DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Workplace Well-Being: Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is a shared feeling that it is OK to be open and honest in a group setting. **Amy Edmondson**, a Harvard Business School professor who coined the term, describes a psychologically safe workplace culture as "one where people are not full of fear, and not trying to cover their tracks to avoid being embarrassed or pushed." In other words, the act of speaking up and learning from mistakes is encouraged, even celebrated.[1] https://www.forbes.com/sites/hbsworkingknowledge/2018/11/29/make-your-employees-feel-psychologically-safe/#4afd6c76c753

Do you have a culture of trust in workplace? Is it an environment where employees feel secure enough to be able to share their thoughts and ideas freely without worrying that they are potentially opening themselves up to negative reactions?

Leaders can do many things to foster a healthy workforce where personal thoughts and ideas are supported.

Ideas (Choose one or more)

The very best way to get started is by being the role model for your team regarding what psychological safety looks like. Consider team building activities around empathy, vulnerability, and trust and include concepts such as:

- **Admit when you are wrong.** By demonstrating vulnerability and directness, you can show employees that it is OK to make mistakes. In Edmondson's opinion, it's even effective for leaders to apologize for not facilitating trust and safety in the past.[1] https://cvdl.ben.edu/blog/creating-psychological-safety/

- **Ask for the team's input.** Researchers **Alison Reynolds** and **David Lewis** say that hierarchical behavior can stifle experimentation because it puts the responsibility on an individual, rather than an entire team. By asking employees for their opinions in group settings, they will not only feel more involved and accountable but also empowered to innovate.[1] https://hbr.org/2018/04/the-two-traits-of-the-best-problem-solving-teams

- **Respond positively to questions and doubts.** Gallup found that only 30% of U.S. employees think their opinions matter at work, and it is not just strategic ideas that need to be acknowledged. Managers should show appreciation when employees speak up about unrealistic timelines or ask for clarification on a project. Thank them for voicing their concerns, and then help them decide on next steps.[1] https://www.gallup.com/workplace/236198/create-culture-psychological-safety.aspx

- **Forgive employees' mistakes**. Nothing kills psychological safety quicker than a negative reaction to an error. Instead, focus on the positives: A mistake was caught, it can be fixed, and there is something to learn from the experience. Above all, a psychologically safe environment protects employees from the fear of being wrong.[1]

- Encourage manager groups to discuss how the information above can inform and change their management style, and in turn, the work culture.

- Review policies about equity and inclusion. Consider how policies can be strengthened to encourage individuals to be comfortable in bringing their whole selves to work. Without careful, thoughtful equity discussions, well-being cannot exist.

- Set goals, identify solutions; create an action plan to address at least one issue

Resources

- 10 Ways to Improve Emotional Safety in the Workplace

  https://www.workstars.com/recognition-and-engagement-blog/2019/12/13/10-ways-to-improve-emotional-safety-in-the-workplace/

- The One Quality that Makes Every Team More Effective and How to Foster it

  https://www.themuse.com/advice/effective-teams-psychological-safety-in-the-workplace

References

[1] https://slack.com/blog/collaboration/psychological-safety-building-trust-teams