



A Culture of Conversation? Building Psychological Safety in High-Risk Construction Environments

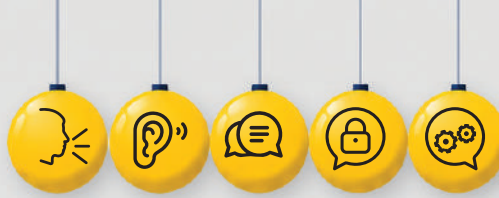
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Executive Summary

The construction industry remains one of the world's most challenging and high-risk sectors. In many ways, significant progress has been made in improving physical safety standards, reducing workplace incidents and strengthening regulatory compliance. Yet despite these advancements, serious incidents continue to occur.

Many investigations reveal a common unifying theme: someone knew something was wrong but unrecorded.

The issue is rarely a lack of procedures or technical controls. More often it is a failure of (or more likely as a result of) the culture. Individuals may hesitate to raise concerns because they fear criticism, judgment, damaging relationships, appearing incompetent or facing negative consequences.

Psychological safety addresses this challenge. It is the belief that individuals can speak openly, ask questions, admit mistakes and raise concerns without fear of humiliation or retaliation.

In construction, psychological safety is not a soft concept. It is a critical component of effective risk management, operational excellence and workforce wellbeing.

This paper explores the importance of psychological safety in high-risk environments and provides practical guidance for leaders seeking to create cultures where people have the confidence to speak up before concerns become incidents.



The Hidden Risk of Silence

Construction sites are dynamic environments involving multiple contractors, changing conditions, tight deadlines and complex activities.

Traditional safety management systems focus on physical hazards. However, one of the most significant risks on any project is often invisible: silence.



Workers may notice unsafe conditions but remain quiet. Supervisors may identify concerns but avoid challenging decisions. Team members may see emerging issues but assume someone else will raise them.

When concerns remain unspoken, opportunities to prevent incidents are lost.

The challenge is not whether people recognise risks. The challenge is whether they feel safe enough to discuss them.

Creating environments where individuals feel confident to raise concerns is therefore not simply a cultural aspiration. It is an operational necessity.

The Emperor's New Clothes: A Lesson for Modern Construction

Hans Christian Andersen's tale of The Emperor's New Clothes remains surprisingly relevant to modern organisations.

In the story, everyone can see the truth, yet nobody speaks because they fear embarrassment, exclusion or appearing foolish. The result is collective silence despite widespread awareness of the problem.

Construction organisations can experience similar dynamics.

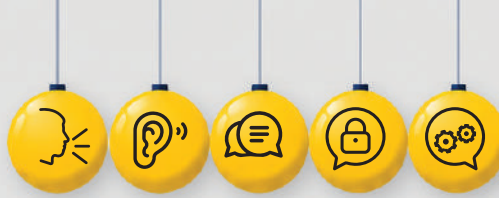
Workers may remain silent because they assume managers already know.

Supervisors may avoid challenging decisions made by senior leaders.

Teams may accept unsafe behaviours because they have become normalised.

In these situations, silence creates risk.

Psychological safety enables individuals to become the voice that identifies concerns before they escalate into incidents. It encourages honesty over hesitation and action over complacency.



Understanding Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is often misunderstood.

It does not mean lowering standards.

It does not mean avoiding accountability.

It does not mean allowing people to say whatever they want without consequence.

Instead, psychological safety is about creating an environment where people can contribute openly, challenge assumptions respectfully and raise concerns without fear.

Research consistently demonstrates that psychologically safe teams learn faster, communicate more effectively and perform at higher levels.

In construction environments, psychological safety strengthens hazard identification, improves reporting, enhances decision-making and supports continuous improvement.

Most importantly, it helps organisations identify weak signals before they become serious events.



THE SHIFT



Why Psychological Safety Matters in Construction

The benefits extend far beyond safety performance.



Improved Risk Identification

When people feel safe to speak up, more hazards, near misses and operational concerns are identified and addressed.



Better Decision-Making

Diverse viewpoints help teams avoid groupthink and challenge assumptions that may otherwise go unquestioned.



Enhanced Learning

Teams that openly discuss mistakes and lessons learned are better positioned to improve future performance.



Stronger Workforce Wellbeing

Employees who feel heard, respected and valued are more likely to be engaged, motivated and resilient.



Increased Trust

Open communication strengthens relationships between leaders, supervisors and frontline teams.

Collectively, these benefits create stronger and more effective organisations.

The Leadership Imperative

Psychological safety begins with leadership.

People closely observe how leaders respond when concerns are raised.

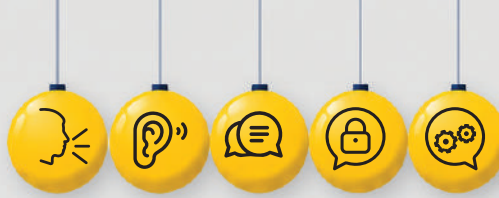
If individuals are criticised, ignored or dismissed, silence quickly becomes the safer option.

Conversely, when leaders welcome feedback, acknowledge uncertainty and encourage discussion, trust begins to grow.

Leaders do not need to have all the answers.

They do need to create environments where others feel comfortable contributing their perspectives.

Effective leaders recognise that safety is not simply about compliance. It is about creating conditions where people feel able to speak honestly about what they see, think and experience.



Conclusion Making Candour Viral

The future of construction safety will not be defined solely by technology, procedures or regulations.

It will also be defined by culture.

Organisations that create psychologically safe environments unlock the full potential of their people. They encourage honesty instead of hesitation, collaboration instead of fear and action instead of silence.

- Every worker, supervisor and leader has a role to play.
- The question is not whether concerns exist.
- The question is whether people feel safe enough to voice them.
- When they do, organisations become safer, stronger and more resilient.

The first step is simple:

- Create an environment where speaking up is not an act of courage.
- Make it part of everyday work.

The Research Behind Psychological Safety

The concept of psychological safety was pioneered by Professor Amy Edmondson of Harvard Business School, whose research has fundamentally changed the way organisations understand team performance, learning and risk management.

Edmondson defines psychological safety as:

"A belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes."

Her research found that the highest-performing teams were not those that made the fewest mistakes, but those that were most willing to discuss mistakes openly and learn from them.

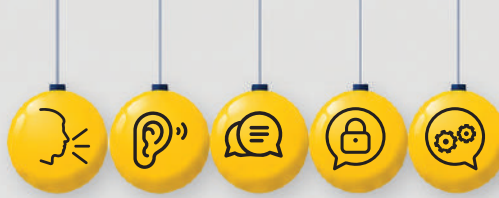
This finding challenged traditional assumptions about performance and accountability. Teams that felt psychologically safe were more likely to identify risks, report errors, seek help when needed and share knowledge across the organisation. As a result, they learned faster and performed better over time.

For construction organisations, the implications are significant.

Projects are often delivered in environments characterised by uncertainty, changing conditions, tight schedules and multiple stakeholders. In these circumstances, no procedure or management system can anticipate every challenge. Success depends upon individuals feeling confident enough to raise concerns, challenge assumptions and share information before issues escalate.

Psychological safety therefore complements traditional safety management systems. It strengthens hazard identification, improves decision-making and helps organisations uncover weak signals before they develop into incidents.

As Edmondson's research demonstrates, organisations that encourage open dialogue are not lowering standards; they are creating the conditions necessary for continuous improvement, innovation and safer outcomes.



A Practical Framework for Building Psychological Safety

Creating psychological safety requires deliberate and consistent action.

Model Vulnerability

Leaders who acknowledge mistakes and admit when they do not have all the answers demonstrate that openness is valued.

Encourage Questions and Respectful Challenge

Questions should be welcomed rather than viewed as obstacles. Healthy challenge improves decision-making and reduces risk.

Respond Positively to Concerns

How leaders react in critical moments shapes future behaviours. Concerns should be met with appreciation, not defensiveness.

Set Clear Expectations

Everyone should understand that speaking up is both encouraged and expected.

Address Incivility

Disrespectful behaviour, regardless of seniority, undermines trust and discourages open communication.

Promote Inclusion

Every voice matters. Diverse perspectives often reveal risks and opportunities that others may miss.

Reflect and Learn

Regular debriefs and lessons-learned discussions help normalise honest conversations about performance.

Lead with Empathy

Understanding different perspectives helps leaders build stronger relationships and create environments where people feel valued.

Reward Candour

Recognising individuals who raise concerns reinforces the behaviours organisations seek to encourage.

From Compliance to Commitment

Many organisations have robust safety systems.

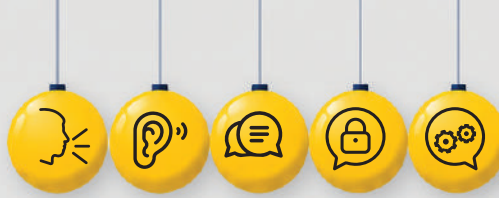
The challenge is ensuring people feel confident enough to use them, or to acknowledge the difference between the way things are written to the way things are done.

Compliance establishes expectations.

Psychological safety creates commitment.

When individuals believe their voice matters, they become active participants in improving safety, quality and performance.

The strongest safety cultures are not those where people simply follow rules. They are those where people feel responsible for helping one another succeed.



About the Author

Peter Baker FloL

Regional HSSE Manager, Douglas OHI

Peter Baker FloL is the Regional HSSE Manager at Douglas OHI, responsible for overseeing health, safety, sustainability and environmental performance across the Group's operations across the GCC.

With extensive experience in construction safety, environmental management and operational leadership, Peter works closely with project teams to embed best practice, strengthen safety culture and improve organisational performance. His approach emphasises the importance of both physical and psychological safety, recognising that workplaces perform best when individuals feel safe to speak up, raise concerns and contribute openly.

A trained workplace coach, mentor and a strong advocate for workforce wellbeing, Peter is committed to advancing initiatives that support mental health, enhance employee engagement and foster resilient, high-performing teams across Douglas OHI's operations.

The Douglas OHI people focused programme, "It's Ok", embodies his ethos and combines all the elements of psychological safety in encouraging inclusion and candour. Peter remains open to discuss this further with any like-minded person who recognises the significance and value of personhood.

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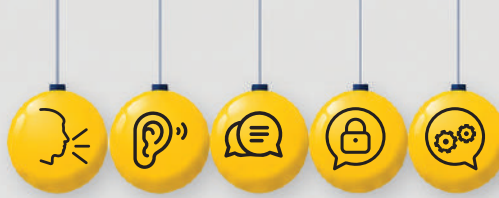
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Psychological Safety Self-Assessment

For Project Managers, Supervisors and Team Leaders

Rate each statement on a scale of 1–5:

- 1 = Strongly Disagree**
- 2 = Disagree**
- 3 = Neutral**
- 4 = Agree**
- 5 = Strongly Agree**

Statement	Score
Team members feel comfortable raising safety concerns.	
People openly admit mistakes without fear of blame.	
Supervisors actively encourage questions and alternative viewpoints.	
Concerns raised by workers are taken seriously and acted upon.	
Team members challenge unsafe behaviours regardless of seniority.	
Lessons learned are discussed openly following incidents or near misses.	
Different opinions are welcomed during planning and decision-making.	
Respectful disagreement is encouraged.	
Leaders respond positively when difficult issues are raised.	
Team members feel their voice matters	

20–29

Psychological safety may be inconsistent across the team. Consider targeted leadership interventions, coaching and engagement activities.

Below 20

There is a significant risk that concerns are not being raised or addressed effectively. Immediate attention should be given to leadership behaviours, communication practices and team culture.

Reflection Questions

- When was the last time someone challenged a decision I made?
- How do I typically respond when bad news is delivered?
- Do team members speak more freely when I am present or absent?
- What behaviours am I demonstrating that encourage, or discourage people from speaking up?
- What action will I take this month to strengthen psychological safety within my team?

Remember: The absence of reported concerns does not necessarily indicate the absence of risk. It may simply indicate the presence of silence.

Your Score

40–50

A psychologically safe environment is evident. Continue reinforcing open communication, learning and trust.

30–39

A generally positive culture exists, but opportunities remain to strengthen openness and encourage more candid conversations.

