

Psychological safety

What is psychological safety at work?

The term was coined by Edgar Schein and Warren Bennis in 1965 as *“providing an atmosphere where one can take chances without fear and with sufficient protection”*.

In later years Professor Amy Edmondson of Harvard Business School defined it as *“a shared belief amongst group members that the group is a safe place to take risks, admit mistakes, and learn new things”*.

Psychological safety exists when people feel included and safe to learn, contribute, and challenge the status

quo, without fear of being embarrassed, marginalised, or punished. (Clarke, 2019).

Psychological safety is not a substitute for effective psychosocial risk management. It is the foundation of good work design.

Psychological safety seems to “live” at the level of the group

AMY EDMONDSON

Why is psychological safety important in your organisation?

If your organisation is psychologically safe, it's easier for people in your business to share their ideas, experience and expertise. That's why the evidence is clear – improving psychological safety contributes to a range of business benefits, including:

- Positive wellbeing
- Improved performance
- High-quality relationships
- Learning
- Engagement
- Creativity and innovation
- A just culture

What supports a culture of psychological safety?

Psychological safety isn't created overnight. It is delicate and dynamic. It's perishable, not permanent. It takes time and requires intention. Some drivers to psychological safety include:

- Leadership mindset and practices
- Team learning behaviours e.g. sharing skills, knowledge, seeking and sharing information
- Consistent practice of empathy by everyone
- Clear roles
- Onboarding with intention
- Fair and consistent processes
- “Straight Talk” conversations

Trust

Will **you** give others the benefit of the doubt when you take a risk?



“Bob is probably going to freak out if I disagree with him.”

Psychological Safety

Will **others** give you the benefit of the doubt when you take a risk?



“My team expects me to speak up. It's how we do things.”

Your leadership work

Psychological safety is not a silver bullet. It doesn't just happen. It needs to be at the forefront of strategy. It requires courage and commitment to challenge the status quo and build a culture where people are willing to use their voice knowing that there will not be negative consequences.

It also requires a shift in the mindset and practices of leaders and supportive organisational processes.

Mindset required

- Everyone makes mistakes, so it's important we can admit them, and learn, from them.
- Speaking up shows you're committed to a safe workplace.

Practices required

- Be curious, take risks, be tolerant of mistakes, embrace positive conflict, create space for new ideas (even wild ones).
- Be modest about own capabilities, acknowledge shortcomings, and admit mistakes.
- Be empathic.
- Listen, and pause to consider everyone's view.
- Inquire before advocating your own view.

Ask genuine questions (i.e., invite people to have a voice).

- What haven't we considered?
- Do you have any nagging questions?
- Who can give us a different opinion or suggestion that we haven't yet discussed?
- Who can poke holes in this idea for us?
- What could make this a bad idea?
- If this idea is a 7, what could make it a 10?
- Make it more difficult to stay silent than speak up. Encourage dissent. Listen to understand, not judge.

Key references

- Leading Psychological Safety: Obligations and Opportunities, a presentation by Dr Hillary Bennett – 8 December 2022
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- Edmondson, A., (1999) Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*. Volume 44, Issue 2
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About the Forum

The Business Leaders' Health and Safety Forum inspires and supports its members to become more effective leaders on health and safety. The Forum has more than 390 members, who are Chief Executives or Managing Directors of significant New Zealand companies.

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About Leading Safety

Dr Hillary Bennett is a Director of Leading Safety, a consultancy specialising in the leadership of safety and wellbeing, and the assessment and development of safety and wellbeing culture. Hillary is a registered psychologist and has 38 years' experience in consulting to organisations, both large and small, in the private and public sector, in New Zealand and overseas. In 2019, she received the SafeGuard Lifetime achievement award for her pioneering work in health and safety leadership and in the forestry sector in New Zealand.

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