how do you promote a sense of safety on a daily basis and help your team do the same.

Here are nine approaches for promoting safety:

1. *Listen and acknowledge what a team member is saying, even if you don't agree*

If group members feel that they are being heard, they will tend to be open to the give-and-take of a team conversation and are more likely to accept a decision that may not be perfectly aligned with their idea. Most important, team participants who are heard are more likely to contribute in the future.

2. *Ask catalytic questions*

Leadership is often more about questions than answers. Appropriate open-ended questions will prompt diverse responses and ideas from the group. Provocative questions include:

- What does success look like?
- How might we. . .? (for example, "how might we design this space to encourage community interaction?")
- What else could we do?
- What is a completely different approach to this problem?
- What are we missing?
- How would a community group react to this design proposal?
- How are you feeling about this conversation?

3. *Demonstrate curiosity*

As a leader, you need to display a "curious mind." After someone offers an idea, you might say "tell me more," or "what's your personal or professional value that is generating this idea?"

4. *Be open to the conversation and demonstrate a willingness to be changed by the conversation*

In an authentic conversation, we are open to the dialogue and are willing to be changed by the conversation (see Career Compass #61 "Leadership Is the Art of Conversation"). If our views are not open to modification, it is not an authentic conversation. It is just people talking.

5. *Focus on learning, not convincing*

If we look at team discussions as opportunities to learn from each other (as opposed to opportunities to convince each other), our conversations will better leverage and incorporate different areas of expertise, and thus lead to more creative problem-solving.

In these conversations, it is essential to avoid seeking the "buy-in" of others. Seeking buy-in is manipulative. Even if you have a great idea, if you seek buy-in, people will resist. Instead, try to incorporate some element of everyone's good ideas and thus get their "fingerprints" on the end-solution.

Most significantly, these learning discussions will create psychological safety over time.

6. *Share some of yourself*

People will follow you (or decide not to follow you) based on their relationship and connection to you. People are choosing in every interaction whether to be influenced by you. If you share yourself (some of your family life, hobbies and interests, hopes, and values), then others are more likely to do the same. Relationships are created by everyone sharing and caring about other team members.

To build rapport, come early to the team meeting and stay after the meeting in order to interact informally with group representatives from the different departments and outside firms. In addition to sharing information about yourself, you can ask questions about their families, recent vacations or hobbies.

Another activity to build relationships is to start any meeting with a "take 5" segment. Before you get into the work agenda, encourage people to share some non-work information or experience so everyone gets to know each other.

7. *Show vulnerability*

If you want team members to express their views, especially divergent opinions, you are asking them to be vulnerable. The best way for the leader to promote vulnerability is to model that behavior. To model vulnerability in the workplace, you can say to the group:

- "I don't know."
- "I blew it."
- "I need your help."
- "I'm fearful."
- "I trust you."

(See Career Compass No. 32: The Power of Vulnerability.)

8. *Celebrate flops*

To promote psychological safety, it is useful to celebrate well-intentioned mistakes or failures. As long as people are committed to excellence, mistakes are accepted, and, in fact, embraced because they are used for learning. To honor "good" mistakes, some teams or organizations celebrate "fabulous flops." Celebrating mistakes sends a strong message to team members that it is expected that everyone takes smart risks and makes periodic mistakes, and it is safe to do so. (See Career Compass No. 18: Taking Smart Risks.)

9. *Debrief everything*

The best way to focus on learning is to debrief all experiences as the team progresses. For example, your team may propose a different design for the community space at the public safety building based on several community stakeholder meetings. After the experience, the team must then debrief the effort:

- What went well?
- What did not go so well?
- What do we learn for our future practice as a team?

Habitual debriefings not only create learning but they promote psychological safety.

If the experience may be of interest beyond your team (such as a civic engagement experience), the group might want to share the written debrief findings with other city teams, city management, and even the city council. Again, sharing your post-action reports within the organization promotes learning and furthers an even wider sense of safety.

Over time, your group becomes a learn-it-all (not a know-it-all) team.

How can you help other team members promote a safe environment?

As the team leader, you have the responsibility to take the initiative and experiment with some of the steps suggested above to create a sense of safety. However, everyone must contribute to building psychological safety in the group.

One way to engage others in furthering this goal is to share with the team the research on psychological safety and discuss the importance of creating a safe environment. To build on that discussion, you may want to first help the group discuss and formulate a set of team norms and make explicit the norm of psychological safety. For instance, possible team norms could include:

- Leverage the knowledge, expertise, and experiences of the different team members to fulfill our team's goals.
- Promote learning as we go.
- Take smart risks.
- Celebrate progress along the way.
- Support each other as we do the work.
- Hold each other accountable.
- Promote psychological safety in the team.

Then all the team members can refer to the norms as the group conducts discussions and makes decisions.

Second, you may also wish to appoint on a rotating basis a team "culture monitor" to assess how the team is working. To jumpstart a periodic conversation about how the team is doing its work, the monitor can report on his or her observations about how the group is living its norms and how team members can enhance their behaviors going forward.

Third, before a decision-making meeting, you might want to designate a team member who prepares and presents a divergent view so the group can consider a completely different solution to the consensus approach.

Fourth, when you engage the group in generating ideas, you might also want to start with the least influential or least involved team member to ensure that he or she gets the opportunity to suggest an idea.

Fifth, in trying to generate creative ideas, you can engage the group in round-robin brainstorming. Everyone must submit an idea on a card to solve a design or construction problem. The card is passed to the next person in the group who adds to the idea or otherwise comments on the proposed solution. The card goes around the team until it returns to the group member who reports on the original idea plus all the comments. This approach stimulates divergent thinking and builds on the ideas of others.

Finally, to stimulate a learning orientation, the team can decide to make a habit of presenting a learning report at the beginning of each meeting. A group member may be designated in advance on a rotating basis to briefly share a relevant article, a key learning from a workshop or seminar, or a recent professional or personal experience with relevance to the group.

Why does promoting safety require humility?

To model behaviors promoting psychological safety (focusing on learning, demonstrating curiosity, showing vulnerability, sharing yourself), the leader must be humble. To test your humility, ask yourself:

- Do I tend to think more like a soldier or a scout? (A soldier's job is to defend; a scout's is to explore and discover.)
- Would I rather be right, or would I rather understand?
- Do I solicit and seek out opposing views?
- Do I enjoy the "pleasant surprise" of discovering I'm wrong?

(These and other provocative questions are suggested by Warren Berger in his newly released *The Book of Beautiful Questions*.)

Achieving safety

All the research suggests that more diverse teams (including members of different ethnicities, ages, genders, life experiences) have the *potential* to be more creative in solving problems. The challenge is that this diversity will not produce more effective and creative teams if there is no psychological safety in the group.

To promote psychological safety, team leaders can help

- Set team norms and refer to them in the course of the work.
- Model curiosity and vulnerability.
- Ask catalytic questions.
- Stimulate learning.
- Celebrate well-intentioned mistakes and failures along the way.

Successful leaders do not just provide clarity about team direction. They also must draw from team members creative ideas and solutions as the group struggles along the way. To accomplish this leadership task, leaders must create a sense of safety.

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