

# IS YOUR ORGANIZATION SAFE ENOUGH TO SOAR? CREATING INTERACTION SAFETY

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What are the costs of...

- Ideas not shared?
- Questions not asked?
- Problems not reported?
- Conflicts that fester and go unresolved?
- Possible solutions not offered?

Imagine you are a leader of a growing organization challenged by rapidly changing market conditions;

by a workforce that is changing in age, values, and motivation; and by intensifying global competition. You call a meeting of your organization's best and brightest. In addressing the room full of your organization's top performers, you outline your view of the challenges the organization is facing for continued growth.

You state clearly that a new direction and new ideas will be required to remain competitive and that constant innovation will be the key not just to the organization's

success but to its very survival. You close your remarks by saying that everyone's best thinking will be needed, and you ask for questions, comments, and suggestions for how to maximize your organization's competitive advantages.

You wait in anticipation, knowing these are the best minds in your organization. And...

Crickets would be more welcome than the silence that follows.

Unfortunately, this scene plays out all too often in meeting rooms of too many organizations. Even when specifically invited and encouraged to speak out, many people are reluctant to share their perspectives—especially when they might differ from the ideas and positions of others in the room.

## Many People Are Reluctant to Share Their Ideas

Years ago, the words “Any questions?” at the end of a senior leader's presentation signaled the end of the meeting. Today, however, such silence is no longer golden.

Today's organizational processes and market intricacies are too complex and in constant motion for any single leader or individual to have all the answers or even all the right questions. Organizations need the best thinking and active contribution of all their people, from the top floor to the shop floor, from the board room to the show room. But whether in one-on-one interactions, staff meetings, or email interactions, many people avoid exposing their ideas and opinions in front of their leaders and managers (and even their fellow team members) because they simply do not feel safe enough to do so.

Organizations can only be as productive as the interactions that take place between their people. The safety to engage in honest, open, productive interactions is critical to organizational performance. But organizational environments that create the sense of safety needed for those kinds of interactions are rare.

## Needed: A Focus on Interaction Safety

Many organizations pay attention to the physical safety of their team members, but many pay less attention to fostering safety in the interactions team members have with one another. In many organizations, the default assumption regarding how people interact is that it is every man or woman for himself or herself ... that is each individual's responsibility to figure out how to share their ideas and to create safety for themselves. And for many people, the way they feel safe in meetings and one-on-one interactions is to be quiet.

Over the past four decades, as we have worked with organizations to create workplaces in which people can do their best work—in which people feel valued, a sense of belonging, respected and seen for who they are—we have found that interaction safety is foundational.

There is a body of research showing the correlation between psychological safety and team performance; for example, the work of Harvard Business School professor Amy C. Edmondson, in journal articles going back 20 years, and in her recent book *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*. Edmondson's work was referenced in a well-known 2016 article by Charles Duhigg in *The New York Times*, “What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team.”

The concept of interaction safety uses these data as a springboard for discussion about the type of work environment that fosters this sense of safety, the conditions necessary for it to flourish, and the effect it has on individual, team, and organization performance.

Interaction safety results in a supportive but challenging environment that encourages reasonable risk-taking and speaking up, that inspires every individual to be brave enough to reach for higher goals and more ambitious possibilities.

It is an environment that supports people to feel safe enough to share not just their best ideas and thinking, but their still-in-formation thoughts and ideas. It is an environment that accelerates building the trust that is

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*All team members will work to add value.*

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so vital for collaboration in one-on-one interactions, among teams, across departments, and throughout an organization.

When people feel the presence of interaction safety, they feel supported to make their fullest contributions to the mission and strategies of the organization. They know they will not be penalized, ostracized, demoted, made small, discounted, or shunned because of well-intended ideas, opinions, suggestions, observations or feedback.

When interaction safety exists, the default assumptions are...

- We are all on the same team and the same side of the table.
- All team members will work to add value.
- The best solutions are those that consider all angles and incorporate all relevant perspectives.
- The best route to success is by building on one another's ideas rather than dismissing them.
- We can achieve more together than any of us can achieve alone.

## Interaction Safety Is Most Obvious When It's Not There

When interaction safety is absent, people act small. They avoid interactions with anyone they are not completely comfortable with. They avoid exposing their opinions, ideas, or actions to the possible judgment of others. They don't share their knowledge or information, even when those things are needed to move a conversation, project, or the organization forward.

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*When interaction safety is absent, people act small.*

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*When people don't feel safe, they...*

*... cannot perform at their best.*

*... Walk on eggshells and avoid anything outside their comfort zones.*

*... Fear being judged or made small.*

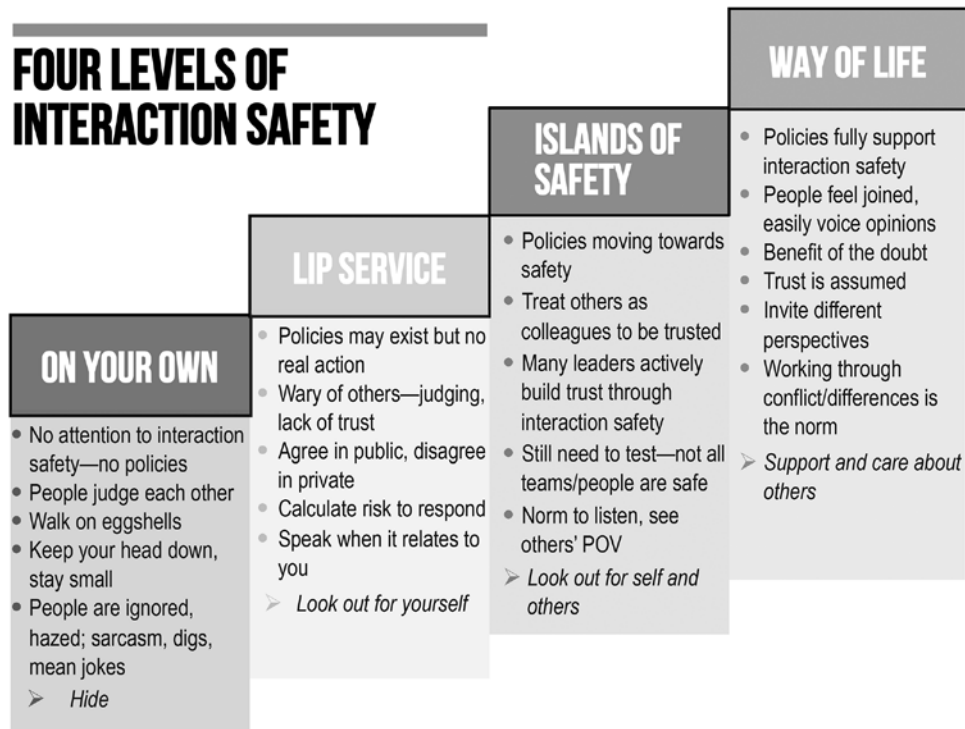
*... Are reluctant to join, to trust, to accept new or different ideas or people.*

Most leaders feel responsible for the physical safety of the people who report to them. To truly create an environment of trust and collaboration, leaders also need to take the time to create an environment in which all team members feel safe enough to interact freely, share their best ideas, and do their best work. When interaction safety is the norm, people feel free to report problems, to have honest conversations, and to actively seek out and embrace different points of view.

## Four Levels of Interaction Safety

After decades of working to create more productive, inclusive, and collaborative workplaces and after hundreds of focus groups, thousands of interviews, and countless hallway interactions, we have come to see the creation of *interaction safety* as a developmental process.

The creation of interaction safety requires conscious leadership and purposeful organizational actions to bring about changes in the organization's interactions and culture. Understanding where you and your organization are can provide a road map for moving to greater levels of interaction safety. (See Figure 1: Four Levels of Interaction Safety.)



**FIGURE 1. FOUR LEVELS OF INTERACTION SAFETY**

Just to be clear—interaction safety is not about institutionalizing political correctness, doing away with conflict, or accepting underperformance. It is about raising the bar on everyone’s expectations for how they can contribute in every workplace interaction.

### Level One: *On Your Own*

There is *no focus* on interaction safety in the workplace. Typical behaviors range from overt bullying, verbal or physical harassment, and abuse to less overt actions of sarcasm, shaming, and put-downs.

- Incidents are addressed reactively, as “one-offs,” and usually blamed on a “bad apple.”
- People are expected to fend for themselves, and often pitted against each other.
- People often feel judged and that they must constantly prove themselves.
- Individuals who report incidents may be labeled as “troublemakers” and/or “too sensitive.”
- People hide and play it safe.

- There are few, if any, HR policies that address interaction safety.
- Making the workplace safe for more productive interactions is not on leaders’ radar.

### Level Two: *Lip Service*

There is *some focus* on interaction safety. The organization has begun to recognize the importance of an environment that has interaction safety, but has done little to actively support its creation.

- When incidents occur, the focus is on assigning blame to “misbehaving” individuals rather than eliminating root causes.
- HR policies may exist but there is no real action when a problem arises.
- People agree in public but disagree in private.
- People look out for themselves.
- Some people who create an unsafe environment for interactions continue to be promoted.

- People experience a disconnect between the organization’s espoused values and the actual behaviors of managers and leaders.

### Level Three: *Islands of Safety*

There is a *great deal* of focus on interaction safety and the organization is actively working to make it a reality, but there is not widespread acceptance or trust across the organization. The organization is enacting HR and management policies that support a culture of interaction safety, but those policies are not practiced consistently throughout the organization.

- The organization enacts policies and provides education with the specific purpose of supporting interaction safety.
- When incidents occur, the organization reacts quickly and takes action focused on root causes.
- There are pockets where individuals feel safe in their interactions, but interaction safety is not a norm throughout the organization.
- Many leaders actively work to build trust through interaction safety.
- Many senior leaders see interaction safety as foundational to higher performance, but some still do not see its connection to the core business of the organization.

### Level Four: *Way of Life*

Interaction safety is the *way of life* in the organization and understood as a critical factor for overall success. It is part of the fabric of the organization and a foundation that supports competitive advantage in productivity, collaboration, innovation, and people doing their best work individually and collectively. People feel free to bring their full selves to the workplace, to contribute, to grow, and to partner without reservation.

- When incidents that violate interaction safety occur, they are seen as outside the norms of the organization, and the role of environmental factors as well as individual behavior are examined closely

to determine what actions may be needed to prevent reoccurrence.

- Everyone is regarded as having value to contribute.
- People feel joined, easily share their ideas and perspectives, and build on the ideas of others.
- Trust and giving and getting the benefit of the doubt are assumed.
- Different points of view are sought after and welcomed.
- Leaders see interaction safety as inextricably connected to the work of the organization and achievement of its goals.
- Leaders actively engage team members on how to sustain and improve the levels of interaction safety for higher performance.

## Where Is Your Organization?

We would like to report that most organizations recognize the importance of creating greater levels of interaction safety in their workplace, but as Figure 2 shows, our experience suggests otherwise.

## Moving to the Next Level: A Model for Change

To move from your organization’s current level to Level Four requires conscious leadership and advocacy at all levels of the organization.

The cycle of change related to interaction safety (as seen in Figure 3) cannot get started without



**FIGURE 2. WHERE ORGANIZATIONS ARE**



**FIGURE 3. CYCLE OF CHANGE**

**dissatisfaction** with the current environment. When enough people—a *critical mass* of thought leaders, whether titled or not—become dissatisfied with the status quo, change becomes possible.

Change cannot gain momentum without **risk-taking**. Even mentioning reasons for dissatisfaction can be risky in many organizations. Sharing stories, supporting others who are telling their stories, reporting evidence of problems, and joining with others to advocate

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*Change cannot gain momentum without risk-taking.*

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for change are risk-taking behaviors that can lead to positive change.

When enough people believe the current situation is holding them and/or the organization back and start speaking up (even if just to their colleagues), the organization has the impetus for change.

Talk and feelings don't make change. Change requires **action**: calling out situations, behaviors, and people that create an unsafe environment. It means that behaviors that create greater interaction safety must be encouraged and rewarded. If enough substantive actions are taken, the organization's level of interaction safety will move to the next level.

## Six Steps to Greater Interaction Safety

To create interaction safety in your organization, you first need to be clear about what interaction safety means, not just to you but also to the people around you. What are the behaviors and cues that identify interaction safety or a lack of interaction safety in your organization? In what situations do people feel most or least safe to share their thinking, and when do you, as a leader, feel safe and unsafe? It is very important to remember that even if *you* feel safe as a leader, the people with whom you are interacting may not feel that way.

Following are six core steps you, your team, and your organization can take to move to deeper levels of trust, inclusion, and collaboration. They will facilitate your organization's developmental process in moving through the levels of interaction safety.

1. Make it clear through your interactions that greater interaction safety is your goal as a leader and critical for every person's ability to contribute.
2. Assess what level of interaction safety currently exists (most of the time) and identify actions needed to move to the next level.
3. Ask each person what she or he needs for greater interaction safety.



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*As people speak up,  
fewer mistakes are made.*

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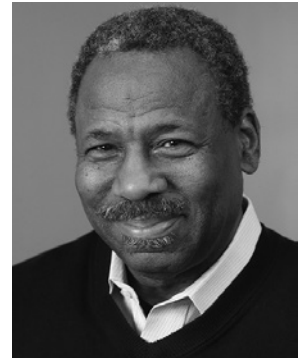
4. Obtain agreement from your leadership team and from the organization overall on where you want to be and how you will achieve that objective.
5. Start practicing the new behaviors for greater interaction safety.
6. Assess how you are performing related to interaction safety on an ongoing basis, invite feedback from your direct reports and others, celebrate what you are doing well, and keep working to continuously improve.

## Conclusion

Interaction safety is a key to building trust, inclusion, and collaboration in the workplace. It takes conscious actions by leaders to create an environment where ideas flow, where people feel free to speak up, where individuals and teams can do their best work together.

When interaction safety is a part of the organizational culture, more ideas are shared and greater efficiencies in process and improvements in quality happen. Information is shared quickly, silos break down, and problems are made visible. As people speak up, fewer mistakes are made. Collaboration spurs innovation and the organization becomes a magnet for talent. When people feel safe enough to share, individuals and the organization soar.

Adapted from Miller, F. A. and Katz, J. H. (2018) *Safe Enough to Soar: Accelerating Trust, Inclusion and Collaboration in the Workplace*. Oakland: CA, Berrett-Koehler.



*Thought leaders in organization development for more than 35 years, Judith H. Katz, EdD, and Frederick A. Miller, Executive Vice President and CEO (respectively) for The Kaleel Jamison Consulting Group, Inc., have created numerous breakthrough concepts related to people, culture, and inclusion. Both recipients of the OD Network Lifetime Achievement Award (Katz, 2014; Miller, 2007), they have co-authored the books Safe Enough to Soar: Accelerating Trust, Inclusion and Collaboration in the Workplace (2018); Opening Doors to Teamwork and Collaboration: 4 Keys That Change EVERYTHING (2013); Be BIG: Step Up, Step Out, Be Bold (2008); and The Inclusion Breakthrough: Unleashing the Real Power of Diversity (2002).*