A leadership approach to psychological safety

Jenny McDonald, Director at Continuum Consulting Group, explores psychological safety and what role leaders can play to ensure teams are supported.

The term 'psychological safety' has become familiar in organisations, and the concept has become increasingly important during these times of a changing world, with impacts on individuals and teams. But what does it really mean, and how can we ensure our people experience high levels of it?

Amy Edmondson, the Harvard academic who coined the term, defines it as:

"Being able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status or career. It can be defined as a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. In psychologically safe teams, team members feel accepted and respected."

Why is it important for organisations?

Google undertook an extensive internal research project, called Project Aristotle, to determine the main elements of highly effective teams at Google. To the surprise of the researchers, the top-rated element was psychological safety, before any of the more traditional elements.

1	**Psychological Safety** Team members feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other.
2	**Dependability** Team members get things done on time and meet Google's high bar for excellence.
3	**Structure & Clarity** Team members have clear roles, plans, and goals.
4	**Meaning** Work is personally important to team members.
5	**Impact** Team members think their work matters and creates change.

re:Work

How do we build Psychological S.A.F.E.T.Y™?

Psychological S.A.F.E.T.Y™ is determined by how we experience the world, and this begins with our brains. From a mix of life experience and upbringing, we decide what is safe and what poses a potential threat. Our brains have five times more threat circuitry than reward circuitry – a legacy from the days when physical danger was a more likely and immediate challenge than in today's world.

Work from the Academy of Brain-based Leadership has identified six domains that influence people's Psychological S.A.F.E.T.Y™.

Each of us has a unique mix of triggers and rewards that we bring to our interactions with colleagues. A Psychological S.A.F.E.T.Y™ threat can create as strong a response as a physical threat, just on an internal level, so it might not be obvious to people around us.

S.A.F.E.T.Y.™ MODEL

SECURITY Our need for predictability:
• Consistency
• Commitment
• Certainty
• (No) Change

AUTONOMY Our need to feel we have control over our environment, and have choices

FAIRNESS Our need to engage in and experience fair exchanges, both to us and to others

ESTEEM Our need to be regarded highly, derived by how we:
• See ourselves
• Compare ourselves to others
• Think others see us

TRUST Our social need to belong to and protect our 'tribe'

YOU Factors unique to 'you':
• Your personality profile
• Your biases
• How you are influenced
• Your context (past, present, future)

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How can the leader support the team in being psychologically safe?

A team discussion about these domains and how our own profile affects our wellbeing at work will let people have robust discussions about ways to decrease negative psychological impacts and maximise the benefits from all team members feeling they are safe to contribute and feel valued, which in turn enhances team decision-making and effectiveness.

One of the first organisational conditions for Psychological S.A.F.E.T.Y™ across the team is team leader behaviour: how does the leader demonstrate openness and appreciation of all views? The role of the leader can both demonstrate and support psychologically safe work practices and conversations.

By way of starting a team discussion and identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the current level of psychological safety factors, the following simple quiz, if completed by members of the team using a 1–5 rating scale, will inform where the team conversation needs to start.

1. If you make a mistake on this team, it is often held against you.

2. Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.

3. People on this team sometimes reject others for being different.

4. It is safe to take a risk on this team.

5. It is difficult to ask other members of this team for help.

6. No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.

7. Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilised.

Source: Amy Edmondson

Discussing the responses to each of these items, coupled with an understanding of the team members' personal S.A.F.E.T.Y™ drivers, will lead to the ability to identify and agree the collective role in making work a place where psychological safety is taken as seriously as physical safety, for both the wellbeing of individuals and the team as a whole. Giving everyone a chance to feel safe and to contribute fully creates a place for greater contribution to the effectiveness of the organisation.

Jenny McDonald is Director of Continuum Consulting Group. If you are interested in learning more then please go to **https://ablsafety.com/**. If you are interested in getting a high-level S.A.F.E.T.Y profile for yourself then please call Jenny 021 499 3320.