Learning Inspirations

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY: THE SECRET INGREDIENT OF HIGH-PERFORMING TEAMS

Most of us have hesitated to ask a question or voice an opinion out of fear for how it would be received – but therein lies the key to building a high-performing team.

For years, leaders have searched for a secret ingredient to unlock the potential in their teams. We've been led to believe that if we hire the right people and place them in the right positions, then we're all set. High performing teams are all about the people within them, right? Well, not exactly.

What mattered more (*according to a Google survey of over 200 employees*) was *psychological safety*.
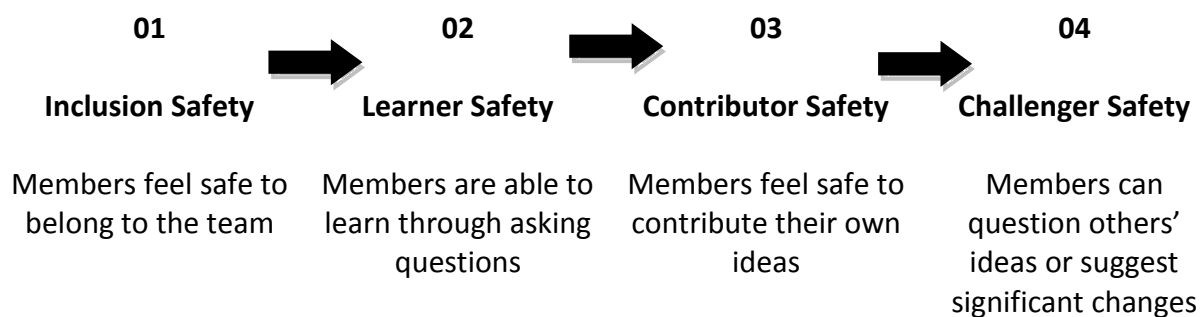

What is Psychological Safety?
Psychological Safety is the foundation for high performing teams and resilient organisations. Think of it as the belief that it is safe to take interpersonal risks in a group, meaning you can openly express ideas, ask questions, admit mistakes, and challenge others without fear of negative consequences.

The Four Stages of Psychological Safety
Timothy R Clarke in his book "The Four Stages Of Psychological Safety" described a model of four "stages" of psychological safety that teams can move through, progressing from stage 1 to stage 4.

01	02	03	04
Inclusion Safety	**Learner Safety**	**Contributor Safety**	**Challenger Safety**
Members feel safe to belong to the team	Members are able to learn through asking questions	Members feel safe to contribute their own ideas	Members can question others' ideas or suggest significant changes

What Happens Without It?
Without psychological safety, employees stay silent, creativity stalls, and mistakes go unreported. Fear of judgment or retaliation leads to disengagement, reduced collaboration, and high turnover. Over time, this erodes trust, damages morale, and stifles the very innovation and agility companies need to stay competitive.

Steps Toward Creating More Psychological Safety at Work

Make psychological safety an explicit priority.
Talk with your team about the importance of creating psychological safety at work. Connect it to a higher purpose of greater organizational innovation, team engagement, and inclusion.

Facilitate everyone speaking up.
Show genuine curiosity, and honor frankness and truth-telling. Be an open-minded, compassionate leader, and willing to listen when someone is brave enough to say something challenging the status quo.

Establish norms for how failure is handled.
Don't punish experimentation and (reasonable) risk-taking. Show recognition that mistakes are an opportunity for growth. Encourage learning from failure and disappointment, and openly share your hard-won lessons learned from mistakes.

Create space for new ideas (even wild ones).
Provide any challenge within the larger context of support. Consider whether you only want ideas that have been thoroughly tested, or whether you're willing to accept highly creative, out-of-the-box ideas that are not yet well-formulated.

Embrace productive conflict.
Promote sincere dialogue and constructive debate.
With your team, discuss the following questions:
- *How will team members communicate their concerns about a process that isn't working?*
- *How can reservations be shared with colleagues in a respectful manner?*
- *What are our norms for managing conflicting perspectives?*

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Make an intentional effort to promote dialogue. Promote skill at giving and receiving feedback, and create space for people to raise concerns. Ask colleagues powerful, open-ended questions, and then listen actively and intently to understand their feelings and values, as well as facts.

Celebrate wins.
Notice and acknowledge what's going well. Positive interactions and conversations between individuals are built on trust and mutual respect. So share credit and embrace expertise among many, and the success of the collective, versus a single "hero" mentality.

In todays fast-paced, high-stakes business world, psychological safety isn't just a "nice-to-have" — it's a strategic advantage. When employees feel safe to speak up, share ideas, and take risks without fear of embarrassment or punishment, innovation thrives and teams perform at their best. Investing in psychological safety is investing in the long-term success and resilience of your company.

Adapted from:

https://www.procurious.com/procurement-news/psychological-safety-the-secret-ingredient-for-high-performing-teams
https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/what-is-psychological-safety-at-work/
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