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“I’m here to get it right and not be right”

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Midjourney

Building safe workplaces

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In a poll run by RightTrack, a UK-based people consultancy, 55% of people said they were too scared to talk about diversity and inclusion in the workplace because they feared saying the wrong thing. And many more are saying this behind closed doors to their colleagues and mentors.

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When we speak to leaders about psychological and cultural safety, we often see this slight hesitation in their eyes. While there is overwhelmingly a belief that these qualities are essential for our teams and organisations, we hear people are worried about fumbling it with their teams. People say: “What if I say the wrong thing?” or “I am worried this might come off the wrong way?” It all seems too hard, and for this reason, it quickly falls down the priority list.

So, what do these concepts mean and how do we combat this prevalent feeling?

Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is defined as “a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes and that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking.”

At its essence, psychological safety is the sense that you *can* speak up. This sense enables a huge array of pro-team and organisational outcomes, including problem-solving, cohesion and connection, and better safety outcomes. Psychological safety is encouraged by cultivating qualities such as trust, a feedback culture, and leadership vulnerability.

Cultural Safety

Cultural safety can be defined as “the environment, relationships, and systems that enable individuals to feel safe, valued and able to participate in and enable their culture, spiritual and beliefs systems, free from racism and discrimination.”

The term was first developed in the context of healthcare in New Zealand and a concern that some healthcare being offered to M?ori people risked diminishing or demeaning their cultural identity and their wellbeing. Subsequently, the National

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Collaboration Centre for Indigenous Health in Canada identified several incremental levels that culminate in cultural safety:

> Cultural awareness ? Cultural sensitivity ? Cultural competency ? Cultural safety

This continuum illustrates that cultural safety requires more than just understanding other cultures but actually having the competence to best support and empower different cultures in your work. Cultural safety comes through education, empowerment, and inclusive practices.

Putting it Into Practice

While these are two distinct concepts, there is an overlap. Both require high levels of inclusivity, giving people a voice and creating the space for them to be themselves. And both see leaders sometimes a bit unsure and uncomfortable in where to concentrate their energies — but we know they are critical. Cultural safety enables diversity and makes people feel safe and recognised both in the workplace and as clients or customers. Psychological safety is a significant predictor of team performance.

Part of the hesitation for leaders addressing each of these areas is because these are highly charged topics in the modern workplace. Leaders' fear of getting it wrong means sometimes that they don't broach these topics at all. It might feel awkward or potentially embarrassing. Even worse, it might lead to a negative experience for a team member.

But it's absolutely essential that leaders don't let these concerns paralyse them. Rather than seeing it as "all too hard", try putting in place one or two measures in your inclusive practice each month. Test and learn — see what works.

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Consider the following practices on your path to *"… getting it right and not being right"*:

State your intentions upfront — tell your team what you are trying to achieve. People respond to honesty, good intentions, and effort.

> Examples: State that one of your goals for the team is to improve on psychological/cultural safety and outline your vision for potential next steps

Bring in diverse voices and perspectives — your first port of call is to get people involved in the process. Speak to friends, colleagues, and your team to understand what they want and need and what's the best way forward. Bring in subject matter experts on cultural and psychological safety. These are all critical information points to assist you in getting to the best course of action you can (rather than some sort of 'perfect' one)

> Examples: Sketch out a listening strategy to start you off and look at ways you can consult broadly

Be an ally — Being an ally is important both for creating substantive change and for signaling to your team that they are supported and welcomed. Spend time educating yourself on the concerns of diverse groups, advocate against (or eliminate!) barriers to inclusion, and speak publicly about the importance of others doing the same.

> Examples: Read DE&I literature, listen to diverse colleagues and friends and sponsor DE&I causes within the organisation

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Create the space for people — give people the space to be themselves through the levers available to you, such as inviting feedback, allowing flexibility, and encouraging people to dress or act authentically.

Examples: Celebrate a day of cultural significance.

Be humble and accept you will get it wrong — approach everything you are doing with an attitude of humility and openness to the views of others. There's nothing worse than doubling down on a mistake. Stay open to feedback as you tailor your approach and take onboard different perspectives.

Examples: Continuously reflect on your strategy and the feedback you're receiving and be ready to change course.

By leaning into a bit of courage, humility, and good intentions, there are huge gains for you to make for yourself, your team and the broader community. Start embracing your "uncomfortability", it's the place where growth happens.

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