

# Team Leader's Actionable Guide to Psychological Safety



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# What is Psychological Safety?



In today's rapidly changing and competitive business environment, organizations are recognizing the significance of creating a positive work culture that fosters collaboration, innovation, and employee well-being. One essential component of such a culture is psychological safety. Psychological safety exists when individuals in a team feel safe to take interpersonal risks, express their ideas and opinions, and be their authentic selves without fear of negative consequences. It is a climate where people feel valued, respected, and supported, enabling them to contribute their best efforts and reach their full potential.

When teams lack psychological safety, members spend a lot of mental and emotional energy managing how others perceive them. This results in poor productivity, low employee satisfaction, and a lack of innovation.

This guide aims to delve deeper into the concept of psychological safety and the numerous benefits it offers to both employees and organizations. By understanding the principles and practices associated with psychological safety, leaders and employees can work together to create an inclusive and high-performing work environment that nurtures innovation, collaboration, and individual growth.

# Team Leader's Actionable Guide to Psychological Safety

When you're part of a team, you either feel safe to speak up, ask for help, and share mistakes... or you don't.

When I was on the internal Organization Development team at Google, my job was to parachute in to help struggling teams. One team in particular helped me see the importance of psychological safety.

The team was made up of experienced team members and new team members. The new folks needed to learn things from the experienced folks, but they frequently received a cold shoulder when they asked for help. Every question was something the experienced folks believed new members should already know.

Asking for help felt like "walking on eggshells," the team's new members said. So, they stopped asking.

This "us" vs. "them" mindset affected the team's productivity, raised the risk of failing, and made the workplace less enjoyable. Newer team members were more likely to leave the company.

After intake interviews with all the team members, I facilitated a one-day onsite with new and old team members. Our goals were to build trust, and equip the team with the skills to nurture a safe environment to communicate and work together.

**Outcome:** Team members built personal relationships across the team. The outcomes included more empathy, collaboration and shared learning, which increased productivity and improved employee satisfaction and engagement.

By applying and revisiting the following tips, you too can build a work culture where safe communication is the norm.



# Don't strive for perfection

Psychological safety defines our sense of belonging and well-being in the workplace. When it's around, people are motivated to take risks, collaborate with others, and speak up.

Striving for perfection works against this goal. It can stress employees and make them less likely to speak up. This type of culture can sometimes result from a leader's own insecurities. Simply put, they think they must have everything figured out. The reasoning goes, "I'm the leader, I can't admit to not knowing!".

The outcome of this approach thwarts the growth of the team. On the one hand, leaders in this type of culture don't share mistakes or concerns and act as if they have answers for everything. Consequently, employees observe this behavior and learn not to reach out to anyone for guidance or perspectives. They conclude that they must figure it all out independently.



But, the truth is, in work environments where things are uncertain or volatile, you won't have all the answers, and you can't expect your employees to either.

Instead, frame the work as a learning problem. Say to your team "I don't have all the answers, so I need all of your best thinking. There will be mistakes, but we'll learn and iterate."

Allowing for imperfection improves collaboration. It makes everyone feel like no one has all the right information in every possible instance. Embracing imperfection brings forth a shared belief that – together – we can overcome challenges and solve problems. By allowing imperfection in the first place, we get closer to more perfect outcomes.

### **How: Remain open and curious**

When you share an idea, ask "what might I be missing?" to invite diverse perspectives. Also, ask people to expand on their ideas. If someone shares an idea, problem, or question, ask the person to help you understand their position. What beliefs drive them, what alternatives are they considering, and what makes this idea important?

Don't jump to conclusions, judge it, or shut the idea down. That idea might be just the thing or the springboard to other, more achievable approaches.

Above all, turn decisively away from the "don't bring me problems, bring me solutions" mantra and embrace a new one: **"Yes, bring me problems, and we can figure out a solution."** This new mantra means:

- Regularly asking employees how they feel at work
- Opening up about your mistakes so employees adopt the same behavior
- Appreciating employees for their progress, even if they didn't meet their exact OKRs

Nothing will ever be perfect unless your industry isn't volatile or dynamic. Let your team know it and feel it. When everyone shares their mistakes, they can correct them and spark new innovative ideas to solve problems.



# Make your team feel listened to

When employees feel you are listening to them, they approach you more often, feel like their work is valuable, and are motivated to keep speaking up. The following are three techniques our clients have learned to make their teams feel heard:

## Paraphrase

Paraphrasing helps people see that you understand what they are saying. When they do, they are motivated to share more. They see that it's ok to speak their minds.

Next time someone says something, say it back in your own words. For example, if I were telling you the words from the paragraph above, you could say, "Employees are motivated to speak up, reach out more often, and feel like their work is valuable when you truly listen to them. Is that correct?"



## Summarize

Summarizing shows you aren't only listening but understanding everything the person is saying. It works best when the person tells you about a complex idea, problem, or situation. Summing up key points demonstrates to your associate that you were truly engaged in the conversation.

Once they stop talking, simplify the message without dumbing down the ideas. You can either pause and let them keep going or ask if you missed anything

## Validate

It's crucial to tell employees that their ideas, feelings, and mistakes are ok. Believing the opposite can make them lose confidence in their work and make them less likely to share.

In conversations, let employees know you accept what they are going through. A simple phrase like, "That sounds really frustrating," can make employees feel heard. They can also feel less stressed the next time the situation happens, as they know others have felt the same.

Validation doesn't mean agreeing with them. It's about helping the other person feel heard and seen. The more people feel heard and seen, the more they'll be inclined to continue sharing and speaking up.

## TIP #3

# Pay extra attention to your remote team

Building and maintaining psychologically safe cultures for remote teams is harder than achieving it for in-person groups. These team members have fewer opportunities for chit-chat, collaborating, and learning about each other. The occasional wait time during a Zoom meeting might reveal a thing or two about your colleagues, but this is the lucky exception rather than the rule.

Pay extra attention to how your remote team feels. The word "extra" is very important, as it can mean more quantity and/or more effort.

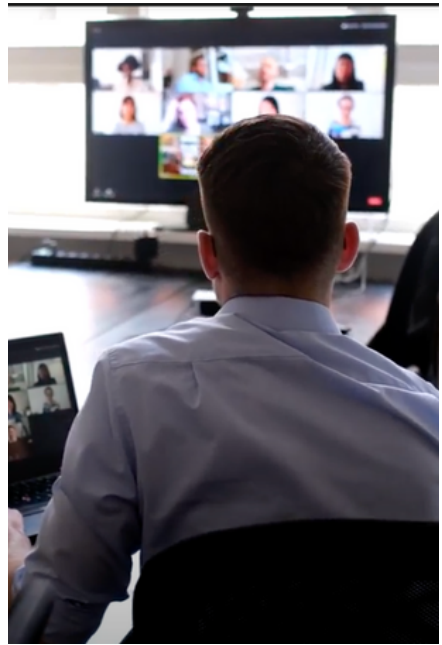


For example, if hosting a monthly 1:1 makes in-person employees feel heard, commit to two monthly check-ins for remote employees. If busy schedules make this difficult, try booking one meeting, but set it for a longer duration. This can help compensate for missed, informal conversations typically found between in-person associates.

**How you say it matters more than what you say**

Thoughtful communication is key when communicating with your remote employees. Since your team rarely sees your body language, written words are the typical method for communicating your message. For example, don't ask "why" questions if you communicate through Google Docs. These questions can feel confrontational, even if they aren't meant to be.

Instead, ask "what" and "how" questions. These types of open-ended questions invite people to take part. It tells them you care about what they say and think just as much as the in-person team member's opinions. Their answer might arrive 12 hours later, but your curiosity signals that you don't mind.



In synchronous meetings with hybrid teams, we recommend everyone join the remote meeting individually. This provides more equity so people aren't having side-conversations in a conference room. Also, dedicate some time to invite new perspectives. Give everyone the space to talk. Nothing kills collaboration more than shooting down someone's ideas. Mediate a space of dialogue.





# Measure the impact of psychological safety

Amy Edmondson, Harvard Business School Professor of Leadership, introduced the concept of team psychological safety in her book *The Fearless Organization*. Professor Edmondson presents a seven-point Likert scale (from strongly agree to strongly disagree) to measure psychological safety:

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

"In analyzing the data," says Edmondson, it is important to "reverse score" data from the negatively worded items. A 1 in the data set is converted to a 7, a 7 to a 1, a 2 to a 6, and so on." You can run this survey before and after implementing our tips to see which areas have improved the most and which need more work.



ALTERNATIVELY,

# Run Regroup's Team Health Assessment



It unveils the critical areas from your team dynamics that would lead to the most ROI when fixed. Every team member participates in the assessment and sees the results. This visibility ensures everyone speaks up, feels valuable, and owns change.

Whether you or we measure the baseline of where you are today and where you want to go, Regroup can educate your team on psychological safety, spot the areas that need the most help, and build a plan to solve them.

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