

**PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY
IN THE WORKPLACE**

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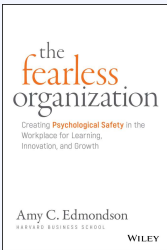
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WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY?

Psychological safety [is] a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking (i.e., the belief that one can speak up without risk of punishment or humiliation).¹

- Amy Edmondson
Harvard Business School



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WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY?

OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) is charged with ensuring employers in the US maintain "safe and healthy work environments."²



OSHA conducts inspections to ensure workplaces are *physically* safe...

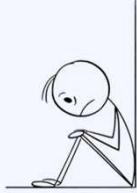


...but who is charged with ensuring workplaces are *psychologically* safe?

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WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY?

Research reveals *psychological* pain has a deeper and longer-lasting impact compared to *physical* pain.³



“Over time, the pain associated with a physical attack is difficult or impossible to recall. The memory of social rejection, however, even many years after the fact, can elicit the same strength of emotion as it did at the time of the event.”⁴

CONSEQUENCES OF A PSYCHOLOGICALLY UNSAFE ENVIRONMENT

CEO Martin Winterkorn was a **demanding boss who abhorred failure**. Former executives described his management style as authoritarian and aimed at fostering a climate of fear. Winterkorn also set ambitious goals for public growth -- including that of becoming the world's largest carmaker.



U.S. District Court Judge Charles Breyer approved the final \$14.7 billion settlement on October 25, 2016.

In a psychologically unsafe workplace, staying silent is easier/safer than speaking up.

IMPORTANCE OF PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFETY

In 2012, Google® endeavored to discover the key to successful teams. They studied every aspect of teams, including:



- How often team members socialized outside work
- Number of similar hobbies among members
- Were team members introverts or extroverts
- Individual level of education among team members
- Length of professional experience
- Demographic (gender, age, race, etc.) makeup of team
- Individual IQs of team members
- Hierarchical structure of team

Nothing correlated to team success.⁶

IMPORTANCE OF PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFETY

Finally, the researchers noticed a similarity consistently shared by successful teams...



*"As long as everyone got a chance to talk, the team did well. But if only one person or a small group spoke all the time, the collective intelligence declined."*⁷

This observation led to the finding that **psychological safety** was the single most important and consistent characteristic of successful teams.

IMPORTANCE OF PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFETY

A 2017 Gallup® survey revealed only **3 in 10** US workers strongly agreed their opinions matter in the workplace.⁸



Workplaces in which **6 in 10** workers felt their opinions mattered have a:

- 27% reduction in turnover
- 40% reduction in safety incidents
- 12% increase in productivity⁹

Psychologically Safe environments are better for employees, AND better for business.

COMPONENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Psychological safety is comprised of several parts- which are weighted *differently* by each individual.

- Predictability** – need for **security** and consistency
- Approval** – need to be **well-regarded & belong**
- Control** – need for **autonomy**
- Equity** – need to feel environment is **fair**



Humans have a "negativity bias" that draws our attention to threat and danger above all else.¹⁰ The amygdala constantly watches for threats of all kind (including psychological).¹¹

COMPONENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

The brain deals with 11 million bits of information per second on a daily basis. It is estimated that 99% of this input is handled in a completely automated manner, below the level of conscious decision-making.¹²

- Predictability** – need for **security** and consistency
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- Equity** – need to feel environment is **fair**



Children often demonstrate what happens when the amygdala is unchecked. (It's called a *temper tantrum*.)

COMPONENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

In adults, the pre-frontal cortex is sufficiently developed to prevent outbursts. The PFC acts as a "manual over-ride" that allows us to take control of our actions/responses.¹³

- Predictability** – need for **security** and consistency
- Approval** – need to be **well-regarded & belong**
- Control** – need for **autonomy**
- Equity** – need to feel environment is **fair**



The pre-frontal cortex is what keeps you from ramming into someone who cuts you off on the highway (well, most of the time anyway). Unfortunately, the PFC can become exhausted.

COMPONENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

However, even adults become more irritable when they are tired, hungry (hangry), or not feeling well. This is because the PFC is very sensitive to anything that is "out of sorts."¹⁴

- Predictability** – need for **security** and consistency
- Approval** – need to be **well-regarded & belong**
- Control** – need for **autonomy**
- Equity** – need to feel environment is **fair**



Keeping your PFC happy is **crucial** to being a rational human being. Proper nutrition, exercise, and sleep are all necessary to a functional PFC!

COMPONENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

As with physical safety, each individual may have a *different* perception of psychological safety. For example, individuals have different tolerances for heights. A situation that triggers fear/discomfort in one individual may not affect another.

- Predictability** – need for **security** and consistency
- Approval** – need to be **well-regarded & belong**
- Control** – need for **autonomy**
- Equity** – need to feel environment is **fair**



Everyone requires at least some degree of predictability, approval, control, and equity- but our sensitivities to a lack of these components varies by individual. An environment that feels safe to one person may make another person uncomfortable.

COMPONENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

PREDICTABILITY – need for security and consistency

Our brains are prediction machines. Although predictability may make for a boring movie, in real life it conserves the brain's resources and makes us feel "safe."¹⁵



You probably wouldn't be comfortable following *this* vehicle on your drive to the office.

Sudden changes **at** the office can also cause discomfort as well.

COMPONENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

PREDICTABILITY – need for security and consistency

Our brains are prediction machines. Although predictability may make for a boring movie, in real life it conserves the brain's resources and makes us feel "safe."



When we encounter things that are *inconsistent* with what we expect, it challenges our sense of security.

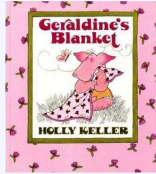
Small amounts of uncertainty are stimulating, but a consistently uncertain environment can eventually lead to illness and depression.¹⁶

COMPONENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

PREDICTABILITY – need for security and consistency

Although everyone has some need for predictability, the degree to which unpredictability (e.g., change, uncertainty, inconsistency) affects us varies from person to person.

Benitria likes change. She is easily bored and enjoys the challenge that comes with new situations. She takes different routes home from work just to "mix things up a bit."



James likes consistency. He sits in the same seat at church every week, takes his coffee exactly the same way each day, and has had the same haircut for 30 years now...

COMPONENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

PREDICTABILITY – need for security and consistency

SITUATION- The office is transitioning to a new practice management system. The new system has a completely different look and feel, and will require everyone in the practice to change the way they enter and access data.

Benitria likes change.

The system is new to everybody.
Do you suppose one of these two may feel a little less at ease with the change in systems?



James likes consistency.

CREATING A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENT

PREDICTABILITY – need for security and consistency

Creating a safe environment for individuals who have a **high need** for **PREDICTABILITY**...

- Always keep your promises
- Provide a lot of detail, and a procedure for everything
- Overcommunicate – give expectations and recognize potential risks
- Be willing to listen to- and answer- any and all questions
- Don't change too many things at once

Creating a safe environment for individuals who have a **low need** for **PREDICTABILITY**...

- Partner them with detail-oriented people who will be happy to "manage the mundane"
- Hold accountable to processes- but be open to "suggestions for improvement"
- Provide new challenges / areas of learning
- Do not micromanage¹⁸

COMPONENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

APPROVAL – need to be well-regarded and belong

One of the largest studies into human behavior (1995) concluded:

“At present, it seems fair to conclude that human beings are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a **need to belong**.”¹⁹

The study found individuals who felt lonely or ill-regarded suffered negative impacts to:

- Intelligence
- Emotional well-being
- Behavior
- Immunity (supported by numerous objective measurements)



COMPONENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

APPROVAL – need to be well-regarded and belong

Individuals who have a high need for approval have a strong reaction to rejection.

A *disapproving* look can be more threatening than a look of *anger* for those with high sensitivity to rejection.²¹



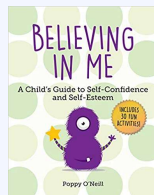
COMPONENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

APPROVAL – need to be well-regarded and belong

Although everyone has some need for approval, the degree to which rejection affects us varies from person to person.

Mark has a low need for approval. He is confident in his own abilities and doesn't need- or particularly like- the spotlight. He enjoys being "part of a team," and has never even asked for a promotion.

Fei has a high need for approval. She is energetic, motivated, keeps everyone entertained with stories and jokes, and is extremely competitive. She's made it clear she wants to manage the practice one day.



COMPONENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

APPROVAL – need to be well-regarded and belong

SITUATION- One of the doctors *hates* to see rechecks. When a patient is put in her chair for a recheck and the issue turns out to be related to fitting, she makes it a point to communicate how “disappointed she is” with the optical staff.

Mark has a low need for approval.

Both of these employees are opticians.
Do you suppose one of these two may feel a little more threatened than the other?



Fei has a high need for approval.

CREATING A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENT

APPROVAL – need to be well-regarded and belong

Creating a safe environment for individuals who have a **high need for APPROVAL**...

- Recognition and praise go a long way- acknowledge their individual accomplishments
- Constructive feedback needs to be handled delicately and 1:1
- Avoid putting in situations where s/he has to implement an unpopular decision
- Motivate with status (titles are important)

Creating a safe environment for individuals who have a **low need for APPROVAL**...

- Authenticity and modesty are “safe zones-” acknowledge their contribution to the team
- Don't create situations where s/he is competing with teammates
- Use concrete (e.g., monetary) rewards- status is not a motivator (may be happy to stay in one position for years, but raises are still necessary)
- Avoid putting him/her in the spotlight, attention can be viewed as threatening

COMPONENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

CONTROL – need for autonomy

In both animal and human studies, the inability to *control* our environment leads to:



- Sad mood
- Loss of interest
- Weight loss
- Sleep problems
- Fatigue
- Worthlessness
- Indecisiveness / poor concentration
- Psychomotor problems

These happen to also be the symptoms of clinical depression.²²

Everyone feels some level of need to have at least the perception of “control.”

COMPONENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

CONTROL – need for autonomy

Conversely, the perception of control has positive effects on our perception of reality.



Studies have found when patients control their own pain medication after surgery (PCA), they actually use *less*.²³

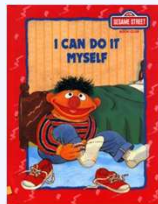
Having a sense of control reduces anxiety, depression, and even the perception of pain. The perceived loss of control inhibits the thought processes that make us rational human beings.

COMPONENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

CONTROL – need for autonomy

Although everyone has some need for control, the degree to which rejection affects us varies from person to person.

Susan has a low need for control. She is always willing to help with anyone's project, and easily adapts to almost any situation- she was the only person in the office that didn't feel stressed out by all the changing COVID requirements.



Andre has a high need for control. He is a self-starter that requires almost no management, and often comes up with creative ideas (he once single-handedly created and implemented a new frame inventory management system).

COMPONENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

CONTROL – need for autonomy

SITUATION- The practice manager has decided the entire staff should begin wearing uniforms. All employees are now required to wear coordinating matching scrubs.

Susan has a low need for control.

Other than a loosely regulated/enforced dress code, employees have always been at liberty to express their own style. Which employee is *more likely* to challenge this new policy?



"I'M STRESSING OUT" "EVERYTHING IS FINE"

Andre has a high need for control.

CREATING A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENT

CONTROL – need for autonomy

Creating a safe environment for individuals who have a **high need for CONTROL...**

- Provide the objective- but allow freedom in how to achieve it
- Provide projects that can be accomplished independently
- Never, ever micromanage!
- Whenever possible, wait to be asked for feedback and direction

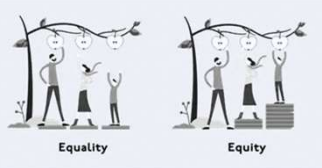
Creating a safe environment for individuals who have a **low need for CONTROL...**

- Provide adequate direction as to how an objective should be accomplished
- Don't force him/her to express an opinion unless it is absolutely necessary
- Provide projects that require teamwork
- Ensure s/he is comfortable before placement in a management position

COMPONENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

EQUITY – need to feel environment is fair

Studies show the perception of unfairness triggers the anterior insular region of the brain (which also causes disgust when tasting bitter food that might be poisonous).²⁴



The insula can interfere with the pre-frontal cortex. That is, when you perceive unfairness it becomes harder to control emotion.

COMPONENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

EQUITY – need to feel environment is fair

The perception of inequity affects our view of our environment.²⁵



Individuals react negatively to the perception of unfair treatment- both unfairness directed towards self **and** unfairness directed towards others.

The "Ultimatum Game" demonstrates an individual will even reject personal gain IF s/he judges the situation to be unfair.²⁵

COMPONENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

EQUITY – need to feel environment is fair

The perception of inequity affects our view of our environment.



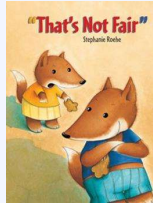
Researchers designed an "inequity game" that they used to test 866 pairs of children ages 4 to 15 in Canada, India, Mexico, Peru, Sengal, Uganda and the United States. They found children developed reactions to unfairness directed at self by age 4- and reactions to unfairness directed towards others by age 8.²⁶

COMPONENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

EQUITY – need to feel environment is fair

Although everyone has some desire for equity, the degree to which unfairness is perceived and/or affects us varies from person to person.

Jorge has a low sensitivity to equity. He is extremely result-focused, and always delivers to whatever goal is set. He's quick to "tell it the way it is" without pulling punches, and cheerfully does whatever it takes to "get the job done."



Stephanie has a high sensitivity to equity. She is a strong advocate for doing things "the right way," and always ensures everyone has a chance to have a say. She is happy when everyone else is happy.

COMPONENTS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

EQUITY – need to feel environment is fair

SITUATION- The practice is beginning to use myopia control products. The manager wants each optician to fit the lenses in a rotating order, which sometimes causes bottlenecks in the optical (because some opticians take longer when taking the measurements).

Jorge has a low sensitivity to equity.

The manager wants to ensure everyone becomes proficient in fitting the new lens. Who is more likely to be stressed by the bottlenecks that are resulting?



"I'M STRESSING OUT"

"EVERYTHING IS FINE"

Stephanie has a high sensitivity to equity.

CREATING A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENT

EQUITY – need to feel environment is fair

Creating a safe environment for individuals who have a **high need** for **EQUITY**...

- Avoid favoritism at all costs
- Make decision processes transparent as possible
- Motivate with rewards for adherence to the process
- Make sure everyone has a voice

Creating a safe environment for individuals who have a **low need** for **EQUITY**...

- Whenever possible, focus on the outcome- not the process
- Be careful when putting political correctness over results
- Motivate with result-oriented rewards
- Don't force participation in discussions about social issues

CREATING A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENT

- PREDICTABILITY
- APPROVAL
- CONTROL
- EQUITY



What is your own PACE?
 What level of sensitivity do you have to each component?
 What does your ideal environment look like?



It starts with **you**. Understanding what makes you feel safe is important- because it helps you avoid consensus bias.²⁷

We all tend to project our own perceptions onto others- which leads to confusion when others react differently than we expect.

CREATING A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENT



Psychological safety requires the participation of each **individual**- and the collective effort of the team.

What about the **other** people in your environment? While it is important for them to "know themselves," it is also important for you to understand their PACE.

When viewed from another's perspective, situations take on a new light.

A free assessment is available at: <https://brainleadership.com/solution/safety-assessment/>

CREATING A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENT



Psychological safety requires the participation of each individual- and the collective effort of the **team**.

Remember, effective teams are those where everyone has a voice.

In a safe environment, everyone has the right to raise *constructive* issues without the fear of being punished or shamed.

In the best teams, the group agrees on a solution to the issue.

CREATING A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENT

This is where leadership comes in...
Rate your agreement on these questions from 1-5 (5 = completely agree).
Then ask your team to do the same...

1. On this team, I understand what is expected of me.
2. We value patient outcomes more than the volume of output.
3. If I make a mistake on this team, it is never held against me.
4. When something goes wrong, we work as a team to find the systemic cause.
5. All members of this team feel able to bring up problems and tough issues.
6. Members of this team never reject others for being different and nobody is left out.
7. It is safe for me to take a risk on this team.
8. It is easy for me to ask other members of this team for help.
9. Nobody on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.
10. Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilised.²⁸



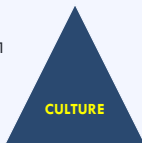
Determine your averages, combine, and you have your **baseline**...
If the answer is "50," you should teach this course- if it is <50, proceed...

CREATING A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENT

This is where leadership comes in...

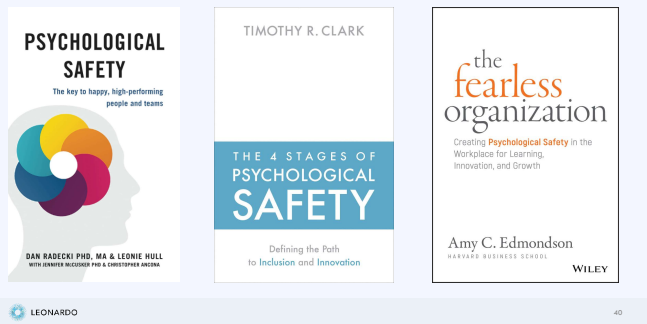
Have a roundtable discussion (or for those who may want to give 1:1 input, have a 1:1 discussion).

For each question, answer this *"What would we need to do to make this a 5?"*



You now have a list of **actionable items** to work on both as a team and as a leader.

RECOMMENDED READING



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