DEI Perspectives

Psychological Safety

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Introduction

Psychological Safety belief
- A shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe to engage in interpersonal risk-taking in the workplace (7)
- Ability to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career (10)

As businesses and organizations continue to grow and develop, they are increasingly moving toward team-based work. According to a study completed in 2015 by the *Harvard Business Review*, collaborative teamwork activities have increased by 50% or more (1). Especially following a pandemic, during which remote-based work has increased, collaboration is the key to business success in a cross-functional, complex, global world. Recall how much time you spend in meetings (virtual and in-person), on phone calls, answering emails, and collaborating on shared documents. More than three-quarters of an employee's day can be spent on working in teams.

A team is an interdependent group of individuals with diverse talents and perspectives (8). The team solves problems through group decision-making, monitors progress, and works together to reach a common goal. An organization's incentive to increase teamwork directly targets its bottom line. As opposed to individuals, teams tend to innovate quicker, recognize mistakes faster, and come together with better solutions as they run with collaborative efforts, energy, and enthusiasm (1,5). In a nutshell, teamwork = increased productivity for the business organization.

While collaborative teams are the goal of today's business organizations, participating in a team requires a level of trust. Teamwork begins by building mutual trust; to create mutual trust, "individuals need to overcome their vulnerability" (10). There is a need for psychological safety to achieve this level of mutual trust within a team.

Google Aristotle Project—An Example of Psychological Safety

In its quest to "build the perfect team," Google devoted undisclosed millions of dollars on research (codename Project Aristotle) to understand what makes a great team. The study focused on components, including team composition (demographics, differing personalities, perspectives, etc.) and team dynamics (e.g., communication methods among team members), that impact a team's effectiveness as a whole (8). When analyzing the data from countless surveys of and interviews with many different styles of teams, at first no patterns made sense—until the idea of psychological safety was introduced.

There wasn't a clearly defined pathway on how to create psychological safety within a team after Project Aristotle discovered it already existed and was organically occurring when a group chose to implement it (4). Adopting the core belief "that everyone is safe for risk-taking and to be vulnerable in front of each other" appeared to often be the first step, whether it was clearly written in guidelines or was an unspoken norm. A clear team structure may encourage psychological safety, including shared leadership or a communally agreed upon team lead and clarity in group expectations and goals (4). Some outcomes of psychological safety include increased learning behaviors, such as openly discussing mistakes or asking for help. Increasing practice of these learning behaviors may directly increase productivity (7). In Figure 1 some attributes that are necessary for psychological safety to exist, as well as some outcomes from creating a psychologically safe environment, are visualized. This is not an inclusive list, as more attributes and outcomes of psychological safety may exist.
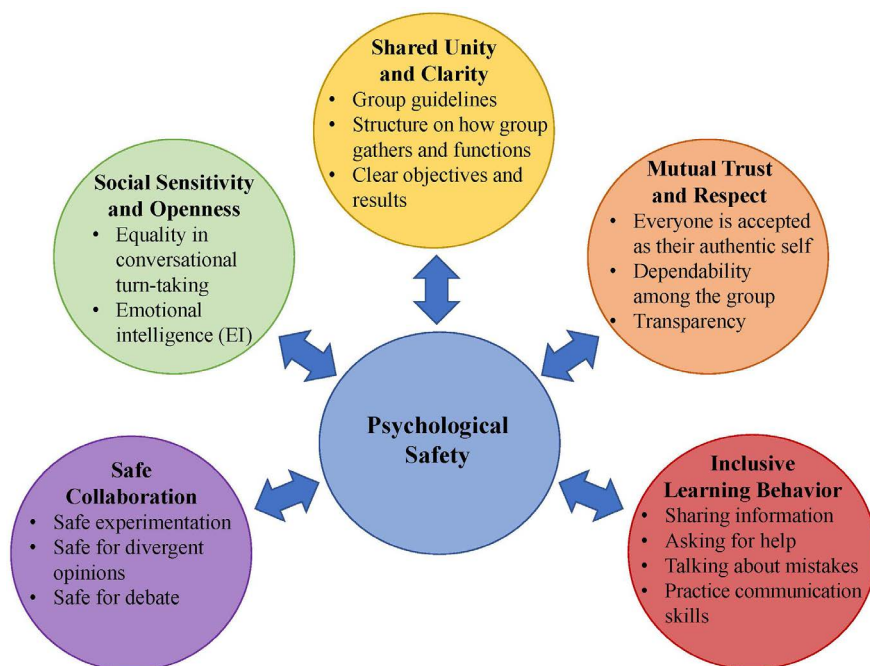
Why Does Psychological Safety Matter to Your Organization?

- All organizations rely on PEOPLE to make them successful—to get the best out of your

Figure 1. Examples of psychological safety attributes and outcomes.

What happens to business organizations with low psychological safety?	Reasons employees don't feel safe to address their psychological safety
• **Higher accident rates** – Safety and product quality suffer • **Higher turnover** – Low morale, low employee retention • **Higher operational costs** – Resulting from higher turnover and lower employee retention • **Lower productivity** – Lower employee retention means less work is completed within a certain timeline	• **Social cost** – Loss or damage to self-image or status • **Physiological cost** – Negative impact on mental and physical health resulting in burnout[a] • **Monetary cost** – Individual's financial burden for health and mental healthcare; unemployment costs

[a] Burnout is a form of exhaustion resulting from excessive and prolonged emotional, physical, and mental stress (12).

people as their authentic selves, operating at their highest potential, they need to feel safe in their work environment.
- Teamwork is best achieved through interpersonal trust that the team is safe and when there is mutual respect for everyone.
- Increase your productivity through increasing learning behaviors achieved in a psychologically safe environment.

Identifying Psychological Safety

A psychologically safe workplace is not determined by hierarchy, personality mix, or cultural background. Its implementation is not likely a scripted method or a ratio-based hiring process, but its effects can have a tangible impact on the productivity and well-being of the workforce. The unscripted dynamic at play presents an opportunity to enact innovative cultural change. Leaders in a psychologically safe environment promote direct and straightforward communication that creates a safe space for risk-taking (11). By sharing leadership responsibilities, leaders can train and coach employees, while simultaneously acknowledging the value their input has to operations. Where shared responsibility may not be an option, a communally agreed upon strong leadership may be a better fit. As long as individuals are involved in the decision-making process and opinion-shaming is discouraged, teams can coalesce their own power model.

Emotional intelligence (EI) is the ability to monitor emotions (self and others), discern among them, and act upon the information gathered (9). EI is at play when team members allow themselves to become vulnerable. Others will gather information about their team member's perspective and use EI to make an informed decision on how to respond. Project Aristotle found this exercise established mutual trust and respect. As group dynamics develop, there are salient characteristics that determine a psychologically safe environment. For example, conversational turn-taking allows team members to express their ideas, opinions, and needs. An important aspect is to avoid any one team member dominating conversations, preventing others from expressing themselves. Akin to EI, successful groups also develop empathic awareness that can help prevent team members from feeling excluded.

To ensure the longevity of the team's power model, it is crucial to train and coach individuals. New joiners should have enough information available to them to proactively learn about the business and make informed decisions. Similarly, as members face challenges or raise questions, a senior team member can serve as a coach. It should be noted that coaching involves a personalized approach to professional development with mutual participation between coaches and coached team members (13).

Fostering a Psychologically Safe Culture

Diversity extends beyond race and gender (e.g., identity, cognitive, and neuro) (2). It brings myriad points of view to team discussions that otherwise would not exist in a homogeneous environment. As previous Master Brewers DEI Perspectives have pointed out, we must adopt justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) in our daily operations. To promote the development of psychologically safe team dynamics, debate must be embraced as well. Debate may be deleterious to personal ego, but serves the key function of personal expression. When planning meetings, enough time should be allocated for thought sharing. Work plans should be evaluated by team members to welcome critical thinking. These activities foster a safe space for learning behavior.

Welcoming critical thinking and expression doesn't mean unbridled criticism, but rather an authentic and respectful deliberation process that provides value to the individual and the task at hand. Curiosity should be the driving force to gain knowledge. Inherently, not every comment or idea will yield value to the task. The mistakes that will inevitably happen are opportunities to learn as a cohort. It is the individual and team's responsibility to take ownership of the final product and the errors that lead to it. Unproductive behavior, like scapegoating, should be avoided, as it takes away from transparency and accountability.

Meetings can seem unproductive when long-winded discussions of items that affect a few individuals take place. However, it is preferable to bring up potential pitfalls early in the process and publicly. The exercise of shared discussions in a group setting effectively gives the individual an opportunity to take moderate risks that can be scrutinized by the entire team. Informal hallway conversations effectively isolate team members and lack the space for deliberation.

When team members learn new skills, the entire group enjoys the results. Training and knowledge-exchange resources should be provided to encourage personal growth. Experienced team members can create knowledge repositories that simultaneously inform new members and increase productivity. In a similar manner, resources should be provided in areas such as:
- Upstander/bystander training
- Workplace safety
- Code of conduct
- Trauma support for victims
- Mediation

continued

Psychological Safety

Collaborator Safety

Learner Safety

Inclusion Safety

Challenger Safety

Learner Safety
- Discover
- Experiment
- Learn from mistakes

Collaborator Safety
- Interact with colleagues
- Foster open, constructive debate
- Have mutual access

Inclusion Safety
- Know your value
- Treat all people fairly
- Include everyone (regardless of titles/positions)
- Openly contribute (shared conversational space)

Challenger Safety
- Challenge status quo
- Speak up
- Express ideas
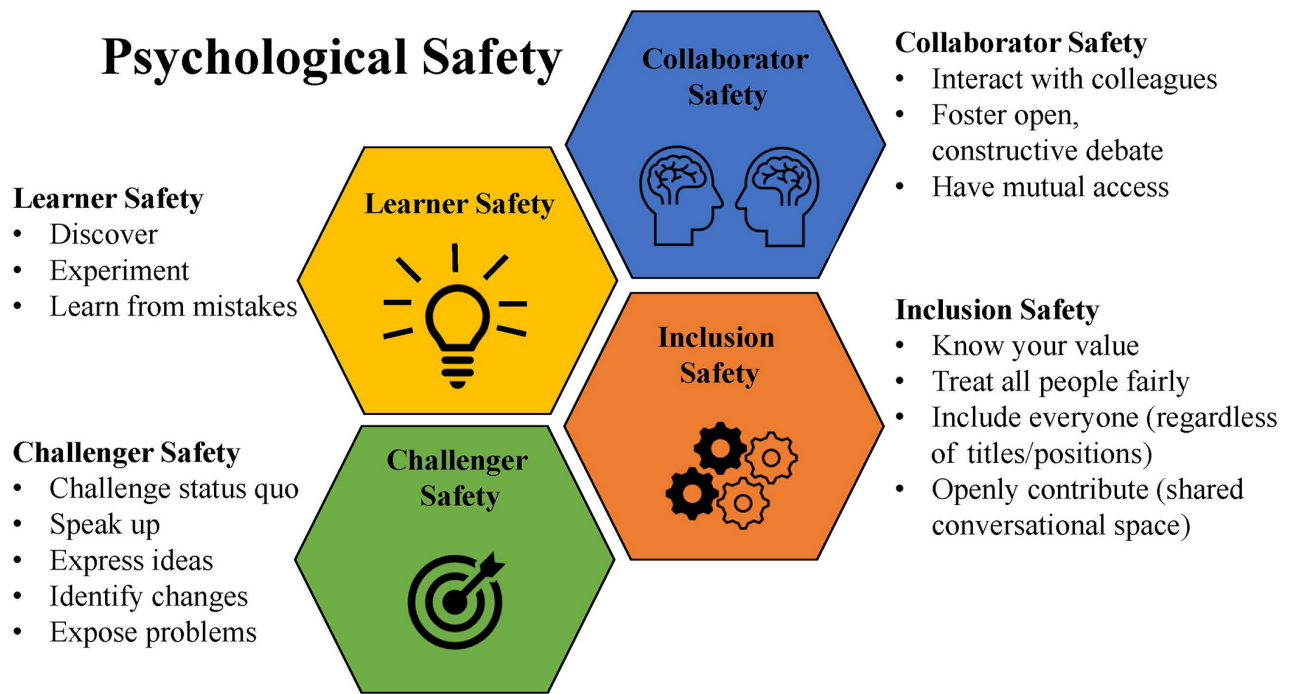- Identify changes
- Expose problems

Figure 2. Once psychological safety is implemented, it can create safe environments for learning, collaborating, inclusion, and challenging and bringing in new ideas. (Adapted from World Wide Technology and Thrive Global [6,11])

Psychological safety can have a positive impact at the individual and enterprise level, as visualized in Figure 2. It can increase team productivity and provide a safe space for critical thinking. Use the provided tools and references to enact positive change in your workplace.

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