



## Getting Started with Psychological Safety

You might have heard of psychological safety. It has become popular in the organizational development world because research indicates it is a major predictor of team effectiveness. Let's start with the definition:

**"Psychological safety is a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes."**

That's from Amy C. Edmondson, Prof. of Leadership & Management at Harvard Business School, and author of *Teaming & The Fearless Organization*.

Psychological safety creates a team environment where people can speak up and share ideas—even risky or challenging ones—without fear.

As a leader, reflecting on your own experience with this is important before teaching it to others. Here are some reflection questions to start with:

- What's an environment where you had high psychological safety?
- What's an environment where you had low psychological safety?
- Is there a metaphor that could describe each environment?  
What were the differences between these two environments?
- What impact might psychological safety have on the people you work with today?

**So why does psychological safety matter?** A famous Google study found it was the single biggest factor in making teams successful. And we've known for a long time that powerful innovation happens through mistakes. Psychological safety actually *enables* an organization to learn from mistakes (rather than hide them). And what's more, intentionally cultivating psychological safety can support the well-being and retention of people who face marginalization.

Many people face marginalization based on their identities—often race, gender, sexual orientation, ability/disability, country of origin, and more. Some employees facing marginalization may have experienced punishment for speaking up in the past. That's one of the ways that our society controls people who are at the margins. For example, assertiveness can sometimes be interpreted as "aggressive" based on the identities one holds. Or another example, Black folks have often been punished or attacked for speaking up. It's important to understand and recognize this context that may apply to your team.

When you're building psychological safety as a leader, here are some ways to take identity into account:

- If somebody has had difficult past experiences with speaking up, be sensitive to that.
- Be patient—it's okay if building psychological safety takes time.
- You may have to go the extra mile to help folks feel psychologically safe if few work environments have ever felt that way for them. It's worth it—find out what would be most supportive for them.
- Embrace the fact that individuals need different things when it comes to psychological safety. One's identity and formal position in the organization significantly affect how psychologically safe one feels.
- If you hold privilege because of your identities or your job, learn how that privilege impacts your relationships with colleagues.

## Take Action

Below is a starting point—important practices that can immediately help build psychological safety in your organization. Try them out and take time to notice what impact they are having.

### *Questions:*

- Ask open-ended questions that invite others to share more (i.e. "What's the concern that you have about that?" or "Who has a different perspective?")
- Seek other people's perspective (not always expressing my own)

### *Communication:*

- Explicitly name the tensions that exist (especially in cross-functional teams)
- Call out uncertainties (framework to try: Here's what I know, what I don't know, what I will know)
- Make sure people know that I don't "always know" and I'm not "always right"
- Share mistakes I've made with the team
- Apologize for having made it hard to come to me with bad news in the past

### *Listening:*

- When listening, signal that what I'm hearing is important (paraphrase back what I heard before asking a question or building on what was shared)
- Acknowledge and thank the speaker for bringing something up, especially if they named a tension or had something different from the rest of the group
- Do a blameless review of what happened when things go wrong, looking for systems failures (vs. people failures). Help to repair the system vs. punish the individual.

### *Presence:*

- Actively encourage the speaker through verbal and non-verbal cues
- Make good eye contact—when on camera, look directly at the camera sometimes instead of the screen. This is critical to denote that you are paying attention and care about what's being said.
- Pause—whenever someone is sharing something with you, pause for 3-5 seconds after they finish and see what happens
- Use physical cues—lean forward and nod to encourage the speaker to continue and reinforce their sense of being understood

## Dig Deeper

Want to learn more about psychological safety? Measure it in your organization? Teach your team about it? Update systems and policies to support it? That's what we do! Get in touch at [inclusiveleaders.io](https://www.inclusiveleaders.io).