Psychological Safety

The Magic Recipe

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Today's leaders must be willing to take on the job of driving fear out of the organisation to create the conditions for learning, innovation, and growth.

You may recall the terrible tragedy of the Boeing 737 MAX crashes in 2018 and 2019; two separate airlines that had recently taken delivery of the new Boeing plane saw crashes under very similar circumstances. The issue was traced back to the so-called Manoeuvring Characteristics Augmentation System (the MCAS), a flight system designed to stabilise the plane due to its large engines. Boeing had sought to keep the new plane as similar as possible to its previous aircraft to reduce the necessity for extra pilot training and other costs to airlines. In order to do this, while having greater engine performance (and thus larger engines), they had to get creative about how to prevent destabilisation of the plane.

During testing of the MCAS, a number of red flags emerged around safety and pilot capability to respond to faulty MCAS initiation. However, due to changes in the makeup of managerial staff, engineers at Boeing claimed that they were increasingly feeling management "maligning and marginalizing engineers as a class." Focus from up the chain to have the plane finished and certified to match Airbus' A320neo offering meant that certification and analysis engineers were under pressure to frame any changes to the MAX as minor.

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Amy Edmondson

In the aftermath, there has been significant discussion around the culture at Boeing. Internal emails seemed to show "The very culture at Boeing appears to be broken, with some senior employees having little regard for regulators, customers and even co-workers." Internal surveying of Boeing's "ARs" - local representatives of the FAA – found mixed results around the presence of undue pressure but concerningly, "39 percent of those responding said they had experienced "undue pressure" and 29 percent were "concerned about consequences" if they reported acts of "undue pressure.""

These issues created a perfect storm: an unresponsive management team, a sense of helpless or "voicelessness" for engineers, and an attitude of pushing things through regardless of the potential risk. The push for profit can mean employees feel obliged to stay quiet about safety. While there is evidence than some engineers spoke up, or at least reported some issues, perhaps if more had felt comfortable to do so things may have taken a different course. That is, if there had been an environment with greater psychological safety.

What is it?

We all know that there are teams, and then there are teams. Most of us have experienced both ends of the spectrum. From the scarcity-mentality, dog-eat-dog team where everyone looks at each other through narrowed eyes, to the open, trusting and collegial group whom we might even enjoy seeing outside of work.

Teams high in a quality called psychological safety certainly capture several elements of the 'good' team but they are not all just about smiles and good times. Psychological safety is a concept popularised by Harvard Business School Professor Amy Edmondson. Early on, Edmondson defined psychological safety as "a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking..." In her book The Fearless Organisation, she went on to define it as "... a climate in which people are comfortable expressing and being themselves." The essential idea is the same – a place where people can speak their mind.

Her research had found that team performance is improved by team learning, and team learning is improved by a psychologically safe environment. The reasons for this relationship are multiple: the psychologically safe team can try new things, ask for help, challenge with new ideas and feel comfortable making mistakes and growing. They are less likely to work-around problems and hide mistakes due to fear.

Why do we care?

Well, the research increasingly supports that psychological safety is important and organisations as big as Microsoft and Google have taken a significant interest in the idea. A Gallup study found that when workers think their opinions count, organisations see improvements including up to a 27% reduction in turnover, 40% reduction in safety incidents and 12% increase in productivity.

A Google study of its own employees concluded that, despite the variance in composition and nature of teams, psychological safety was the major predictor of team performance and distinguished between good and great teams (citing two aspects of psychological safety in particular: equal conversation turn-taking and higher average social sensitivity).

A meta-analysis of research on psychological safety has agreed with Edmondson's early research findings, noting "the strong relationship that psychological safety demonstrated with information sharing and learning behaviour."

The Centre for Creative Leadership has also found in its study of senior leadership teams that those teams with strong levels of psychological safety had the highest levels of performance and lower levels of interpersonal conflict than teams without it.

Returning to the case of the Boeing aircrafts, we might wonder if psychological safety had been higher between leaders and engineers, whether certification and delivery of the MAX would have proceeded with the MCAS in its flawed form – and the tragic outcome that followed. And this important 'safety outcome' is being backed up with research in other industries. For example, there is a large body of evidence that is linking high psychological safety with improved patient outcomes in hospitals and health care settings.

What are the predictors of psychological safety?

Research has explored a whole range of factors which impact on levels of psychological safety in the workplace. One analysis of the organisational literature identifies the following list as the strongest predictors of psychological safety:

- Leadership style
- Empowerment
- Leader-assigned mastery goals
- Diversity climate
- Conflict management style
- Quality of the managerial relationship
- Team tenure

We can see from this array of factors that leadership plays a key role in building psychological safety, with leadership styles or behaviours forming the vast majority of the list. It's clear that leadership that is more consultative and supportive rather than authoritative encourages psychological safety. Other factors such as organisational diversity climate and team tenure, while maybe not always directly managed by a team leader, are still open to being influenced.

The good news about all this though is that building psychological safety is in the hands of any leader who wants to put in the work.

How do we build it?

The first step is really about instigating some habitual actions both as a leader and as a team member. For example, Edmondson and Kim Scott describe four steps for creating psychological safety:

Solicit criticism
Example: ask a team member to share something that is not working for them in terms of your ways of operating or manner

Give praise
Example: spend time noting something you really value or appreciate about someone else in the team

Give criticism
Example: share a piece of feedback in a compassionate but firm manner with a team member

Gauge your feedback
Example: consider the body language and tone of your team member after sharing feedback, and see if it has landed properly or needs to be adapted further

As a leader you can begin incorporating these practices into your approach right away through feedback discussions or actively recognising and celebrating team members. Encouraging this in your team might require both setting up the space for it to happen and making it clear that these behaviours are all OK – and in fact will make the team stronger. Ultimately, it is a joint responsibility between formal leaders and their teams to create the conditions for psychoogical safety to flourish.

ReWork, an initiative by Google, also lists a range of concrete behaviours leaders can take to increase psychological safety. Simple examples include inviting the team to challenge your perspective and modelling vulnerability through sharing your own personal experiences.

More deeply, these habitual actions are underpinned by a mindset which is curious, respectful, and open to the contributions of others. Edmonson argues that leaders have to let go of command-control mindsets in favour of inquiry, openness and problem solving , and that is really at the heart of it - turning away from fear as the means of controlling teams and turning towards shared purpose.

What does it look like in contemporary spaces?

We know that contemporary leadership continues to shift with the tides and so too must our application of this theory.

In the hybrid space, Edmondson writes about how the separation between discussions on 'work' and 'non-work' topics has disappeared and we have to be creative and engaged with how we bring psychological safety into play to grapple with these challenges. Edmondson recommends five steps:

1. Set the scene - contextualise the discussion with what's going on (for example, say: "our ways of working are changing, but the work still needs to be done, so what could this look like?")
2. Lead the way - by sharing your own experience and difficulties with hybrid
3. Take baby steps - slowly build up to people feeling comfortable sharing
4. Share positive examples - of how better understanding the problem and people and organisational needs leads to better outcomes
5. Be a watchdog - on protecting the environment where people feel safe sharing

In the diversity and inclusion space, there is a call for "equitable" psychological safety. This means being aware of the following in how you practice psychological safety:

- Consider "intersectionalism" - how diverse identities can create unique experiences for people in which they intersect (for example, the experience of a person of colour who is also disabled is uniquely different to a person who has one of these attributes but not the other)
- Think deeply about the ways in which you can meet the different needs of different people
- As a leader, take the lead, and responsibility, for working to overcome barriers to psychological safety experienced by diverse team members
- Reflect on how our own identity and experiences may be different to others and can enable or block psychological safety

There is compelling evidence that psychological safety is a powerful determinant of team learning and performance. Spending the time to understand this concept and the behaviours that characterise it, is time well spent for any leader.

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