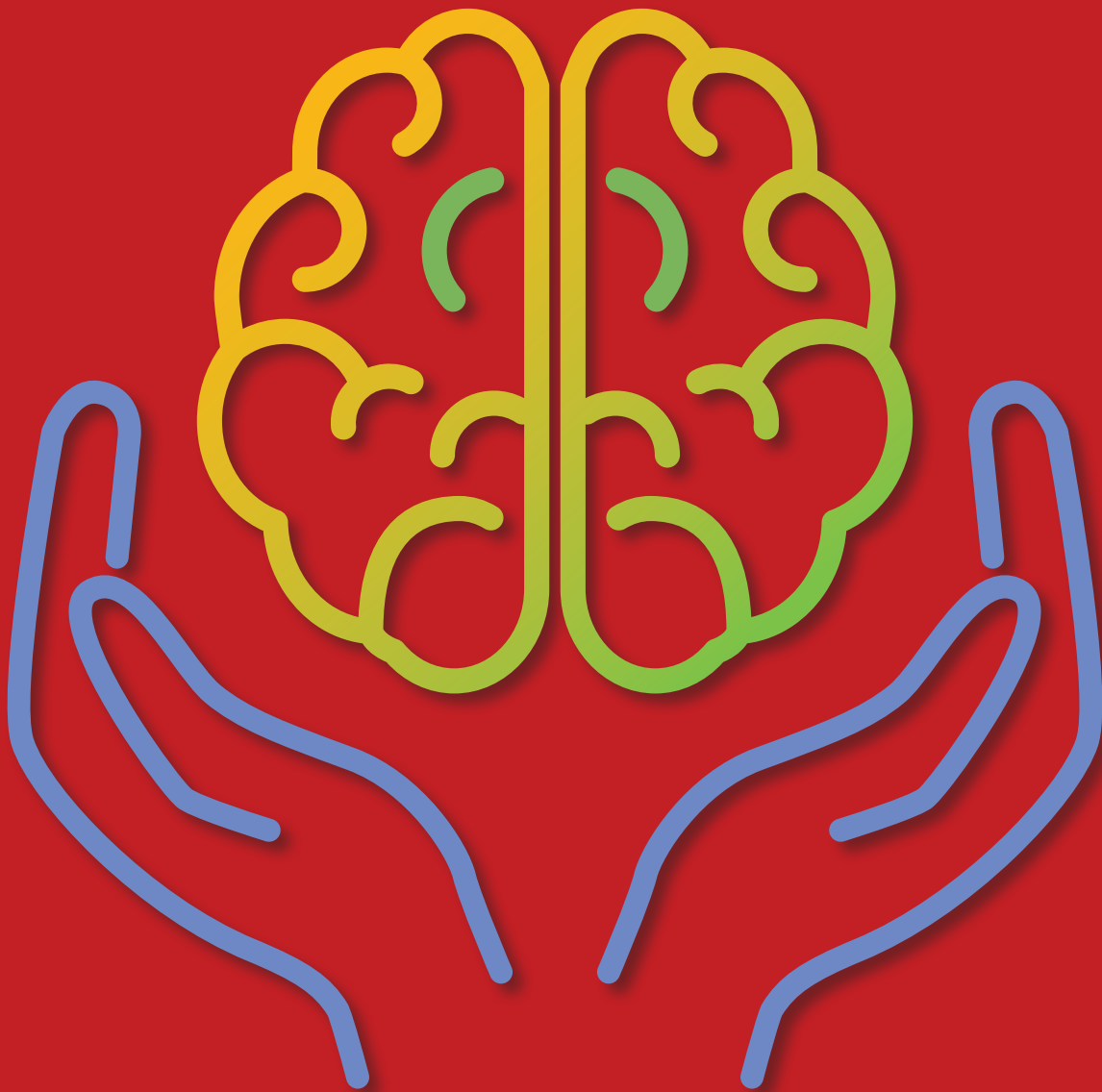


Sustain High Performance With Psychological Safety

Kenneth Nowack and Paul J. Zak



SUSTAIN HIGH PERFORMANCE WITH PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

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In the 1992 film *Glengarry Glen Ross*, supervisor Blake loudly berates a group of shady investment real estate salesmen for their failure to sell. He questions whether they are even men, and he tells them they better start selling. He then threatens to fire everyone except the top two salesmen.

In the 2006 film *The Devil Wears Prada*, Miranda Priestly is a powerful fashion magazine editor who, although she often says little, forcefully makes her presence felt. In one scene, her assistant says, “She’s on her way. Tell everyone!” Another colleague yells out, “OK, everyone, gird your loins!” They scramble to ensure everything, including themselves, is perfect and ready for her arrival. Priestly will tear down those around her with disdainful looks or condescending remarks.

Those examples of abusive bosses are just fiction, though, right? Maybe not.

Search the internet for “worst bosses” and you will find plenty of real-life horror stories, such as the one detailed in The Muse article “The Worst Boss I Ever Had: 11 True Stories

That'll Make You Cringe" where a manager installed a bathroom request button at employees' desks and regularly denied their appeals.

Fear-based leadership can be an effective short-term motivator, but its usefulness rapidly burns out. People acclimate to threats and, no surprise, quit working for abusive supervisors, taking their skills and passion elsewhere. Toxic leadership extends beyond screaming threats to subtler but equally damaging bullying, silence or ignoring, and exclusion.

Three decades of research by academics and applications by practitioners have shown that, in contrast, leaders who create psychological safety gain and sustain high performance among employees. Psychologically safe cultures treat team members with care and empathy.

Talent development professionals play a critical role in helping leaders hone their management skills and understand why creating a psychologically safe environment makes business sense and how their organization can get there.

In this issue of *TD at Work*, we will:

- Provide a brief history of psychological safety.
- Explain the neuroscience of psychological safety.
- Review the reasons it improves performance.
- Identify ways leaders and organizations can create safe cultures.
- Demonstrate how to measure psychological safety and related outcomes.

Historical Roots

Discussions of employee wellness can be found in the earliest economics writings, for example in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*. Deborah Boucoyannis writes that, "In Smith, profits should be low and labor wages high, legislation in favor of the worker is 'always just and equitable,' land should be distributed widely and evenly, inheritance laws should partition fortunes, taxation can be high if it is equitable, and the science of the legislator is necessary to thwart rentiers and manipulators."

Employee wellness began to be institutionalized in British labor laws in the early 19th century, yet the importance of employee mental health was rarely recognized until the 20th century. By the 1960s, academics Ed

Schein and Warren Bennis described the contribution that psychological safety made to employee productivity and professional development. They noted that it "was essential for making people feel secure and capable of changing their behavior in response to shifting organizational challenges."

In the 1980s, psychologist Will Schutz developed the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation theory and instrument that measures openness as a key aspect of productive cultures. The theory provides a way to understand collaborative relationships. In the 1990s, Harvard Business School Professor Amy Edmondson extended Schultz's research and conceptualizations to teams.

Initially hidden in academia, the term *psychological safety* became more popular after Google published research that sought to identify why some teams outperformed others. Google analysts interviewed 180 teams for Project Aristotle and found that psychological safety was a potent predictor of high performance. Subsequent research—as well as books, articles, and talks—have spawned new ways to measure and influence psychological safety.

In Practice

What distinguishes organizations grounded in psychological safety in which employees are comfortable expressing themselves? Psychological safety measures the quality of relationships that employees have with their managers and leaders, as well as with peers.

Social Relationships

As social creatures, humans thrive in groups. Social relationships have a profound effect on our emotional and physical well-being. We are biologically primed to discern, through verbal and nonverbal cues, whether those around us are friends or foes. An individual's perception that they have a positive social connection with another person compared to a social threat results in different neurological and behavioral responses. (See The Cyberball Experiment sidebar for an example of how that played out in a social experiment.)

Social threats have been shown to significantly elevate cortisol, the stress hormone, compared to impersonal

The Cyberball Experiment

University of California, Los Angeles Professor Naomi Eisenberger and her colleagues wanted to understand how the brain responds to social exclusion. To do so, in 2003, they imaged participants' brains using functional magnetic resonance to document neurological responses.

They created a computer game called *Cyberball* and had participants play it while an MRI machine scanned their brains. In the game, three avatars—one representing the participant in the MRI scanner—pass a ball to each other. As the game progresses, two avatars begin playing exclusively with each other, excluding the avatar representing the person in the MRI scanner.

Participants who were excluded from the ball toss reported feeling distressed because they were left out. The imaging data showed that social exclusion activated regions of the brain that process physical

pain. The more distressed a participant felt, the stronger the activation in the brain's pain matrix. Emotional derogation is not only irritating but affects brain activity.

In 2010, Nathan DeWall, a psychologist at the University of Kentucky, replicated the Cyberball findings and added a clever twist: Participants took a pill twice a day for three weeks prior to having their brains scanned. Half took the pain reliever acetaminophen; the others swallowed a placebo. Acetaminophen reduced neural activity in the pain matrix related to the social exclusion and diminished self-reported distress.

These experiments established the causal effects on the brain of social isolation. Social threats grab neural bandwidth that individuals could otherwise use to contribute to team goals.

stressors. Indeed, social threats keep cortisol high 50 percent longer than do physical threats. When people are devalued, ignored, rejected, bullied, or shamed, they typically describe the experience as painful. Pain causes people to narrow their focus to the here and now, and it impairs their ability to effectively execute tasks.

Psychological Safety and Trust

Psychological safety is an internal state that enables individuals to behave authentically, take risks, and express themselves candidly. In the workplace, psychological safety captures how comfortable employees feel as team members. Author Timothy R. Clark asserts there are four actions related to psychological safety:

- Being included
- Feeling safe to experiment
- Contributing
- Challenging the status quo

Those factors enable an employee to respectfully disagree with her supervisor's approach or a manager to ask a senior leader for permission to change processes. In psychologically safe teams, individuals can perform those actions free of social approbation. That is particularly

important when employees try new approaches that may not work as expected. The pain of social threats chills innovation.

Absent psychological safety, employees avoid rocking the boat for fear of retribution. Yet, when employees feel psychologically safe with their colleagues, engagement, empowerment, and trust blossom.

Organizational trust has a substantial effect on performance, so its relation to psychological safety is critical for talent development professionals to understand. Interpersonal trust is an individual's willingness to give control to others with the expectation that they will reciprocate—that is, they will be trustworthy. High-trust cultures cultivate reliable teams.

Psychological safety is internally focused—it's how comfortable an employee feels with colleagues. Trust is externally focused on how others treat an individual. Psychological safety is a necessary precursor to trust. The collaboration necessary to achieve organizational objectives is more likely when trust and psychological safety are both high.

Further, psychological safety can be equated to readiness: Psychologically safe colleagues are ready to

contribute to achieve team goals. Trust is the reciprocation of other team members' contributions. That is the reason psychologically safe teams consistently outperform teams in which members feel unsafe.

Absent psychological safety, employees avoid rocking the boat for fear of retribution.

Trust and Performance

Any time individuals are in groups, friction can arise. Social friction is more likely when stress is high. Trust among team members is a lubricant for social frictions, supporting collaboration.

Consider a scenario where a project is running on a tight deadline and a snag arises, such as a necessary part delayed in shipment. That stress could lead team members to cast blame. However, when trust is high, collaboration is easy and inadvertent slights do not escalate to volcanic crises. Team members are less likely to snap at each other and more likely to develop a solution together, perhaps even using humor to lighten what could be a tense situation. In high-trust organizations, employees can count on each other to move projects forward.

Think of trust as a bank into which team members make deposits, building up social resources that they can use when needed. Science shows that colleagues will not make deposits into the trust bank unless they can safely interact with others, and oxytocin—a signaling molecule—factors into that.

Two decades of research have established that oxytocin plays a significant role in facilitating trusting relationships. The brain releases oxytocin when one person shows another person trust. Oxytocin motivates the reciprocation of trust—that is, it encourages trustworthiness.

Reciprocating trust over time is how people build connections with each other. Importantly, oxytocin activates evolutionarily old areas of the brain associated with emotions. A person must unconsciously feel that another

individual is trustworthy before they give trust. (See the job aid exercise at the end of this issue for a way to measure trust among team members.)

Knowing the neural substrate of trust has permitted scientists to identify factors that inhibit deposits into the trust bank. Chief among those are aggression and stress. Aggression, associated with a rise in testosterone, puts the brain into fight mode rather than cooperate mode. Aggression at work can be physical or emotional. While the former is rare, the latter can be insidious. Berating, belittling, and discounting others' opinions can inhibit the release of oxytocin and, thereby, undermine effective teamwork.

The absence of aggression—whether overt or subtle—is necessary for a workplace to be psychologically safe. A job aid at the end of this issue offers tips on how leaders can increase psychological safety.

High stress is also a trustbuster. Extreme stress causes the brain to move into survival mode. The overriding focus for someone in this state is to escape the stressor.

When stress is excessive, the brain directs release of the potent hormone epinephrine that shuts down the oxytocin response that typically follows positive social interactions. Think of psychological safety as the opposite of anxiety. Because anxiety takes significant neural bandwidth, it inhibits task performance. Organizations with high psychological safety actively moderate stress levels, creating the neurological preconditions for trust. There are many ways to manage stress in the workplace, for example, by institutionalizing emotional check-ins, providing food and snacks, encouraging a reasonable work-life integration, and providing opportunities for employees to socialize with colleagues.

Organizational Implementation

Leaders who understand the science of psychological safety have a powerful margin to improve team performance. Talent development professionals can help leaders understand psychological safety and create programs to raise it. By demonstrating support, care, and empathy for employees at all levels, leaders can establish an organizational culture that values positive social interactions.

Psychologically safe organizations promote trust among team members and enable rational risk-taking. For example, a leader could take a fresh approach on a project although time is tight rather than doing things the way they've always been done. Caring cultures promote feedback from colleagues that is constructive rather than confrontational. Such cultures run more experiments, have more innovation, and perform above their peers.

Psychologically safe cultures clearly delineate colleague roles and performance expectations. Once those are established, employees can execute tasks as they see fit. Research shows that empowered, interdependent employees put in greater discretionary effort and report more job satisfaction. High-autonomy organizations likewise tend to have flat management structures in which supervisors serve as coaches or guides, providing consistent feedback to direct reports.

To manage effectively, leaders must commit to measurement. They can do so by using neurophysiologic data or surveys or intuitively by doing emotional check-ins with team members. Personal inquiries before daily huddles—whether in person or virtual—can provide a rough gauge of psychological safety and identify team members who may be struggling.

Case Study: W.L. Gore & Associates

An outstanding example of a company that has built and maintained a culture of psychological safety is W.L. Gore & Associates. Among its core principles are freedom, fairness, and commitment. And that approach has worked—the company has been on *Fortune* magazine's 100 Best Companies to Work For list for more than 30 years.

W.L. Gore generates \$3 billion in revenue annually and employs 11,000 associates who work in small teams with minimal hierarchy. Employees are either leaders, sponsors, or associates. Leaders emerge by exhibiting credibility and because others are willing to follow them; associates take the reins when ready as they gain expertise and knowledge.

People respond to stress in different ways and face different circumstances—in a phrase, everyone is different. Personality traits result in different stress responses. Colleagues who are high on openness to new experiences value autonomy and will thrive when empowered to work as they see fit. Those who by disposition are proactive will detect problems and initiate change when given the opportunity to do so. Individuals with a learning mindset will focus on improving skills and acquiring knowledge, and they will value the new vistas they can explore when psychological safety is high.

The need for psychological safety is highest for those who are anxious. Those individuals perform well in a calm, relaxed, and secure environment free of conflict.

Psychologically safe cultures actively eschew social exclusion by creating opportunities for colleagues to voice their opinions. An effective way to reinforce the importance of every person on a team is to invite employees to share gratitude during team meetings, for example, recognizing a peer who has put in extra effort to further collective goals or resolve problems.

Companies and leaders don't need to limit the gratitude exercise to team meetings. They can facilitate similar recognition via internal communication vehicles, such as the intranet or social networking (for example, Yammer). Public recognition demonstrates that every person is valued. Public ridicule does the opposite, producing pain and inhibiting performance. Talent development professionals can take the lead in helping leaders and companies implement a gratitude practice.

Leaders' Role

Leadership practices and behaviors powerfully influence discretionary effort. Intentionally fostering psychological safety is an effective way to improve performance. Leaders do that when they connect, involve, and support direct reports, a practice talent development professionals can encourage and emulate.

Connect: Establish and build relationships that demonstrate respect, caring, appreciation, and a genuine interest in colleagues.

- Get to know team members by discussing nonwork activities and challenges during daily huddles, one-on-one meetings, and weekly team sessions. *Example:*

Lululemon has managers openly discuss personal goals and ordeals during daily huddles.

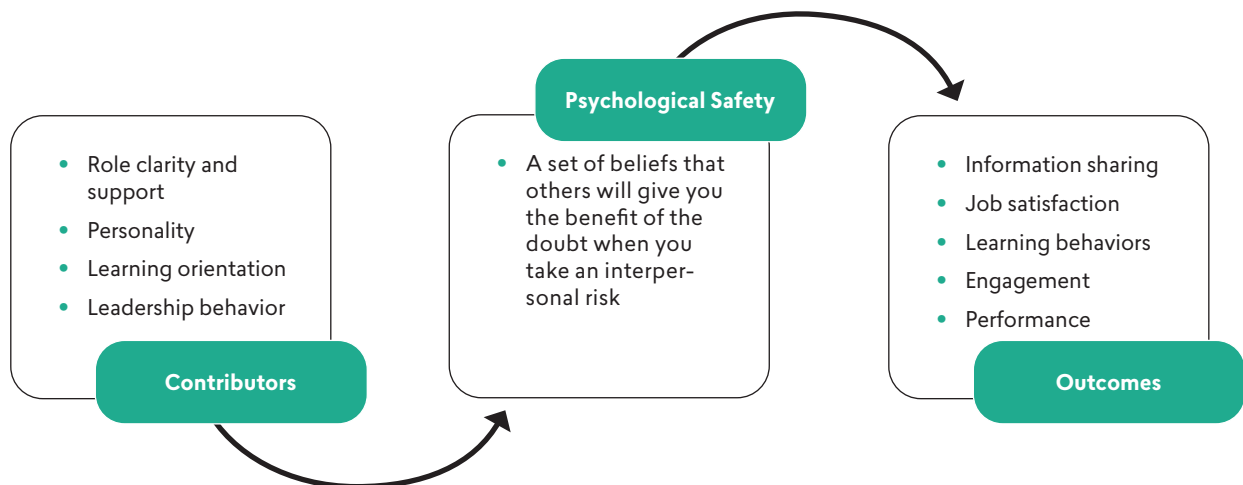
- Ask questions that genuinely seek employees' perspectives by soliciting input and summarizing what you have heard during individual and team meetings. Do that in person, via email, or through communication platforms such as Slack.
- Reframe mistakes, both one's own and others', as learning opportunities when meeting with team members. Show a genuine desire to learn lessons from failures and poor outcomes.
- Improve morale by expressing gratitude for the effort colleagues have put in. Do this through daily and weekly affirmations in person, during team meetings, and via electronic communications. *Example:* Talk show host Jimmy Fallon sends guests handwritten thank-you cards, a practice many effective leaders use.

Involve: Solicit input and feedback on planning, decision-making, and problem-solving processes.

- Create an opportunity for all team members to have a voice in meetings by using a round-robin method. That method can be especially important for introverts who may need time to process their thoughts and who may find their voice overshadowed by more extroverted colleagues.

- Invite recommendations and express appreciation for others' ideas both informally during one-on-one meetings and through formal announcements. *Example:* For decades, Tata Group has had suggestion boxes that have resulted in many implemented innovations.
- Model intense listening for better understanding by paraphrasing and capturing the emotional tone of conversations. Try leaning forward when someone is speaking, focusing attention on what they are saying.
- Involve team members in problem solving to model processes for others. Form task forces, project improvement teams, and problem-solving committees that include employees at all levels for diverse and improved decisions. *Example:* The US Army uses this approach, mixing enlisted soldiers with junior and senior officers during analyses to gain diverse perspectives and demonstrate how to crowdsource problem solving.
- Catalyze open-loop learning by encouraging team members to question the need for existing processes, procedures, and systems, both informally during individual and team meetings and by creating teams tasked with arriving at concrete and specific suggestions to improve efficiency and overall effectiveness. *Example:* Thrivent Financial has created a "rule busting

Psychological Safety Contributors and Outcomes



committee” that has saved thousands of hours of employee time by substituting judgment for strict rules.

Support: Provide the tools needed for colleagues at all levels to reach performance goals.

- Champion direct reports’ ideas and suggestions to senior leaders. Act as a servant leader focusing on team wins rather than jockeying for a promotion.
- Provide resources to accelerate colleague performance by funding and incentivizing training, coaching, and mentoring programs for employees at all levels and across gender, race, and other diversity dimensions. Promote cross-training by allowing colleagues to spend one day each month in a different division.
- Collaborate with colleagues on a constitution that details norms for collaboration, cooperation, and constructive conflict. Use that process when new teams are chartered, and review and revise norms of behavior for existing teams. *Example:* Morning Star Tomato, a global producer of tomato products, developed a Colleague Letter of Understanding that details colleague goals and conflict resolution methods. That approach has led to exceptional performance, and the company asks colleagues to write new letters annually.
- Create, reinforce, and support a culture of appreciation that recognizes individual and team contributions by developing an internal recognition system where peers and supervisors give out spot awards and host regular celebrations of successes. *Example:* Online retailer Zappos empowers Zapponians to award points to colleagues who have been helpful. Employees use those points for swag or give them to charity. Importantly, the company asks anyone awarding points to include personal thank-you notes.
- Model work-life integration and support active detachment from work to enhance individuals’ well-being. Initiate policies that arrest hour creep, or help employees prioritize so they work productively and then are able to sign off for the day; encourage employees to take vacations without doing work; and minimize emails and text messaging after work hours. *Example:* Mortgage lender United Shore Financial Services has a Firm 40 policy and expects the parking lot to be empty at 6:05 p.m. and employees to not bring work home.

- Use feedforward, instead of feedback, to help employees become more effective during formal reviews and weekly progress checks. That leads to a growth mindset and can effectively build employees’ capabilities.
- Use stay interviews to identify ways to retain employees, enhance discretionary effort, and deepen commitment to the organization. The technology sector and other industries that struggle with employee retention use this strategy. Evolve company culture using information gleaned from the stay interviews.

Intentionally fostering psychological safety is an effective way to improve performance.

Sustain a Culture of Psychological Safety

Creating a psychologically safe organizational culture leads to desirable team and individual outcomes (see figure p. 6). Talent development professionals should encourage leaders to take these seven steps to enhance psychological safety, and they themselves can lead by example.

- **Measure at discrete intervals.** Distribute employee pulse surveys along with annual engagement surveys to measure and benchmark psychological safety. Use survey data to identify departments, divisions, and teams in which psychological safety is high. Find out what leaders are doing in those units, and use that knowledge to create solutions to raise psychological safety where it is low.
- **Measure continuously.** Continuous neurophysiological measurement of psychological safety provides real-time feedback to sustain safe cultures. Those measures show that different approaches to establish psychological safety are needed during recruitment, onboarding, meetings, group work, and in-person and remote client interactions. Continuous measurement often shows that psychological safety wanes temporally, for example, at the end of the day or when leaders from headquarters visit a business unit.

- **Ensure safety in hiring.** Emphasize the company's focus on psychological safety as a core company attribute when interviewing candidates. Highlight that attribute on the company's external communications, including its website and in job announcements. Onboarding should reinforce zero tolerance for bullying and specify how employees can safely report inappropriate behaviors.
- **Value emotional intelligence.** Screen, select, and promote colleagues who are empathic and can emotionally regulate. Review and revise selection and promotion practices to minimize unconscious biases

and create a diverse and inclusive company. Leaders need to model emotional intelligence at all times to set the standard. Many resources that delve into emotional intelligence and how leaders can increase it, such as through journal writing, tools to help manage emotions such as walking or deep breathing, and role play.

- **Train for psychological safety.** Provide ongoing training, webinars, and executive coaching to ensure all employees behave in ways that enhance psychological safety. Core components include active listening, conflict management, and the ability to give and receive critical feedback. To calculate the

Psychological Safety Across Cultures

Four factors determine how psychologically safe individuals feel around others:

- **Capability**—colleagues' competence, knowledge, and skills
- **Consistency**—how dependable colleagues are when making commitments
- **Caring**—connections to colleagues that are based on genuine warmth and emotional support
- **Candor**—communication with honesty and integrity

Although the neuroscience of psychological safety is universal, societies vary in how much emphasis they place on each factor. That can cause outsiders to feel less psychologically safe when working with international colleagues or clients. For example, in Japan, personal relationships play a larger role in supporting business practices, while the US depends more on the legal system.

The four pillars of psychological safety have a discernable skew across countries (see below). Capability and consistency are performance-focused factors and are typically valued in task-oriented countries across North America and Western Europe. Colleague relationships can be pleasant but perfunctory in those cultures if work is performed on time and meets agreed-upon standards.

Cultures that emphasize capability and consistency separate the emotional attachments to colleagues from their task performance. Trust is built with those who have proven they are reliable. Individuals in any country may focus more on task completion than building emotional connections with others. That is neither good nor bad; it is just how those individuals seek to reach performance objectives.

The caring and candor factors capture the emotional closeness, friendship, empathy, warmth, and integrity that support psychological safety. Those relationship-focused behaviors establish a safe space where individuals share ideas and give and receive constructive criticism. Cultures that emphasize caring and candor often require a time investment to develop personal relationships that integrate work and nonwork interests. Colleagues working in cultures that emphasize relationships still value capability and consistency, but they put a premium on emotional connections.

Global business requires understanding and adapting to cultural differences. The four factors provide a framework to evaluate colleagues and clients to establish psychological safety so that organizations meet objectives and key results.

Capability and Consistency	Caring and Candor
US, Norway, UK, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Finland	Saudi Arabia, Japan, China, Turkey, India, Brazil, Mexico, Spain, Nigeria, Thailand

return on training investment, measure key outcomes that psychological safety training should influence, including higher productivity, employee retention, and fewer sick days.

- **Job satisfaction.** Monitor individual and team satisfaction as an indicator of a psychologically safe workplace. As an indicator of satisfaction, ask employees how much they enjoy their job on a typical day on a scale of 1–7. Average values of 3 or less require immediate attention. Provide team coaching, and use tools (such as the job aid at the end of this issue) to measure psychological safety and trust.
- **Openness.** Practice transparency by sharing financial statements with colleagues at town hall meetings and offering training so they are understood. Consider sharing salary formulae to demonstrate fairness. Institute an anonymous online system to share perceived grievances, issues, and problems. Resolve problems rapidly and fairly to sustain psychological safety.

Measurement

Psychological safety is directly associated with individual and team-based outcomes. The reduction of stress with psychological safety cultures promotes positive citizenship behaviors that foster collaboration, constructive conflict, and cooperation. When employees are psychologically safe, they are more committed to the organization's goals, more apt to put in discretionary effort, and more satisfied with their work lives.

A psychologically safe culture promotes experimentation, enabling learning and innovation. Although psychological safety is a universal phenomenon, it demonstrates itself in different ways throughout the world. (See the Psychological Safety Across Cultures sidebar.)

Measuring psychological safety can help companies ensure they are taking the right steps to provide a safe, effective workplace for all. However, employers must properly gather data. (See the Team Psychological Safety Survey job aid at the end of this issue.)

For example, a supervisor asking an employee how safe they feel at work is akin to someone asking another individual whether they look fat in new clothing. There is only one correct answer.

Ensure that surveys are free from bias by putting into place several measures:

- Have individuals answer questions anonymously without risk of others—including leadership—knowing their identities. Employees should never be punished for providing data.
- Measure psychological safety in real time. That enables leaders to test communications prior to release and rapidly pivot if psychological safety tumbles. Measurement is the first step in building cohesive teams and a culture of trust.

Measurement also empowers workers to manage their own psychological states. Individual real-time indicators of psychological safety help employees develop strategies for emotional regulation.

For example, an employee may not feel psychologically safe if they are ruminating on a negative social encounter. Such an employee may lash out at those around them for reasons they do not understand themselves, thereby inhibiting team performance. Practices such as counting to 10 or taking deep breaths can help people emotionally regulate when psychological safety is absent. Access to an individual measurement technology enables workers to learn when they should reset. That lets employees concentrate on work, driving up productivity and job satisfaction.

Safety to learn. Measuring readiness to learn means it can be managed to improve training performance. In a recent study, researchers collected neurophysiologic data from the wearable devices of 23 students in a microeconomics course at an elite US college. They used the psychological safety data for the eight classes prior to the midterm as a measure of students' readiness to learn. The data showed that those who were psychologically safe earned higher midterm grades. The impact on outcomes was considerable: A 25 percent increase in psychological safety raised students' midterm performance by a full letter grade.

Effective team meetings. Neurologic data from a multinational manufacturing company showed that discussions at team meetings sometimes inhibited psychological safety, reducing meeting effectiveness. Twelve months of data for one-hour meetings revealed that psychological safety in the first 15 minutes of a

Case Study: Dell

In 2001, computer technology company Dell conducted a survey that revealed that half its employees would leave if given the chance. That was especially true for senior managers who worked directly with CEO Michael Dell. Company leadership was flummoxed; the company was growing rapidly with salaries and stock options abundant. An advisor eventually explained to the CEO why: No one wanted to work with him. He was famous for yelling—at everyone all the time.

Michael Dell hired an executive coach and worked to improve his social skills so he could be a more effective leader. He put props on his desk to remind him to be aware of what he was doing and

to motivate him to change his behavior. For example, a plastic bulldozer cautioned him not to run over others; a Curious George figure was a reminder to listen to others.

The strategies worked. Turnover fell and teamwork improved. Measuring psychological safety showed leaders like Michael Dell how their behavior affects others. Psychological safety is increasingly important because workplaces have become more diverse and inclusive. Employees raised in different cultures may interpret communications and interactions in different ways. Even when there is no intention to offend, a neurophysiologic decrement to psychological safety can occur and persist.

meeting was typically mixed, with a nearly equal distribution of attendees who felt unsafe, safe, and very safe. That points to the need for a period of calming focus before beginning a meeting. That could be as simple as everyone sitting quietly for three to five minutes with eyes closed, a guided meditation, or standing up and stretching. Companies can employ those techniques during virtual meetings as well. The data also showed that virtual meetings that start with an emotional check-in effectively increase psychological safety.

The company's data revealed that team leaders were nearly always able to increase attendees' psychological states from safe to very safe as meetings progressed. The organization's managers have high emotional intelligence and were diligent in creating opportunities for colleagues to voice opinions.

The pattern of increasing psychological safety is typically the opposite in daylong meetings. Asking people to be immersed in a meeting is metabolically costly. Burning metabolic energy degrades individuals' ability to sustain psychological safety unless there are enough breaks to eat, use the bathroom, stretch, and relax between sessions. The data shows that breaks matter because participants are less likely to remember and act on information presented when psychological safety is low. Sustaining high performance

demands that the meeting organizer establish and sustain an environment of psychological safety.

Organizational trust. Companies that actively manage psychological safety provide the foundation for organizational trust. *Trust Factor: The Science of High-Performing Companies* found that employees who work for companies in the highest quartile of trust, compared to those in the lowest quartile, face 74 percent less stress, have 106 percent more energy at work, report 50 percent higher productivity, take 13 percent fewer sick days, are 76 percent more engaged in their jobs, suffer 40 percent less burnout, and are 29 percent more satisfied with their lives outside of work.

Conclusion

Who would individuals rather work with: a friend or a foe? The science of human connection shows that trust and effective teamwork require psychological safety. Psychological safety is not nice to have—it is necessary. Feeling safe reduces the stress of getting through the day so employees can focus their energy on performing at their best. Employees facing and overcoming challenges at work alongside trusted colleagues enjoy and remain in their jobs and inspire colleagues to perform at their best. That is the foundation for high performance.

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Team Psychological Safety Survey

Use this 20-item survey to evaluate the level of psychological safety in teams. It measures communication, recognition, support, openness, and caring among team members. The range of scores is between 20 and 100 with higher scores indicating greater psychological safety.

Communication	Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
My colleagues encourage everyone on the team to have an equal opportunity to speak and share their thoughts, ideas, and opinions.	1	2	3	4	5
My colleagues listen for understanding before trying to assert their viewpoint.	1	2	3	4	5
My colleagues invite and are open to discuss contrarian and challenging viewpoints.	1	2	3	4	5
My colleagues engage in constructive conflict or confrontation.	1	2	3	4	5
Recognition	Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
My colleagues meaningfully recognize my individual efforts and achievements in a timely and appropriate manner.	1	2	3	4	5
My colleagues notice and demonstrate appreciation for my progress and the effort it takes to get things done well.	1	2	3	4	5
My colleagues share my progress and success with others outside our team.	1	2	3	4	5
Support	Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
My colleagues collaborate and cooperate, rather than compete, with me.	1	2	3	4	5
My colleagues encourage me to do my best work.	1	2	3	4	5
My colleagues engage in constructive conflict or confrontation.	1	2	3	4	5
My colleagues make it easy to ask other members for help when needed.	1	2	3	4	5
My colleagues encourage me to openly share my thoughts, suggestions, and ideas.	1	2	3	4	5
My colleagues make it safe for me to bring up problems and tough issues.	1	2	3	4	5
My colleagues make it easy for me to speak up and share my genuine thoughts and feelings.	1	2	3	4	5
My colleagues create a climate to encourage risk-taking, suggestions for changes, and improvements.	1	2	3	4	5
Caring	Never	Almost Never	Sometimes	Almost Always	Always
My colleagues provide candid and timely feedback to help me improve and grow.	1	2	3	4	5
My colleagues take time to listen and understand my point of view.	1	2	3	4	5
My colleagues take an interest in my personal and family life.	1	2	3	4	5
My colleagues rarely or never deliberately act in a way to undermine my efforts.	1	2	3	4	5
My colleagues rarely or never reject others for being different.	1	2	3	4	5

Psychological Safety Exercise

Use this activity to enhance psychological safety and trust in teams.

Estimated Time

30 minutes

Background

Amy Edmondson, a Harvard Business School professor, defines the term *psychological safety* as “a climate in which people are comfortable being (and expressing) themselves.” She has confirmed that psychological safety predicts quality improvements, learning behaviors, and productivity. An internal study that Google conducted found that teams with high psychological safety were better than other teams at implementing diverse ideas and driving high performance. Individuals within those teams were also more likely to stay with the company.

Step 1

Invite the team to get together. Pose the following questions on a flipchart for people to answer in a round-robin format (that is, everyone answers each question one at a time):

- What can we count on each other for?
- What is our team’s purpose?
- What is the reputation we aspire to have?
- What do we need to do differently to achieve that reputation and fulfill our purpose?
- What can we do to create a culture where risk taking is safe?

Step 2

Once every team member has shared their responses to the questions, summarize the main themes. Track commitments everyone is willing to make.

Step 3

Wrap up the exercise by asking if anyone has additional suggestions that will enhance psychological safety.

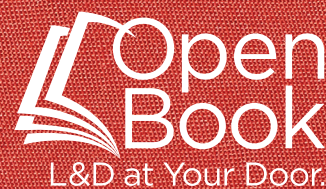
OXYTOCIN Leadership Checklist

Eight leadership practices facilitate interpersonal trust and psychological safety to create a high-trust culture. These practices form the acronym OXYTOCIN and enable leaders to evaluate where to intervene to improve performance. Share this checklist with leaders and managers as a helpful reminder of what behaviors they should practice.

OXYTOCIN Leadership Practice	Leadership Toolkit Checklist
Ovation Praising, acknowledging, and recognizing others' efforts and accomplishments	☐ Publicly acknowledge and praise others for efforts and accomplishments. ☐ Provide immediate feedback on tasks and activities. ☐ Share success stories with others within the company. ☐ Provide incentives and rewards for high-quality work.
Expectation Setting and communicating challenging but achievable goals; providing ongoing goal feedback; fostering a growth mindset	☐ Clearly establish and communicate performance goals and outcomes. ☐ Seek and reward talent for ongoing learning and those seeking challenges (growth mindset). ☐ Set and express high-performance expectations and standards and aggressive deadlines on assigned tasks, projects, and assignments. ☐ Check on daily progress on tasks, projects, and assignments.
Yield Empowering decision latitude for others; supporting flexibility; fostering independence; demonstrating a tolerance for others' mistakes	☐ Allow talent to push back, challenge the status quo, and introduce improvements and/or changes. ☐ Use colleagues' skills, knowledge, and experiences by delegating appropriate tasks and assignments to them. ☐ Allow for disagreements to emerge and to be discussed openly. ☐ Encourage, support, and reinforce prudent risk-taking, experimentation, innovation, and change.
Transfer Supporting autonomy; encouraging self-management; facilitating mastery of skill development	☐ Establish how colleagues' work is linked to team and organizational goals. ☐ Trust and empower team members to make changes, implement decisions, and solve problems on their own. ☐ Transfer authority to colleagues to ensure completion of delegated tasks, assignments, and projects. ☐ Involve colleagues in organizational decision-making, planning, and problem-solving processes.
Openness Communicating vision, goals, and progress; demonstrating candor to internal and external stakeholders; keeping others informed; soliciting and valuing input from others	☐ Provide colleagues with direct and timely feedback about work performance and progress. ☐ Provide "feedforward," rather than feedback, to others to foster learning and growth. ☐ Inspire commitment to others' ideas, suggestions, and opinions. ☐ Support challenges to one's own ideas.
Caring Developing collaborative relationships; fostering teamwork; supporting others; demonstrating consideration for others' feelings	☐ Be empathic: Take others' points of view before expressing own. ☐ Show a personal interest in others by verbalizing their feelings. ☐ Intentionally build relationships with work colleagues as human beings, not human capital. ☐ Make time to socialize with colleagues.

OXYTOCIN Leadership Checklist (Cont.)

OXYTOCIN Leadership Practice	Leadership Toolkit Checklist
Invest Coaching others; investing in staff development; seeking opportunities to identify and deploy others' signature strengths; facilitating talent mobility; creating a high-impact learning culture; supporting ongoing learning	☐ Regularly conduct stay interviews. ☐ Identify and deploy the team's signature strengths and interests. ☐ Conduct periodic career growth meetings to support professional and career growth. ☐ Provide resources to engender professional and personal growth.
Natural Being genuine and appropriately vulnerable; modeling integrity; standing up in the face of opposition and challenges; being willing to ask for help	☐ Share personal information to build relationships with colleagues. ☐ Maintain the highest standards of personal and professional integrity. ☐ Practice candor through openness and honesty. ☐ Be consistent in actions and words.



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