



Psychological Safety in Teams

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Based on: “The Fearless Organization” by Amy C Edmonson, PhD



SCENARIO 1

A new nurse at a NICU notices that a doctor has **not prescribed a new medicine** for supporting lung development of two high risk premature twins. She learned about this in nursing school.

But the **neonatologist had not issued an order for the medicine**.

The nurse thinks for a moment about **talking with the doctor** but then remembered that the previous week, the same doctor had **publicly berated another nurse** for questioning one of her orders.

What do you think the nurse is more likely to do next?

- a. Remain silent and tell herself the twins will probably be OK.
- b. Express her concerns to the doctor.



SCENARIO 2

Gunther just joined an **IT team** working on a technical project. During one of the first staff meetings the team initiated a discussion around some of the problems they were having with a **new commercial software**.

Gunther shared his **bad experience** with the same software in his previous job, highlighting that he believed it was not being used any more.

The room **went silent** for a moment and then a another team member proposed to discuss the issue in **another occasion**.

What do you think may have happened?

- a. The group is just shy.
- b. Buying the software was the idea of the supervisor.



■ What is Psychological Safety?

- *“Belief that one will **not be punished**, excluded or humiliated for disagreeing with others, **asking questions, proposing ideas, raising concerns or admitting mistakes.**”*

In other words (shorter)

- *“Believe that our work environment is **safe for interpersonal risk-taking**”*
- A **team-level** phenomenon that emerges from team **dynamics**. It may **vary widely** between teams in same organization.



■ What is NOT?

- *“Everyone agreeing with each other”*
- *“Being extrovert”*
- *“Not about being irresponsible”*

Psychological safety is **not immunity from consequences**, nor is it a state of high self-regard.

In psychologically safe workplaces, **people know they might fail** and that they might receive **performance feedback** that says they're not meeting expectations.

Psychological safety is NOT about **feeling irresponsible** for what happens. On the contrary, **members of psychologically safe teams feel more responsible** for their effectiveness and productivity.



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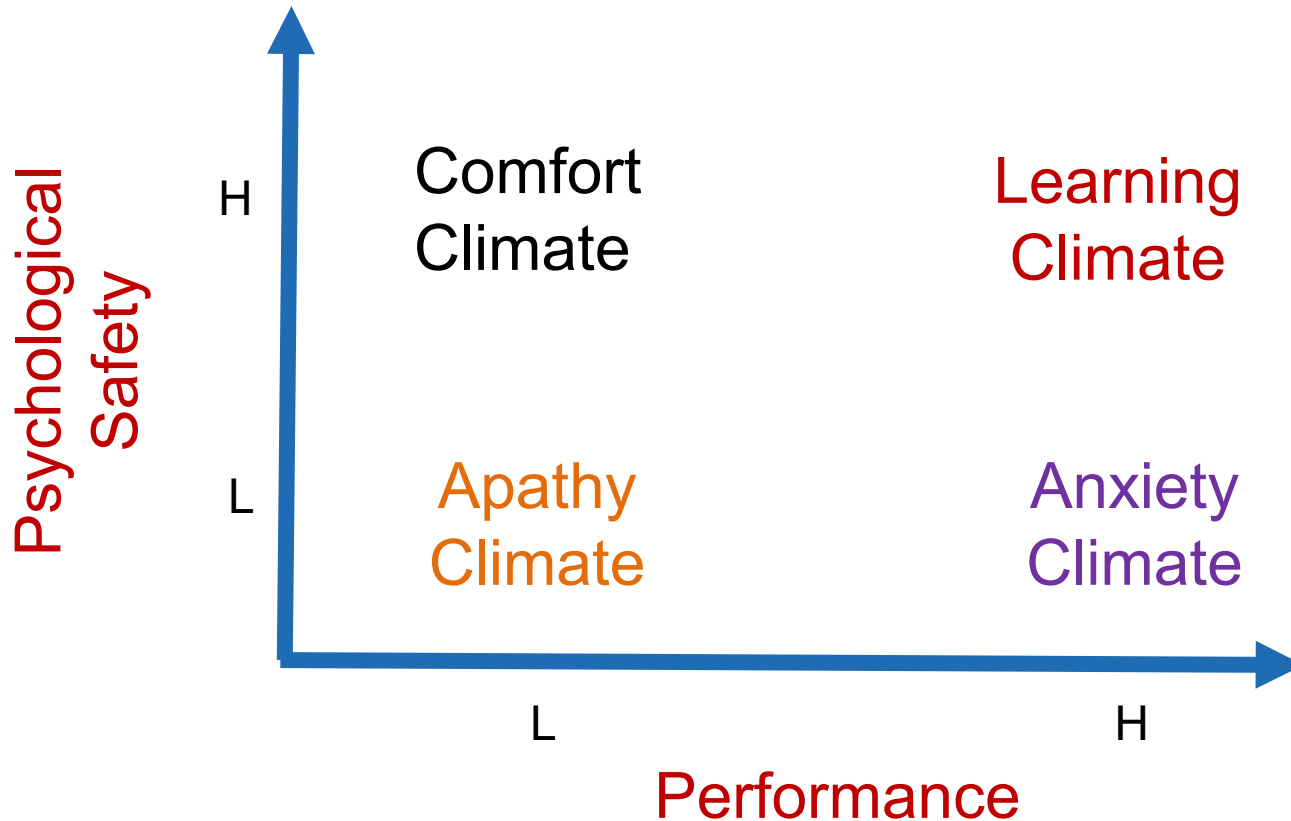
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■ What is NOT?

➤ “Lowering performance” – in fact these are independent variables.





- **Main barrier** to Psychological Safety: “natural” fear

Unwritten rules about voice in organizations that most people take for granted

- “Do not **criticize** something the boss may have helped create”
- “Do not **propose** things unless you have solid data”
- “Do not **speak up** if the boss’s boss is present”
- “Do not speak up in a group with anything negative to prevent the boss from **losing face**”
- “Speaking up brings **career consequences**”



■ **Voice-Silence** Calculation

Benefit	Who Benefits	When Benefits	Likelihood of Benefit
Voice	Organization	Future	Uncertain
Silence	Oneself	Now	Certain

Saying: “no one has ever been fired for remaining silent”

On the other hand: teams with silent members are less likely to innovate and improve over time.

*Need to **actively balance** this voice-silence calculation.*



■ How to **measure** Psychological Safety:

Sample Survey Questions (Likert scale Strongly agree/ disagree)

- 1. If you make a **mistake**, in this team it is often held against you.*
- 2. Members of this team are able to **bring up problems** and tough issues.*
- 3. People on this team often **reject others** for being different.*
- 4. It is safe to **take risks** in this team.*
- 5. It is difficult to **ask** other members of this team for **help**.*
- 6. No one in this team would deliberately act in a way that **undermines** my efforts.*
- 7. Working with this team, my unique skills and talents are **valued and utilized**.*



- How to **interpret** Psychological Safety results

“Based on our international **normative database**, psychological safety scores below **70%** are considered **below average**.”

Sample Survey Results & Analysis- BlueEQ



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Question (higher percentage= higher psychological safety)	PS Average in Team	+/- Intl' Benchmark
1. Mistakes - whether they are / are not held against team members	%	%
2. Handling Conflict - whether team members can/ cannot bring problems and tough issues.	%	%
3. Reject - Whether team members reject/ not others for being different.	%	%
4. Risks - Whether it is/ not safe to take risks	%	%
5. Mutual help - whether it is/ isn't difficult to ask other members for help .	%	%
6. Undermining - whether others would/ wouldn't deliberately act in a way that undermines efforts..	%	%
7. Valued - whether unique skills and talents are valued and utilized	%	%
OVERALL PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AVERAGE	%	%



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Question	Team1 (n=11)	Team 2 (n=10)	Team 3 (n=8)
1. If you make a mistake , in this team it is often held against you.	87%	40%	58%
2. Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.	62%	44%	43%
3. People on this team often reject others for being different.	78%	66%	73%
4. It is safe to take risks in this team	72%	30%	55%
5. It is difficult to ask other members of this team for help .	87%	58%	75%
6. No one in this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.	80%	46%	75%
7. Working in this team my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized	71%	46%	83%
OVERALL AVERAGES	77%	47%	65%



Benefits of High levels of Psychological Safety

■ Benefit 1: Faster Team Learning

- Routine, repetitive, predictable, modular work is **in decline**.
- Today, most work requires **good judgment**, coping with **uncertainty**, creativity, effective communication and coordination.
- **Voice is critical for process improvement and innovation.**
- Corroborated by:
 - Project Aristotle (Google, 2016)
 - Multiple research on R&D groups (Siemsen; Baer & Frese, Cheng & Jiang, 2009)

How?

- Increase capacity to **learn from mistakes**
- Faster quality **process improvement**
- Reduced **“workarounds”**
- More willingness to **share ideas** (even when not entirely sure)



- **Benefit 2: More Individual Engagement**
 - Engagement: Extent that employee feels **passionate** about job and **committed** to organization.
 - Proxy for willingness to put **discretionary efforts** into job.

- **Benefit 3: Moderator's Role**
 - Virtual teams (Gibson & Gibbs, 2007)
 - Conflict within teams (Bradley B. et al, 2012)
 - Synergy of Diverse views (Schilpzant, M, 2013; Sigh B. et at, 2013)



Benefit 4: Promotion of other elements of team effectiveness (Project Aristotle, 2016)

- **Dependability-** Team members **get things done** on time and meet expectations.
- **Structure and clarity-** teams have clear **goals**, and have well-defined **roles** within the group.
- **Meaning-** The work has personal **significance** to each member.
- **Impact-** The group believes their work is **purposeful** and positively impacts the greater good.



How to get psychological safety (summary)

- Frame the work as a learning problem
 - Reframe Failure
 - Motivate Effort
 - Clarify Interdependence
- Acknowledge your own fallibility.
 - Reframe Roles
 - Situational Humility
- Model curiosity
 - Invite genuine participation
 - Ask powerful questions
 - Structures for input
 - Respond appropriately
- Sanction clear violation of rules or values



■ Frame the **work as a learning problem**

■ Reframe **failure**

- failure is not as a ‘bug’ of learning, but a feature
- uncouple fear from admitting mistakes
- cannot pretend to grow and innovate without it

	Traditional frame	Destigmatize
“Failure”	Not acceptable	Natural result of growth and experimentation
“Performance”	Effective performers don’t fail	Effective performers learn and share lessons from failures
Goal	Prevent at all cost	Learn and long-term prevention
Impact	People hide failure to protect themselves	Open discussion, fast learning and innovation
	Less performance	Better performance



- Types of Failure

	Preventable	Complex	Intelligent
Unwanted outcomes that are..	..deviations from best practices	..combination of complex events	..experimentation in new territory
Created by..	..behaviors, skills and attention deficiencies	...interaction of multiple variables	..calculated risk taking in uncertainty



- **Gap** in Reactions to Failure

“I frequently ask managers, scientists, salespeople, and technologists around the world the following question:

What percent of the failures in your organizations should be considered blameworthy?

Their answers are usually in **single digits** – perhaps 1% to 4%.

I then ask *what percent are treated as blameworthy?*

Now, they say (after a pause or a laugh) 70% to 90%!”



- Frame the **work as learning**
 - **Motivate** Effort
 - Articulate a sense of **purpose** (why what we do matters)
 - Clarify
 - level of **interdependence**
 - **what is at stake** in a Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous (**VUCA**) world



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■ Acknowledge your own **fallibility**:

➤ Reframe **Roles**

	From	To
Authority	Has all answers Gives orders Criticize	Sets direction Invites input Supports learning
Others	Do what they are told	Contribute with knowledge and insight

➤ Be **approachable/ accessible**

➤ Display **situational humility**

- confidence and humility are not opposites
- acknowledge **shortcomings**- don't need to have all answers
- show **humble curiosity** that adapts to the situation



- Show **Curiosity**
 - Invite compelling, genuine **participation**
 - Ask **powerful questions**
 - genuine- don't know answer
 - open ended- require more than yes/no answers
 - stimulates reflection
 - surface assumptions
 - Create **structures for input**

Surveys, Focus groups, Team facilitation (Novo Nordisk), Peer to peer learning (g2g), Braintrust (Pixar), Knowledge marketplaces (Danone)



- Show **Curiosity**

- Respond appropriately (no matter what)

If your reaction to feedback is defensive, Psychological Safety will be badly impacted. Instead:

- Express **appreciation for effort**, regardless of outcome.
- **Destigmatize failures**, particularly those that are good faith efforts to solve a problem or experiment new approaches



- Sanction the **clear violations** of rules and values
 - **Willful or repeated neglectful violations** of rules and values should have **consequences** proportionate to the violation
 - *“Most people are thoughtful enough to recognize (and appreciate) that when people **violate rules or repeatedly take risky shortcuts**, they are putting themselves, their colleagues, and their organization **at risk**.”*
(Edmonson, 2018)
 - Psychological safety is **reinforced** rather than harmed by **fair, thoughtful and firm responses** to potentially dangerous, harmful, or sloppy behavior.



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