What does it take to build (or weaken) an enthusiastic, motivated and high-performing workforce?

Project Aristotle, a multi-year study of 180 teams at Google, was formed to determine the factors involved in why and how some teams are effective and some are not. They initially looked at each team's composition, particularly in regard to educational backgrounds, skills and personality traits of the team members. What they found was that none of these factors was decisive in determining the effectiveness of a team. They eventually discovered that, even for very smart, high-powered employees, a **psychologically safe** work environment was critical for team effectiveness. Other factors – clear goals, dependable colleagues, meaningful and impactful work – were all very important, but psychological safety was essential.

Imagine you're in a team meeting and someone takes an **interpersonal risk** and proposes a new idea to solve

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a thorny problem. However, instead of receiving supportive, open-minded, constructive feedback, another member of the team is dismissive. Perhaps they belittle the idea and make sarcastic comments. It may even be delivered with humour, but there's no doubting the put-down.

The team member likely feels embarrassed and devalued. Chances are they are hesitant to contribute further. Chances are they'll avoid contributing at future meetings as well. Psychological safety is lost.

Psychological safety is a discreet, but powerful, source of success or failure in all businesses.

· Have you ever wondered why your people aren't more collaborative?

· Do you work with any 'jobsworths' who do their job, but nothing more?
· Have you ever been concerned by your team's lack of ideas, creativity and innovation?

You may be unfamiliar with this idea of psychological safety, but it is now recognised as a fundamental element of enthusiastic, motivated and high-achieving teams.

IN A NUTSHELL:
Psychological safety exists in an atmosphere where colleagues and team members feel able to speak openly with **candour** in any situation.

What exactly is psychological safety?

Psychological safety is a shared belief within a group that it is safe to take interpersonal risks without fear of negative consequences for one's self-image, status or career. Such safety results when you **trust** and **respect** one another.

When people believe it's safe, they feel free to express themselves openly. They share their ideas. They ask questions. They admit mistakes. They engage in constructive discussions without the fear of being judged, ridiculed or punished. Their enthusiasm, energy, passion and commitment to their work improves..

Ignore psychological safety at your peril...

Virtually no one comes to work in the morning to be (or to be SEEN to be) ignorant, incompetent or disruptive. We all seek to avoid these interpersonal risks, either consciously or unconsciously.

· Because we don't want to look ignorant, we don't ask questions! We don't challenge questionable decisions, mistakes or inaccuracies that might result in a better outcome.
· Because we don't want to look incompetent, we don't admit mistakes or weaknesses! And projects delay, quality fails, customers are let down.
· Because we don't want to be called disruptive, we don't make suggestions! And improvements in speed, quality

and performance are lost. Safety issues might be ignored and lives put at risk.

In most cases, real innovation, progress and success is dependent upon cooperation and collaboration amongst team members. This, in turn, is dependent upon trust, respect and candour which, in turn, is built on a sense of psychological safety.

"Ideas typically do not just come to you. They happen because you've been talking about something and talking to a lot of people about it for a long period of time."
– Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook Q&A Session

"Organisations don't have ideas – people do, so we need to make sure people can contribute their ideas."
– Margaret Heffernan, entrepreneur, CEO, writer and keynote speaker

A PROVEN SOLUTION FOR YOU...

When you create and nurture a culture of psychological safety, you ensure that your team feel free to exchange ideas, concerns and questions without fear of reprisal or negative consequences. This will open a flow of creativity, innovation and growth for your firm.

What happens if there's a lack of psychological safety in your business?

When interpersonal risk/fear rather than interpersonal safety rules, you get:

· Reduced engagement, creativity and innovation, resulting in lost opportunities and lower performance
· Decreased trust and collaboration, which reduces productivity, engagement and progress
· Lower morale, risking the loss of your good people

In an environment lacking psychological safety, team members may be hesitant to take risks, to try new approaches or to learn from failures. This inhibits individual and organisational growth, stifles innovation and limits the ability to adapt to the rapidly changing world in which we live.

Build a fearless culture...

In her book, *The Fearless Organization*, Amy Edmondson, Professor of Leadership and Management at the Harvard Business School, writes of her work with a hospital. They were struggling to reduce medical errors and improve patient outcomes.

By building a culture where employees at all levels felt comfortable speaking up about potential issues or problems, the hospital was able to significantly reduce medical errors and improve patient care.

According to Amy:

"Without psychological safety, people cannot speak up, contribute or learn. They cannot contribute their unique perspective or value...Fear in the workplace is lethal to creativity, innovation and engagement."

Lives at risk...

Investigations of the 2005 Deepwater Horizon drilling rig incident suggest that, prior to 20 April 2010, people felt they couldn't voice their concerns. This lack of psychological safety likely contributed to the escalation of risks and the subsequent tragedy when the drilling rig exploded – 11 killed, 46 injured and the largest marine oil spill the world has seen.

Overall, the absence of psychological safety can have wide-ranging, detrimental effects on your team's stability and well-being, their willingness to collaborate and their ability to innovate. The success of your business ultimately depends on you nurturing and maintaining psychological safety.

A culture of psychological safety pays off...

Psychological safety should be a key component of any workplace culture, as it allows for:

· Enhanced collaboration
· Increased learning and growth
· Improved performance
· Healthy conflict resolution
· Well-being and retention

Psychological safety is absolutely necessary for fostering a culture of trust, collaboration, learning and high performance within teams and organisations. It creates an environment where individuals can freely express themselves, take risks and contribute their best efforts, ultimately leading to better outcomes and a more positive work experience.

For more information about the advantages of a culture of psychological safety, please click the link for the downloadable tools at the bottom of this article.

How to build a psychologically safe culture...

According to Amy Edmondson and other experts in the field, there are a number of practical skills necessary for creating a psychologically safe work environment, including:

Active listening – Listening to others' ideas, concerns and questions without judgment to promote open communication. Give them the benefit of the doubt.

Empathy – Being able to understand and relate to other people's emotions, perspectives and experiences.

Trust-building – Being authentic, reliable, and accountable to build trust among colleagues.

Feedback delivery – Providing constructive feedback in a manner that is respectful and which promotes willingness among colleagues to learn from mistakes.

Conflict resolution – Being able to address and resolve conflicts that may arise in the workplace in a constructive, respectful and timely manner.

Inclusivity – Being inclusive, open-minded and sensitive to differences in a diverse workplace.

Growth mindset – Encouraging individuals to embrace challenges and learn from failures to enable continuous learning and development.

Utilising these practical skills can help individuals create an environment where people feel safe to speak up, share ideas and collaborate. This environment then fosters trust, creativity and innovation that can lead to increased productivity and engagement in the workplace.

STOP thinking that silence or a lack of comment mean that your team feel psychologically safe.

START creating a culture where everyone feels safe to share and collaborate.

How do you apply these skills in your business?

As a leader, you are responsible for the social and cultural environment of your business – in other words, how your people feel and behave.

Here's how to break down the elements of psychological safety, thanks to the practical and common-sense approach Timothy R Clarke applied in his own businesses and which he shared in his book, *The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety*. It pays to follow a sequence of human needs:

1. Inclusion Safety – As human beings, we want to be included.
2. Learner Safety – We want to learn.
3. Contributor Safety – We want to contribute.
4. Challenger Safety – We want to be able to challenge the status quo.

We need to feel included, that we are learning and contributing and that we can challenge – all without fear of censure, embarrassment or punishment.

"The leader's job is not to have all the ideas but to make sure all ideas are heard...The essence of leadership is to enable others to feel safe in contributing their best."
– Amy Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization*

GET YOUR BITESIZE SUPPORT TOOLS NOW
https://businessbreakthrough.online/psychological-safety-tools-and-resources/

4 helping hands for you…

The importance of a psychologically safe environment in your business cannot be overstated. Without it, there is a risk your team will be disengaged and your business will stagnate, leading to a lack of growth and innovation.

1. **Lead by example** – As a leader, you need to model the behaviour you would like your team to emulate. Encourage open communication and make it clear that mistakes are opportunities for growth, not reasons for punishment.

2. **Foster teamwork and collaboration** – Encourage collaboration and cooperation among team members, looking for areas of improvement and opportunities for experimentation.

3. **Encourage open communication** – Foster an environment where employees feel comfortable speaking up, sharing their ideas and asking questions. Actively listen to your employees and validate their perspectives, even if you disagree.

4. **Encourage diversity and inclusion** – Embrace diversity and inclusion in your business. Recognise and value the unique perspectives and experiences that each individual brings to the table. Foster an environment where everyone feels included and respected.

By implementing these steps, organisations can cultivate an environment of psychological safety, encourage team learning, collaboration and innovation and, ultimately, achieve better results.

Here are some steps you can take to help ensure psychological safety in your business:

Establish clear expectations – Clearly communicate expectations regarding behaviour, performance and respect in the workplace. Make sure everyone understands the importance of psychological safety and the role they play in creating it.

Provide constructive feedback – Offer feedback in a constructive and supportive manner. Focus on the behaviour or performance, not on the individual. Encourage a growth mindset by emphasising learning and improvement rather than criticism.

Address conflicts promptly – Address conflicts and issues promptly and fairly. Establish clear processes for conflict resolution and ensure that employees feel safe and supported when raising concerns.

Promote work-life balance – Recognise the importance of work-life balance and encourage employees to take care of their well-being. Provide resources and support for mental health and stress management.

Celebrate successes and learn from failures – Celebrate achievements and recognise the efforts and contributions of your employees. Encourage a culture that embraces learning from failures and treats them as opportunities for growth. Fail fast and move on!

Continuously improve – Regularly seek feedback from employees through surveys, focus groups or in one-on-one discussions. Use this feedback to identify areas for improvement and implement changes that promote psychological safety.

Remember, fostering psychological safety in your business is an ongoing process that requires consistent effort and commitment. By implementing these practices, you can create a supportive and inclusive work environment where individuals thrive and contribute their best.

TIME TO DISAGREE:

'Sometimes the ideas put forward are just not good – am I still expected to accept them unconditionally?'

A psychologically safe environment is not one in which everyone agrees with someone just to be "nice". Nor does it mean offering praise or unreserved support for everything said. Psychological safety is actually about candour. It's about allowing for productive disagreement or conflict. It's about a free exchange of ideas. There may be a disagreement on a particular issue; however, the important thing is that conflicting ideas can be shared and discussed without fear of rejection or reprisal. It is this exchange of ideas that allows the group to learn and grow. Simply acknowledge the contribution, ask others how this may help, ask for more suggestions, ask how we can make an idea stronger.

'Is psychological safety enough? What about performance standards?'

Psychological safety, while of utmost importance, is not the only thing needed in a workforce. Leaders must also set high standards, inspiring and enabling people to reach these standards. In addition, it is important for leaders to communicate and demonstrate a core purpose, behind which all can rally. These three things work together, but psychological safety will underpin everything. When your people believe that they can, that they must, be forthcoming at work, it allows them to set ambitious goals, believe in these ambitious goals and work together with others to attain them.

Want to know more?

The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety: Defining the Path to Inclusion and Innovation – Timothy R. Clarke

If you are looking to implement a culture of psychological safety in your business, this book breaks down the concept, providing many practical applications that you can start using today. This book will expand what you know about psychological safety and will increase your awareness of its necessity and its value to your business.

The Fearless Organization – Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning Innovation and Growth – Amy Edmondson

If you want to make changes to the culture of your business, this book is a must-read. Amy provides clear-cut examples with academic research and stories to back up why leaders at all levels must provide an environment of psychological safety for better outcomes.