

What Is Psychological Safety?

by Amy Gallo

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Summary. What exactly is psychological safety? It's a term that's used a lot but is often misunderstood. In this piece, the author answers the following questions with input from Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson, who coined the phrase "team... [more](#)

No one likes to deliver bad news to their boss. But that's exactly what I had to do when a project I'd been working on wasn't delivering the results we expected. I'd been a big advocate for our team taking on the initiative and, personally, I'd invested a lot of time into it — and convinced others to do the same.

When I met with my manager to present the data, which showed that we hadn't recouped our investment and the initiative had performed worse than planned, I was nervous. I would've understood if she had been frustrated or even angry and I expected her to at least ask "What went wrong?" or "How could we have prevented this?" (both questions I'd prepared answers for).

Instead, she asked a simple question: *What did you learn?*

I now understand that what she was doing was building psychological safety. She understood that learning was key — my (and her team's) future performance depended on it.

Psychological safety is a critical concept for teams and the people that lead them. It's also a topic we've covered quite a bit at HBR. But not everyone knows or fully understands it, so I reached out to Amy Edmondson, the Harvard Business School professor and author of *The Fearless Organization*, who coined the phrase "team psychological safety," to get a refresher on this important idea. I asked her about where the term originated, how it's evolved, and, of course, how people can think about building psychological safety on their own teams.

What is psychological safety?

Let's start with a definition. Team psychological safety is a shared belief held by members of a team that it's OK to take risks, to express their ideas and concerns, to speak up with questions, and to admit mistakes — all without fear of negative consequences. As Edmondson puts it, "it's felt permission for candor."

Edmondson first landed on the concept when she was doing research for her PhD. She had set out to study the relationship between error making and teamwork in hospitals, expecting to find that more effective teams made fewer mistakes. But what she found was that the teams who reported better teamwork seemed to experience more errors. When she dug into the data, she began

to suspect that better teams might be more willing to report their mistakes – because they felt safe doing so – and conducted follow up research to explore that hypothesis.

The “team” in team psychological safety is important. “This is a group level phenomenon — it shapes the learning behavior of the group and in turn affects team performance and therefore organizational performance,” she says. As Edmondson explained to me, the sense of safety and willingness to speak up is not an individual trait, even though it’s something you do feel and experience at the individual level; “it’s an emergent property of the group.” In fact, in most studies, people who work closely together have similar levels of psychological safety compared to people in other teams.

Why is psychological safety important?

First, psychological safety leads to team members feeling more engaged and motivated, because they feel that their contributions matter and that they’re able to speak up without fear of retribution. Second, it can lead to better decision-making, as people feel more comfortable voicing their opinions and concerns, which often leads to a more diverse range of perspectives being heard and considered. Third, it can foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement, as team members feel comfortable sharing their mistakes and learning from them. (This is what my boss was doing in the opening story.)

All of these benefits — the impact on a team’s performance, innovation, creativity, resilience, and learning — have been proven in research over the years, most notably in Edmondson’s original research and in a study done at Google. That research, known as Project Aristotle, aimed to understand the factors that impacted team effectiveness across Google. Using over 30 statistical models and hundreds of variables, that project concluded that *who* was on a team mattered less than *how* the team worked together. And the most important factor was psychological safety.

Further research has shown the incredible downsides of not having psychological safety, including negative impacts on employee well-being, including stress, burnout, and turnover, as well as on the overall performance of the organization.

How has the idea evolved?

I asked Edmondson how the idea has changed in the 20 years since she first starting writing about it. Academics have discovered some important nuances. For example, she points out that psychological safety seems to matter more in work environments where employees need to use their discretion. As she explains, “The relationship between psychological safety and performance is stronger in situations where the results or work aren’t prescribed, when you’re doing something creative, novel, or truly collaborative.” She has also written about how hybrid work requires that managers expand how they think about psychological safety.

She and others have also been looking at how psychological safety interacts with diversity on teams. New research by Edmondson and Henrik Bresman, a professor of organizational behavior at INSEAD, has shown that on teams with high psychological safety, expertise diversity was positively associated with performance. While their study is a single one in a single industry (drug development), it’s an important proof point “that psychological safety may be the key to realizing the promise of diversity in teams.”

How do you know if your team has it?

This is likely the question on many leaders’ minds. Edmondson has developed a simple 7-item questionnaire to assess the perception of psychological safety (if you want to run this survey with your team, there’s an instrument you can sign up to use on Edmondson’s website).

How people answer these questions will give you a sense of the degree to which they feel psychologically safe:

1. If you make a mistake on this team, it is not held against you.
2. Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.
3. People on this team sometimes accept others for being different.
4. It is safe to take a risk on this team.
5. It isn't difficult to ask other members of this team for help.
6. No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.
7. Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized.

Edmondson cautions however that the scores are not definitive; what matters is the variance. “Anyone filling out a survey is doing so in a way that is relative to their expectations,” she says. “For example, if I say ‘yes, I can ask for help’ I’m doing that relative to what I think it ‘ought’ to be.” She suggests managers use the data from the survey to reflect on your team’s experience and be curious about what you could change to improve that experience. Which leads to another critical question: what can you do to foster psychological safety?

How do you create psychological safety?

Edmondson is quick to point out that “it’s more magic than science” and it’s important for managers to remember this is “a climate that we co-create, sometimes in mysterious ways.”

Anyone who has worked on a team marked by silence and the inability to speak up, knows how hard it is to reverse that.

A lot of what goes into creating a psychologically safe environment are good management practices — things like establishing clear norms and expectations so there is a sense of predictability and fairness; encouraging open communication and actively listening to employees; making sure team members feel supported; and showing appreciation and humility when people do speak up.

There are a few additional tactics that Edmondson points to as well.

Make clear why employees' voices matter.

For most people, it feels safe to hold back and stay silent — they default to keeping their ideas and opinions to themselves. “You have to override that instinct by setting the stage for them to speak up,” she says. Explain clearly and specifically why you need to hear from them, why their viewpoint and input matters, and how it will affect the outcomes of the work.

Admit your own fallibility.

If you, as a leader, can own up to and demonstrate how you've learned from your mistakes, it paves the way for others. It's important to model the behavior you want to see in your team and normalize vulnerability. This includes things like being respectful, open to feedback, and willing to take risks.

Actively invite input.

Don't assume people will tell you what they're thinking or that they understand that you want their input. “Explicitly request it,” says Edmondson. She suggests asking open-ended questions like: What are you seeing? What are your thoughts on this? Where do you stand on this idea?

Respond productively.

You can tell people you want their input or it's OK to make mistakes, but they won't do those things if they feel like they're being blamed or shut down. Edmondson suggests asking yourself: When people speak up with a wacky idea or tough feedback, how do you respond? Be "appreciative and forward-thinking." Also, replace blame with curiosity. As author and coach Laura Delizonna writes, "If team members sense that you're trying to blame them for something, you become their saber-toothed tiger... The alternative to blame is curiosity. If you believe you already know what the other person is thinking, then you're not ready to have a conversation. Instead, adopt a learning mindset, knowing you don't have all the facts."

What are common misconceptions?

I also asked Edmondson if there are any myths or misconceptions about psychological safety and she pointed to two.

"It's all about being nice."

Edmondson says that creating a psychologically safe environment isn't about being "nice." In fact, there are many polite workplaces that don't have psychological safety because there's no candor, and people feel silenced by the enforced politeness.

"Unfortunately, at work, nice is often synonymous with not being candid."

"You must feel comfortable in a psychologically safe environment."

"Too many people think that it's about feeling comfortable all the time and that you can't say anything that makes someone else uncomfortable or you're violating psychological safety," says Edmondson. That's simply not true. Learning and messing up and pointing out mistakes is usually uncomfortable. Being vulnerable will feel risky. The key is to take risks in a safe environment – one without negative interpersonal consequences. "Anything hard to achieve requires being uncomfortable along

the way.” She shares the analogy of an Olympic gymnast. In her training, she pushes herself and her body; she takes risks but does so in a way that she won’t get injured. Edmondson reminds us, “Candor is hard but non-candor is worse.”

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My boss’s simple response when I came to her feeling defeated has had a huge impact on me. That one question — *What did you learn?* — changed the way that I view my own missteps — with more compassion and understanding — and how I treat others when they make mistakes. As my experience shows, by making psychological safety a priority, leaders set up their teams for success now and long into the future.

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