

Psychological Safety in Teams

In 2017, the tech giant Google conducted research into the secret sauce of effective teams¹. The researchers studied 180 teams using a multitude of measures and found that what really mattered was less about who is on the team, and more about how the team worked together. The most important dynamic of effective teams was **psychological safety**, which they defined as, “*team members feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other.*”

We often hear “virtual working” quoted as the reason for poor teamwork. However, since the research was conducted pre-pandemic, it is particularly interesting that they also discovered that colocation (i.e. sitting together in an office) was not a variable connected to team effectiveness. Teams often tell us that they feel “clunky” or “awkward”, but rarely know why, so we often invite teams to pay proactive attention to their psychological safety.

The opposite of psychological safety

If these three things feel familiar in your team, then you probably don't have psychological safety:

1. Being wrong is avoided like the plague
2. Blame is more important than gratitude
3. Outlying views are ignored

Cornell Professor Kathleen O'Connor² (see diagrams) argues that when psychological safety is absent from the workplace, teams lose the individual knowledge and expertise each member brings to the table. As a result, they struggle to capitalise on the diversity of knowledge and expertise in the team. Ironically, this is the very same knowledge and expertise those people were recruited for, which suggests that psychological safety has a crucial role in harnessing value from diversity.



What is Psychological safety?

It's important to emphasise that psychological safety is not about being nice. Harvard Professor, Amy Edmondson³ defines it as:

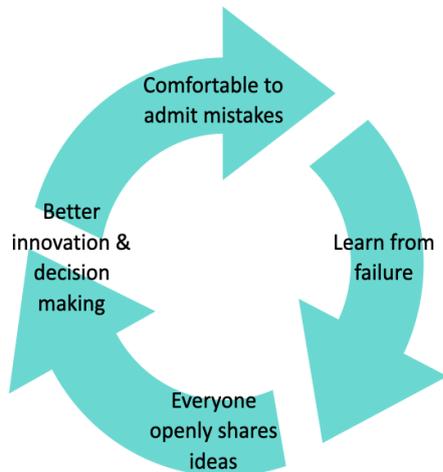
“A belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes and that the team is safe for personal risk taking.”

She describes what we are prepared to do in psychologically safe teams, and the consequences we fear that stop us from doing just that (even if we know we should)!

¹ 'What Google learned from its quest to build the perfect team' [New York Times Magazine](#), 2016

² 'Is your team in psychological danger' World Economic Forum [Leadership article](#) Apr 12, 2016

³ 'Building a Psychologically safe workplace', Amy Edmondson [TEDx presentation](#) 2014



The best test of whether your team is psychologically safe is to think about the following: Would you admit to making a mistake? Would you tell others in your team if you were feeling overwhelmed or angry, or that you had difficult family circumstances that needed your attention? If the answer is “Yes”, then you are in a psychologically safe team.

Most people have worked in a team that help them “fizz” and so will be able to resonate with how it is to be in a team like this. But rarely do people understand how to contribute to creating a team like this.

How can you create psychological safety in your team?

Humans have a basic need for safety, belonging and dignity and so they look for signs that these exist in the team they are working in. During her TEDx Talk, Amy Edmondson outlined three main positive behaviours that support psychological safety in a team:

- Frame the work as a learning problem, not an execution problem
- Acknowledge your own fallibility
- Model curiosity and ask lots of questions

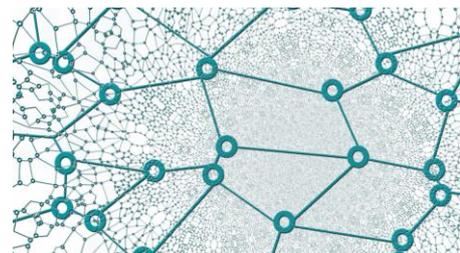
On first pass, this seems like a simple list. Easy? Or is it? The real question is are you all practising these behaviours every day with each other?

To do this, we need to build psychological safety for ourselves; as the hostess says in the safety briefing on a flight, ‘put on your own oxygen mask first’.

Put on your oxygen mask first

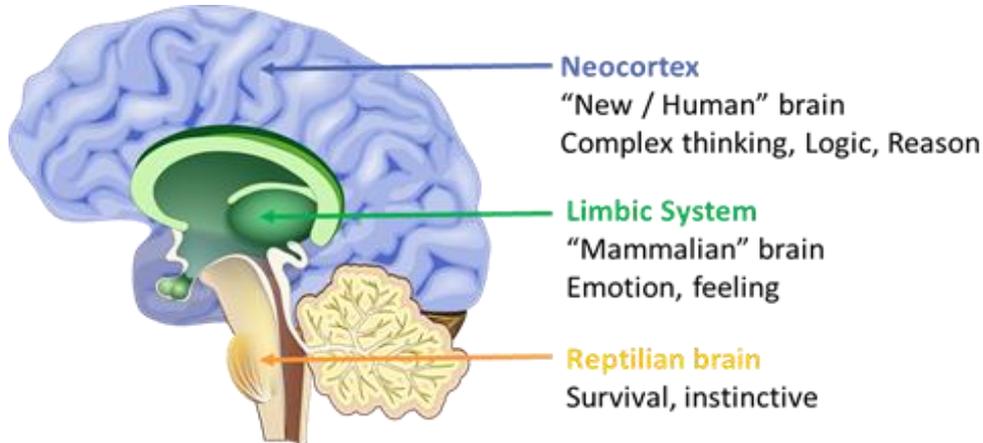
To ensure our survival, our brains are wired to perceive threats to our safety, belonging and dignity. Our ‘reptilian brain’ is continually scanning the environment for perceived threats. If we detect a treat, we are triggered and our ‘flight, fight, freeze, appease’ response kicks in. Although we do all of them, there is usually one that is our primary response and this is called a ‘Conditioned tendency’⁴. This conditioned tendency is shaped by our history, created when we were younger to keep us safe, help us belong and stay in dignity. As we grow older this conditional response can become less helpful and so we want to be choiceful about it. But the problem is, our conditioned response is automatic, and usually unconscious.

Linking back to our tribal past, our awareness of safety, belonging and dignity is on full alert when we are working in teams. The web of relationships triggers us so easily. Research shows that exclusion is damaging because it hurts: the sensation is akin to physical pain.



⁴ ‘Embodying authenticity’, Aquilina, E, Live it publishing 2016

Combining these two factors together makes teams both a source of joy and pain! Which is why they can be complex & messy. If we are in our conditioned response, it is really difficult to be curious, admit our own fallibility and framework as a learning problem. So how can you be 'choiceful'?



Our conditioned response is wired in our bodies, in our nervous systems, and stored in our muscle & tissue memory. When we are under threat our bodies, triggered by our reptilian brain, respond before our neocortex (our 'new' brain which manages our higher order thinking) has had a chance to respond. As a result, you can't think your way to changing this, because it starts in your body (not your brain). Thus, it is helpful to be able to tune into your body, to notice the subtle clues that you are being triggered e.g. tightness in the throat, knees bent, leaning forward. By tuning into the sensations in your body and picking up instant and often subtle clues, you are able to understand if you have been triggered.

As a leader, pay attention to the conditions

If you are able to put on your own oxygen mask first, and practice the behaviours to build psychological safety, you can also start tuning into the conditions within the team.

Exploring how people work (not just what they do) together, and developing clear expectations, can help people both shape and feel responsible for everyone's behaviour. Invite people to explore what they need and also what they can offer to contribute to these conditions. Listen and be curious to the answers, notice any judgements that arise in yourself or others that might get in the way of this.

Build practices to reflect and review how you are doing with these conditions, and actively invite feedback on both when it has gone well, and when the team or individuals could have done better. These conversations are a great opportunity to role model: framing the work as learning.

Summary

As you think about the team you work in now, use the above ideas to think about how you could positively support psychological safety, both in your behaviour and also the conversations you invite. Psychological safety is the bedrock on which teamwork is built, so it is worth taking time to build this bedrock.