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How to Influence Psychological Safety from the Bottom Up

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Midjourney

When your leaders think they're providing psych safety, but they're not, how can we have that conversation?

The notion of psychological safety in the workplace has gained a welcome rise in prominence over recent years. It's a regular topic of conversation for business leaders who see it as an essential soft-skill learning experience, and most importantly, understand its connection to nurturing cohesive and high-performing teams.

But what does psychological safety look like in the day-to-day?

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Though we may be filled with good intentions to build a base of trust and offer a safe workplace, are we actually getting it right?

The truth is our success is likely to be situational. Even in mostly psychologically safe work cultures, we might not be 100% there. For instance, a team leader might make us feel safe to speak up on a range of topics, but there may also be certain areas that we know are completely off-limits. This can be confusing and complex to navigate.

And then there are the even more challenging scenarios, where a team leader truly believes they are nurturing a culture in which others can speak up, but in fact, no one in their team or organisation feels that way.

So, as a team member, how do you influence from the bottom up, to help build a safe space? And as a team leader, what signs should you look out for that indicate your team isn't feeling as psychologically safe as you think they are?

Psych Safety For Team Leaders

If your team is not feeling safe enough to share honest feedback, then no amount of asking them will unlock their honest opinions. The way to the truth of how people are thinking and feeling is through building trust. Key ways to demonstrate that you are trustworthy are:

- Setting an example of being a good listener
- Over-indexing on compassion
- Demonstrating you are a self-aware human by sharing some of your vulnerabilities
- Being a genuinely curious and generous mentor

This will "show" your team that you care and that you want to understand. Only then will they feel confident to risk failing or speaking up about their concerns. Don't equate their silence with a sense that all is fine. Consistently and assiduously work

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on your inclusivity.

Psych Safety For Team Members

Yet even with the best intentions, leaders can be blind to how their team is feeling underneath the daily work exchanges. So, as a team member, what do you do if you find yourself in a team with a leader who's just not picking up on the subtext?

Influencing up is a useful and empowering skill and by becoming an advocate for communication you can create agency. So here are some tips to help you promote psychological safety in your team.

Practice:

- framing — so much of what we say is impacted by how we frame our conversations. This means taking time to prepare how we introduce a topic, being curious, suspending judgment, and inviting diverse opinions. We can set this example for our leaders by using these recommended cues with colleagues: **Begin with a "maybe statement"** i.e., *"Maybe* … something else could be true; **Name what we observe** — *"I notice…", "I observe…", "It seems…" or "I've heard…"*; and **Ask questions *such as*** "What do you think?" or "How do you see it?"

Advocate for:

- feedback loops to allow different perspectives to be heard, such as anonymous employee surveys, access to an anonymous suggestion inbox, and peer-to-peer feedback platforms

Seek out:

- one-on-one sessions with your manager — in a one-on-

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one situation, a leader will feel less put on the spot if you provide feedback or suggestions on creating a more trusting work environment

Keep in mind that psychological safety isn't just about making people feel ok for the sake of it. It can be crucial to the safe and effective operation of an organisation. Take the recent case of the Queensland Forensic DNA Laboratory. A psychologically unsafe culture led to a catastrophic failure of the system, and the need to re-examine 40,000 samples from thousands of crimes.

Physical safety, well-being, integrity, reputation, and quality control can all be at risk when we're afraid to speak up. As a leader, welcoming a variety of inputs means relinquishing our expert mindset, embracing humility, and leveraging the incredible power of diversity.

It's a superpower!

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