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partnership with the future

TOWARD >

What is Team Psychological Safety? (TPS)



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TOWARD delivers various propositions to support Senior Leaders, Teams and their organisations towards better leadership, cultures and performance. It has been our experience, through working with many C-Suites and Senior Teams, that the quality of relationships, and a dynamic that welcomes others (and self), has an impact upon team culture and performance. Many Senior Teams and Leaders are inordinately busy and some are increasingly fatigued. Some have team relationships that rarely transcend beyond the transaction. Team Psychological Safety (TPS), as a practice, can support teams to reconnect, build stronger relationships, develop cultures of candour and commit to practices that ultimately improve performance.

A work environment that promotes Psychological Safety has been described as one of the most important leadership responsibilities in the 21st Century. Psychological Safety can be defined as, **‘a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking.’**¹ The concept refers to the experience of being able to speak up, share ideas, concerns and to ask questions. In psychologically safe teams, team members feel accepted and respected, and feel able to be candid.

By building and attending to TPS, the interpersonal relationships in a team are likely to thrive and grow, which enables the team to engage in meaningful conversations that, in turn, will drive performance. An environment of TPS can also reduce fear and invite a fuller expression of participation and engagement. The key to high-performance teams is the extent to which members are able to take interpersonal risks with one another, and apply the learning that takes place within the team’s practices. Edmondson (1999)² suggests it is a group level construct and all team members need to perceive it is characteristic of the team.

Edmondson (2019) broadly defines psychological safety as:

“a climate in which people are comfortable expressing and being themselves. More specifically, when people have psychological safety at work, they feel comfortable sharing concerns and mistakes without fear of embarrassment or retribution. When a work environment has reasonably high psychological safety, good things happen; mistakes are reported quickly, so that prompt corrective action can be taken; seamless coordination across groups or departments is enabled,

¹ Edmondson, Amy (1 June 1999). “Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams” (PDF)

² Edmondson, A (1 June 1999). “Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work

and potentially game-changing ideas for innovation are shared. Psychological safety is a crucial source of value creation in organisations operating in a complex, changing environment.”³

Professor Amy Edmondson (2019) highlights that effective teamwork happens best in a psychologically safe workplace. In order for collective talent to be unleashed, a psychologically safe climate needs to be fostered. Edmondson (2019) also highlights that alongside building psychological safety is the need for the setting of high standards, and that leaders need to inspire and enable people to reach them.

Google’s Project Aristotle

In 2012 Google embarked on an initiative “Project Aristotle” analysing 180 internal teams to find out why some were working much better together than others, and to study what makes the best teams. They conducted 220+ interviews with employees over a two year period, and looked at more than 250 attributes of 180+ active Google teams. They concluded that it is not who is on the team, their experience or IQ that makes the difference, but rather how the members of the team interact. Google found that the teams with the best performance had the highest level of team psychological safety. Rozovsky (2015)⁴ the study’s lead researcher concluded, “who is on a team matters less than how the team members interact, structure their work and view their contributions.”

Project Aristotle concluded there are five key dynamics that set apart successful teams at Google- psychological safety, dependability, structure and clarity, meaning of work and impact of work. Rozovsky (2015) wrote **“Psychological safety was by far the most important of the five dynamics we found. It’s the underpinning of the other four.”** Duhigg (2016)⁵ in writing about Goggle’s research into effective teams highlighted that understanding and influencing group norms are key to improving teams. He also noted that two behaviours, conversational turn taking and empathy can contribute to psychological safety in teams as “they are part of the same unwritten rules we often turn to...when we need to establish a bond. And those human bonds matter as much at work as anywhere else. In fact, they sometimes matter more” (p.13).

³ Edmonson, A. (2019) The Fearless Organisation. New Jersey: Wiley. p.xvi

⁴ Rozovsky, R (2015) “The five keys to a successful Goggle Team” re:Work Blog. November 17,2015

⁵ Duhigg, C (2016) What Google Learned From its Quest to Build the Perfect Team in The New York Times

Team Psychological Safety can be measured across seven elements and used to improve team performance,⁶ these are:

Appreciation

Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilised.

Mutual support

Team members support one another and don't act to undermine others' efforts.

Reaction to mistakes

Making mistakes is not held against team members.

Dealing with issues

Team members can bring up problems and tough issues safely.

Accepting diversity

Team members are not rejected for being different.

Taking risks

Team members feel it is safe to take risks on this team.

Asking for help

It is easy to ask others in the team for help.

By building and attending to TPS we are making the assumption that the interpersonal relationships in the team will thrive and grow to enable the team to engage in meaningful conversations, that in turn will drive performance. The ultimate goal of the team is not team psychological safety but **improved performance**. Building psychological safety in interpersonal relationships is only part of the journey. The team also needs to explore how a safer environment will actually help them to perform more effectively. In other words, what will improved interpersonal relationships do to impact performance?

“Focusing directly and explicitly on producing psychological safety was the wrong way to produce the change that was needed. The emphasis is on the work, how it's changing, and what's needed to do it well, rather than on psychological safety.”⁷

⁶ Edmondson, A (1 June 1999). “Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work

⁷ Edmondson, A (2010) Teaming p136

Team Dynamics

Differences in psychological safety can emerge as a consequence of group interactions. The norms of a group will encourage or inhibit team members' vulnerability. Are new ideas welcomed? Divergent ideas criticised?

The interplay of team member roles and characters are also part of group dynamics, for example does someone play a motherly role or a rebellious teen. These in-group and out-group dynamics and the power distribution among team members influence psychological safety

Practice Fields

Opportunities for teams to practise and to reflect upon the results, rather than to take real action. Most businesses do not employ practice and reflection to improve employee's skills, but most other teams in sport, and other disciplines, do. Practising creates an environment where it is safe to learn and make mistakes without fear of being penalised.

“Practice fields are likely to contribute to psychological safety not only because real..consequences are removed but also because they convey... to the team that learning is important and getting it right the first time is understood to not always be possible..Discussing and experiencing aspects of the team task offline highlights potential problems .. and because there are no material consequences of errors individuals are likely to speak up about them” (p.19).

Edmondson (2019)¹² notes:

“I do not mean to imply psychological safety is all you need for high performance. Not even close. I like to say that psychological safety takes off the brakes that keep people from achieving what's possible. But it's not the fuel that powers the car. In any challenging industry setting, leaders have two vital tasks. One, they must build psychological safety to spur learning and avoid preventable failures; two, they must set high standards and inspire and enable people to reach them. Setting high standards remains a crucial management task. So does sharing, sharpening, and continually emphasising a worthy purpose.”

¹² Edmondson, A (2019) The Fearless Organisation; Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation and Growth, Wiley:New Jersey p.21