10 Steps to Creating a Psychologically Safe Workplace

Transformation not change

"Psychological safety is being able to show and employ oneself without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status or career." – Amy Edmondson

If you're not familiar with Amy Edmondson, let us introduce you. She's the Harvard Business School professor credited with coining the term **'psychological safety'** back in 1999. She identified that psychological safety is critical to the successful performance of teams and the organisations they work for.

Twenty five years later, psychological safety continues to be a high priority for organisations. Global technology giant Google has carried out extensive research on what makes a team effective. Psychological safety emerged as number one of five pillars that make up an effective team. They found that employees with high psychological safety are less anxious to take risks.

The dangers of toxic workplaces
When psychological safety isn't present, employees don't feel safe to speak up, ask for help, or take risks due to the possibility of failure and repercussions. If left to deteriorate, a business with poor psychological safety can become a toxic place to work.

Oak Engage's Toxic Workplace Report, Sept 2023, found that 75% of employees have experienced a toxic culture at work, with women and people working in healthcare most affected. Similar studies estimate the cost of toxic workplaces in the UK at more than £15bn in terms of sickness, absence, and employee turnover.

A workplace in which employees feel psychologically safe and able to speak up, ask questions, and share their views can benefit from **creativity** and **innovation**, improved **productivity**, **engagement** and **retention**. Psychological safety is also a critical factor in achieving OKRs (Objectives and Key Results).

It starts with YOU
As a leader, part of your role is to set others up for success. You have a unique opportunity to support and influence the people experience in your organisation. Let's take a look at our 10 steps to building psychological safety within your team.

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1. Open Communication

To achieve psychological safety, employees need to be in an environment where they feel safe to speak up, ask questions and raise concerns. When employees feel their opinions are being heard, they're more likely to be **engaged** and **motivated**.

Think about the feedback channels you have and provide options so that employees get to choose the channel they feel most comfortable with. From one-to-ones, team meetings and Q&A sessions, to focus groups, surveys, online ideas hubs and whistleblowing helplines, you probably have more channels than you think.

Organisations that are open to feedback and provide various ways to do this stand to gain valuable information about the employee experience. Ask for opinions and ideas from your team. When you receive their feedback, be sure to listen and act on it. Communication is a two-way process.

2. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

A speak-up culture is one of the key drivers of employee engagement. In order to speak up, employees need to feel psychologically safe, accepted, and included. This is one of many reasons why a **diverse**, **equal** and **inclusive culture** is so important.

Employees want to feel **valued** for who they are. They need to feel able to be themselves and to speak the truth at all times. When employees know that their employer, manager and team value them for who they are (not just for their contributions), they develop a sense of self-worth and feel more comfortable speaking up.

3. Encourage Creativity and Innovation

From diversity of thought and opinion come incredible ideas and **innovations.** To achieve psychological safety, organisations need to celebrate diverse ideas and opinions. Nurture an environment where no idea is a bad idea. Be constantly curious in everything you do. Encourage your team to be creative, share thoughts, and challenge each other respectfully, without any fear of repercussion or retribution. Some of the greatest ideas originate through debate!

For more on this, take a look at our blog [Why psychological safety is needed for innovation](#).

4. Promote Collaboration

Essential for creativity and innovation, a **collaborative culture** can spark new ideas, help your team achieve tasks more efficiently, and create a supportive working environment. Encourage teamworking as a way to achieve shared **goals**, involve everyone in decisions that may affect them, discuss change openly, and normalise asking for help when you need it. This will strengthen connections within the team and with other areas of the business, which all contributes to higher psychological safety.

5. Encourage mistakes

Employees should be able to come to work without fear of being judged for making a mistake or taking a wrong decision. In a psychologically safe workplace every mistake is considered an opportunity to **learn** and **grow.** It's ok to make mistakes. We learn from trying and we move on to the next thing.

If someone in your team makes a mistake, offer your feedback in a constructive, not critical, way. Encourage your team to do the same if pointing out someone else's mistake. Friendly disagreements and conflicting opinions are good, as long as it's done with kindness and respect.

6. Develop a Growth Mindset

By this, we mean within yourself and your team. **Learning** is an essential component of psychological safety. We learn through our mistakes, we learn from our successes, we learn from each other. Providing continuous, positive and **constructive feedback** is an important part of the learning curve.

Encourage your team to identify the areas in which they would like to develop and seek out opportunities for personal growth. Suggest coaching and mentoring where it might be useful. Offer career progression to those that want it. Bear in mind, training and development may look different to different people. And don't forget your own personal development too!

7. Become a Storyteller

Storytelling is a valuable and effective way of communicating. Stories have the power to create an emotional **connection** with the information being communicated. If you have a difficult message to share, storytelling may help you to connect with your team and explain the reasons behind the decision. Opening up and showing emotion will also help to build psychological safety. It's all about the language you choose and the way you deliver it.

8. Practise Empathetic Leadership

Leaders have a responsibility to ensure their team feels safe, supported, and understood. Leading with **empathy** means being able to understand and share the feelings of others.

It's important to flex your leadership style to suit different situations. When issues arise, allow yourself to experience the emotion of the situation and understand how it feels to others. Teams can thrive under compassionate, caring **leadership**, where feelings are respected, and emotional intelligence is high.
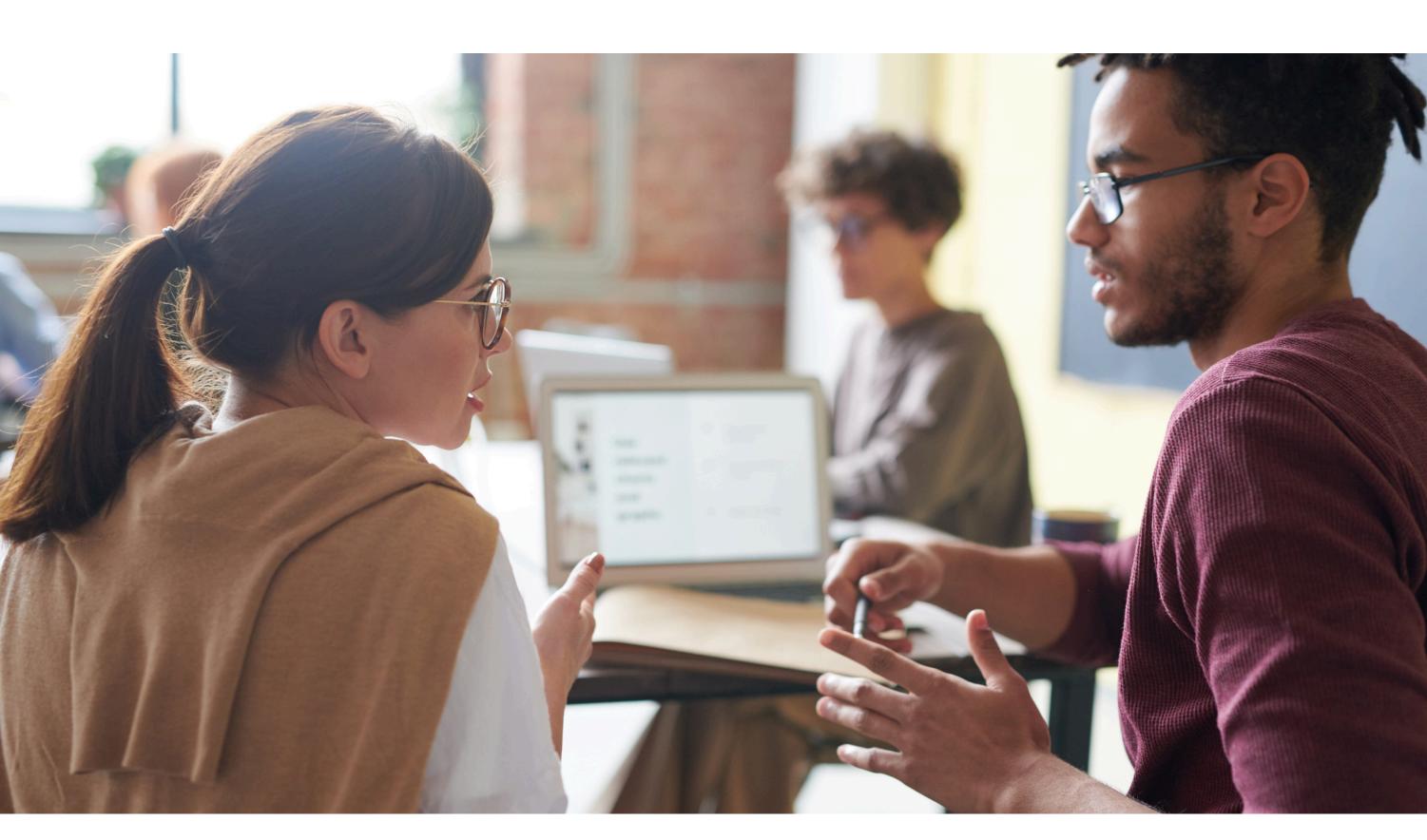
9. Keep your promises

For employees to feel safe at work, the things leaders say and do have to be aligned and authentic. This breeds respect and builds trust in senior management and the direction they are leading the business. **Trust** is a key factor in psychological safety and employee engagement.

At the same time, be kind and keep the promises you make to yourself. Focus on your own development as a leader. Reading this guide is a great first step in building your skills and **competencies**. What other areas would you like support to develop? Make sure to have an open, honest conversation with your line manager about your goals and objectives.

10. Prioritise health and wellbeing

As a leader, you should lead by example in every action you take, every day. Align your **behaviours** and actions to those you expect from your team. In short, be the employee you want to lead.

To build team resilience, every employee needs to feel mentally and physically fit and well. If people don't feel able to speak up when they need time off or don't feel well enough to work, they will not be able bring their full self to work or feel safe when they are there. Make sure to set an example in how to work, rest and play. Take regular breaks from your work, enjoy your full holiday entitlement, be honest when you're having a difficult day, practise healthy eating and look after your physical and mental **wellbeing**.

Take a Psychological Safety Scan

Psychological safety is fundamental to successful teams and organisations. Take our simple 5-step Psychological Safety Scan to assess your current safety level and highlight areas for improvement.

We can help you to identify what's holding back open communication, how to encourage collaboration and develop actions to improve psychological safety within your team. The aim of the Scan is to build trust, allow employees to feel safe enough to take calculated risks, challenge each other and move forward.

Talk to us to arrange your Psychological Safety Scan and make the step-change that will help you reach your goals.

Talk to us

Further resources
Blog: The importance of psychological safety
Blog: Getting started with a psychologically safe workplace
Video: TEDx talk - Building a psychologically safe workplace, Amy Edmondson