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Psychological safety as a risk mitigant for psycho-social hazards

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Midjourney

As people across human resources (and the broader employment landscape) in Australia continue to grapple with the implications of the psychosocial hazard changes to WHS law, there is a powerful correspondence with a leadership and team theory that some are starting to notice.

Psychological safety, popularised by Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson, is a sense that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking (such as speaking up, making

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mistakes, and being open about oneself). It has become a mainstay of the leadership and organisational space, particularly following its endorsement by Google in Project Aristotle. And the research seems to support its performance benefits.

Psychologically Safe Environments

In fact, the connections between the quality of psychological safety in a team and good work health and safety outcomes are numerous. In high psychological safety environments:

- People are more likely to speak up when something is not being done right (rather than keeping quiet out of fear)
- People feel more comfortable asking for help (rather than trying to do something without the requisite skills, knowledge, or tools)
- People will report mistakes in order to fix them (rather than sweeping them under the rug or hiding them)

This inevitably means: fewer safety issues. One area where Edmondson's original research focused was on safety in healthcare. Psychological safety was a major predictor of the rate at which errors were reported in the healthcare space.

When it comes to psychosocial risks, there is an added layer of challenge for organisations to navigate — one which needs psychological safety. Common psychosocial hazards identified by Safe Work Australia include poor support or harassment. *Often psychosocial risks are not things you can clearly 'see' but instead require people to talk and share what's happening in their psychosocial environment.*

Whether it be bullying, harassment, or overwhelming job demands, psychological safety assists not only with identifying these types of risks but also managing them. The solutions frequently need to be co-created with the person being affected. And that means an environment where they are

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comfortable to speak up and say what's what.

The call is clear: psychological safety needs to be a foundation for your WHS strategy — and this is even more so the case in the current evolving regulatory environment. You will be amazed by the other benefits that come with it too!

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