

Fostering Psychological Safety in the Workplace

Objective

To increase psychological safety in the workplace.

What to Know

Feeling safe and secure is a basic human need. If individuals do not feel safe and secure, they may feel depressed, anxious, overwhelmed, worried, fearful, and more. *Psychological safety* refers to the ability to speak up, express ideas, ask questions, admit mistakes, and discuss concerns without fear of being ridiculed, punished, shamed, or even fired.

A psychologically safe work environment allows employees to feel comfortable taking risks, setting boundaries, addressing conflict, or asking for a raise. Growth, emotional well-being, and forward progress are encouraged and supported, and teams tend to be more motivated, efficient, engaged, and effective.

Here are some examples of psychological safety in the workplace.

- Employees feel comfortable questioning their supervisor.
- Problems, errors, and mistakes are handled without fear of punishment.
- Team members encourage one another to discuss original ideas.
- Employees and supervisors lift each other up instead of shutting each other down through intimidation or bullying.
- Everyone feels valued, respected, and heard.

Here are suggestions to create an environment that supports psychological safety.

1. Practice giving feedback. Team members may be afraid to speak up because they are concerned they will be ignored, laughed at, or even fired. This can be managed by practicing giving feedback in a respectful and encouraging way. Treat team members with an open and respectful attitude. You can do this during brainstorming sessions or team meetings. Let everyone know that all ideas and suggestions are welcome.

2. Get to know your co-workers. Team building activities are essential to know others well, understand how they think, assess how they feel about different topics, and observe how they engage with the world. This builds trust, which is the foundation of psychological safety. Eat lunch together or do activities as a group, and your colleagues will be more likely to share their thoughts and opinions.

3. Collaborate and share ownership. Collaboration may be essential for success, but teams can be possessive, or projects may be planned and implemented in isolation. So, be proactive and collaborate with others to ensure everyone is on the same page.

4. Immediately deal with issues. Putting things off can have negative consequences. Frustration and resentment can build if problems are not adequately addressed in a timely manner. You do not want team members to identify problems and think, “What’s the point in bringing it up?”

5. Ask colleagues how they are doing – and mean it. You may have burnt out or overwhelmed co-workers or supervisees. If you work in a psychologically unsafe environment, you may not realize colleagues are experiencing real problems until they resign. Frequently take your team’s “mental temperature” and offer resources when colleagues are struggling.

6. Create an open and respectful culture. Be respectful in every interaction and open to ideas and questions. Let others know they can openly discuss concerns while showing them they are valued. Ask open-ended questions and lead with empathy and compassion. Always consider others’ feelings when you share feedback.

7. Be honest and transparent. When others understand the reasoning behind decisions, they are often better able to adapt and accept change. Transparency contributes to psychological safety because it fosters trust, which helps others secure and respected.

8. Communicate clear expectations. Clearly lay out the expectations of each job, role, or project. This allows the team to understand what needs to be done to meet or exceed expectations. Create clear goals, define success, and support each person on their journey toward success.

9. View failure or mistakes as learning opportunities. Ask these questions:

- What can be done differently next time?
- What can we learn from this situation?
- What process needs to be improved so this does not happen again?
- How can we move forward as a team?

Communicate and take ownership or responsibility for your own mistakes.

10. Be supportive. Encourage your co-workers and offer positive reinforcement and feedback when things go well. Make decisions a collaborative effort and check in with team members to see how you can help or support them.

To foster psychological safety, everyone must feel included and understand it is acceptable to make mistakes, learn from them, contribute feedback, and challenge ideas. By using the above suggestions, you can cultivate psychological safety and create a healthy work environment.

What to Do

Psychological safety is an ongoing process, and it requires continuous effort and commitment. Answer these questions to make improvements and create a psychologically safe work environment. Under each topic, write a T for “true” or an F for “false” next to each statement. Then answer the relevant questions.

Establish Trust and Open Communication

_____ Open dialogue and active listening are always encouraged.

If not, what can we do to improve?

___ We work in an environment where everyone feels comfortable expressing their ideas and concerns.

If not, what are some changes we can make?

___ The company/business/organization provides opportunities for anonymous feedback or suggestions.

If not, what can we implement to ensure everyone is heard?

Lead by Example

___ I demonstrate vulnerability and admit my mistakes.

If this is difficult for me, here are some things I can do.

___ I value diverse perspectives and encourage others to share their viewpoints.

If not, what can I do differently?

___ I show empathy and understanding toward team members.

If not, what can I do to be more understanding and empathic?

Encourage Collaboration

___ I promote teamwork and foster a sense of belonging within the team.

If not, what can we implement to make changes?

___ I encourage collaboration and ensure equal participation from all team members.

If not, what can we implement to make changes?

___ I discourage blame and finger-pointing and focus on problem-solving instead.

If not, what can we do differently?

Provide Clear Expectations and Feedback

___ I clearly communicate expectations and goals to team members.

If not, what can we implement to make changes?

___ Regular feedback is provided (positive and constructive) to help individuals grow.

If not, what changes can we make?

___ We offer a safe space for discussing challenges or areas of improvement.

If not, what can we do differently?

Foster a Learning Culture

___ I encourage a growth mindset and support continuous learning.

If not, what can we do differently?

___ Opportunities are presented for professional development and skill-building.

If not, what can we do differently?

___ We celebrate and recognize individual and team achievements.

If not, what can we do to recognize and celebrate others?

Address Conflict and Difficult Conversations

___ Conflicts or issues within the team are addressed promptly and constructively.

If not, what can we do differently?

___ Open and respectful communication is encouraged during difficult conversations.

If not, what can we do differently?

___ We effectively mediate conflicts and find mutually beneficial resolutions.

If not, what can we do differently?

Support Work-Life Balance

___ Work-life balance is promoted, and we encourage everyone to take care of their well-being.

If not, what can we do differently?

___ Personal boundaries are respected (e.g., we ensure reasonable work hours).

If not, what can be done to make changes?

___ Resources or support for managing stress or work-related challenges are available for everyone.

If not, what can be done to make changes?

Create Opportunities for Autonomy and Growth

___ Team members are empowered to make decisions and take ownership of their work.

If not, what can be done to make changes?

___ There are ample growth opportunities and career development is strongly supported.

If not, what can be done to make changes?

___ Individual strengths within the team are recognized and utilized.

If not, what can we do differently?

Regularly Assess and Improve Psychological Safety

___ We regularly seek feedback from team members about their sense of psychological safety.

If not, what can we do differently?

___ Team dynamics are regularly evaluated, and we make necessary adjustments.

If not, what can we do differently?

____ We actively engage in self-reflection and seek opportunities for personal growth.

If not, what can we do differently?

Team Building Circle of Appreciation Activity

This is an exercise you can do to foster psychological safety in the workplace by creating an environment where team members feel valued and supported. Ensure that everyone has an opportunity to participate, and that the atmosphere remains positive and inclusive. Follow these steps.

1. Gather all team members in a comfortable meeting space, such as a conference room or common area.
2. Explain the purpose of the exercise, which is to create a positive and supportive environment where team members can express appreciation for one another.
3. Instruct the team to form a circle, either by standing or sitting in chairs.
4. Start the exercise by selecting one team member to begin. This person will turn to the person on their right and express a specific appreciation or compliment about that person's work, contribution, or personal qualities. The comment should be sincere and specific.
5. After the first person shares their appreciation, the recipient will then turn to the person on their right and express their appreciation. This continues until everyone in the circle has had a chance to both give and receive appreciation.
6. Emphasize that active listening is essential during this exercise. Team members should give their full attention to the person speaking and show appreciation for the unique qualities and contributions being recognized.
7. Encourage participants to be open to receiving appreciation and to respond with a simple "thank you" or any other appropriate response.
8. Each team member may express appreciation to at least two different people in the circle, ensuring that everyone receives multiple expressions of appreciation.
9. Thank everyone for their participation and emphasize the importance of building a culture of appreciation and psychological safety within the team.

Note: This exercise can be adapted based on the team's size and preferences. It can be incorporated as a regular practice during team meetings or as part of team-building activities.

Reflections on This Exercise

Describe how this activity helped foster psychological safety in your workplace.

What was challenging about this exercise? Be specific.

Did anything surprise you about this activity? If so, describe.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn from this exercise?
