

WORKPLACE SUPPORT • ARTICLE 5

CREATING A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE WORKPLACE

A COMPASSIONATE EXPLORATION

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A psychologically safe workplace is one where people feel comfortable being themselves. It is an environment where employees know they can ask questions, admit mistakes, express concerns, share ideas and request support without fear of embarrassment, criticism or punishment.

Psychological safety is not about lowering standards or avoiding accountability. High-performing teams can still have clear expectations, deadlines and responsibilities. The difference is that employees feel respected, valued and safe enough to speak honestly.

When people feel psychologically safe, they are more engaged, more innovative and more willing to contribute. When psychological safety is absent, employees often become fearful, withdrawn or reluctant to ask for help, even when they are struggling.

Creating psychological safety is one of the most powerful ways organisations can improve wellbeing, teamwork and performance.

What Is Psychological Safety?

The term psychological safety refers to a shared belief that people can speak openly without fear of negative consequences.

In psychologically safe workplaces, employees feel able to:

Ask questions without feeling foolish.

Admit when they have made a mistake.

Request help when they are struggling.

Share concerns respectfully.

Offer new ideas.

Challenge processes constructively.

Give honest feedback.

Be themselves without feeling they must hide who they are.

Psychological safety encourages learning rather than blame.

Instead of asking,

"Who made this mistake?"

Supportive workplaces ask,

"What can we learn from this?"

Why Psychological Safety Matters

Everyone makes mistakes.

Everyone experiences periods of uncertainty.

Everyone needs support at times.

When employees fear judgement, they often avoid asking questions or admitting difficulties. Small problems remain hidden until they become much larger.

Research has shown that psychologically safe workplaces often experience:

Better teamwork
Greater creativity
Improved communication
Higher employee engagement
Better decision-making
Reduced workplace conflict
Increased innovation
Higher staff retention
Improved wellbeing

People are more likely to contribute their best work when they feel respected rather than criticised.

The Impact on Mental Health

Psychological safety plays a significant role in protecting mental health.

Employees experiencing anxiety, depression, stress or burnout are far more likely to seek help early if they believe they will be met with understanding.

Without psychological safety, people often:

Hide symptoms.

Continue working while overwhelmed.

Avoid discussing difficulties.

Worry about being judged.

Fear losing opportunities.

Experience increasing stress.

Over time, this can contribute to emotional exhaustion, burnout and sickness absence.

A supportive conversation at the right time can prevent difficulties from escalating into a crisis.

Psychological Safety and Neurodiversity

Psychological safety is particularly important for neurodivergent employees.

Many autistic adults and people with ADHD have spent years masking their differences in order to fit into workplaces that were not designed with their needs in mind.

This constant effort can be exhausting.

Without psychological safety, neurodivergent employees may feel unable to:

Request reasonable adjustments.

Explain communication preferences.

Disclose sensory difficulties.

Ask for written instructions.

Request flexibility.

Be authentic at work.

Creating an accepting workplace reduces the need for masking and allows individuals to focus their energy on their work rather than hiding who they are.

What Makes People Feel Unsafe?

Psychological safety can quickly disappear when employees experience:

Public criticism.

Blame-focused management.

Humiliation.

Bullying.

Gossip.

Being ignored.

Constant monitoring.

Fear of making mistakes.

Punishment for speaking honestly.

Lack of trust.

Even subtle behaviours can make people feel unsafe.

Interrupting employees, dismissing ideas or reacting defensively may discourage future communication.

How Managers Can Build Psychological Safety

Managers play a vital role in creating supportive workplace cultures.

Helpful leadership behaviours include:

Listening Actively

Give employees time to explain their concerns without interrupting or making assumptions.

Feeling heard is often the first step towards feeling supported.

Responding Without Judgement

Employees are more likely to seek help when managers remain calm, curious and respectful.

Avoid jumping to conclusions or minimising someone's experience.

Encouraging Questions

Create an environment where asking questions is viewed as a strength rather than a weakness.

Questions demonstrate engagement and a willingness to learn.

Normalising Mistakes

Mistakes happen in every organisation.

Rather than focusing on blame, encourage learning, reflection and improvement.

This builds confidence and encourages openness.

Respecting Confidentiality

Employees need confidence that personal information will be treated sensitively and shared only when necessary.

Trust is built through confidentiality and consistency.

Recognising Success

Positive feedback is just as important as constructive feedback.

Recognising effort, progress and achievements helps employees feel valued and motivated.

Practical Ways to Create Psychological Safety

Organisations can strengthen psychological safety by:

Holding regular one-to-one meetings.

Encouraging honest feedback.

Asking for employee ideas.

Providing clear expectations.

Responding constructively to mistakes.

Supporting flexible working where appropriate.

Promoting inclusive leadership.

Providing mental health awareness training.

Encouraging respectful communication.

Celebrating diversity and inclusion.

Psychological safety develops over time through consistent actions rather than one-off initiatives.

What Employees Can Do

While leaders have significant influence, employees also contribute to workplace culture.

Individuals can help create psychologically safe teams by:

Listening respectfully.

Supporting colleagues.

Asking for clarification when needed.

Offering constructive feedback kindly.

Respecting different perspectives.

Challenging inappropriate behaviour.

Being approachable.

Showing empathy.

Every interaction contributes to workplace culture.

The Benefits for Organisations

Psychologically safe organisations often experience:

Increased productivity.

Better collaboration.

Higher innovation.

Improved employee wellbeing.

Reduced sickness absence.

Stronger employee retention.

Better customer service.

Greater trust across teams.

More resilient workplaces.

Employees who feel safe are more likely to contribute their ideas, identify risks early and work collaboratively towards shared goals.

Final Thoughts

Psychological safety is the foundation of healthy workplace relationships. It allows people to be honest, ask for help, share ideas and acknowledge mistakes without fear of judgement.

When employees feel psychologically safe, they do not waste energy hiding their struggles or worrying about how they will be perceived. Instead, they can focus on learning, contributing and performing at their best.

Creating psychological safety is not about removing accountability - it is about replacing fear with trust. Organisations that invest in trust, compassion and open communication build workplaces where people feel valued, supported and empowered to thrive.

A gentle reminder

This resource offers general information and reflection. It is not a diagnosis or a substitute for individual medical or therapeutic care. If you are worried about your safety or someone else's, seek urgent professional support.

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