Psychological Safety in the Workplace: A Pillar of Team Success

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Corporate innovation and growth depend on idea generation, collaborative conversation, and decisive action.

More than ever, business success requires that complex, diverse, cross-functional teams work optimally. Despite the critical importance of high-performing teams in contemporary business, we still know surprisingly little about the core characteristics of top-tier teams. This question is key to sound business management. It deserves rigorous attention and research. Fortunately, intriguing studies in recent years are shedding new light on the topic and indicating how practical changes in the workplace might have major payoffs.

Charles Duhigg, writing in the *New York Times* in February 2016, described Google's Project Aristotle study, in which the company examined potential predictors of its high-performing teams. Duhigg says that according to Google, it wasn't immediately intuitive or straightforward to determine what that team trait might be, but identifying such a team trait would have obvious advantages, as it would empower managers to form superb teams prospectively, rather than just appreciate and reward them retrospectively. In a company as impressive as Google, why would some teams thrive, while

others turn in fair-to-middling performances and others actually fail entirely? Google found that remarkably, factors like the experience and expertise of team members were not the secret sauce. In fact, no characteristic of individual team members constituted the foundation of the teams that performed best.

Instead, Google found that it was a remarkable characteristic of the team as a whole that turned out to be most essential: psychological safety. Grounded in strong internal research into its own corporate culture and team functioning, Google produced intriguing findings that may be relevant to leaders and managers in a wide array of companies and organizations. Psychological safety could be the linchpin (or at least one of the key features) of the teams that thrive and produce the best outcomes.

Exactly what do we mean by the term "psychological safety"? In business contexts over the last few decades, a laser-focused definition of the term has emerged. When describing the characteristics of business teams, it refers to an interpersonal dynamic in which each individual team member feels encouraged and empowered to share ideas and insights proactively—without trepidation or worry about negative judgment or disparagement. In 1990, William Kahn defined psychological safety as "being able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status or career."

On psychologically safe teams, individuals feel valued and respected. They encourage each other to share ideas, even risky or far-flung ones, which can provoke meaningful discussion and widen the team's perspective on challenges and opportunities. As such, psychological safety can promote curiosity, learning, and development. A *Harvard Business Review* article in October 2017, "Research: For Better Brainstorming, Tell an Embarrassing Story," provided perspective and empirical evidence to justify these claims. In the studies described, two separate groups were assessed as to how many creative ideas they could produce in a set amount of time for a "brainstorming" activity. Before the brainstorming session, one group was primed by having each member tell a personal story of success or pride. The other group was asked to go around the room first and tell a candid, personally embarrassing story. The latter groups, which deeply engaged and became emotionally bonded to one another throughout the exercise, produced superior ideas in the brainstorming session.

Since psychologically safe environments can foster greater creativity and innovation, the C-suite should take note and reflect on how to leverage this research finding. A culture of psychological safety tends to emerge from the top and propagate across companies and organizations. CEOs and key managers can lead by example. The well-researched social phenomenon known as emotional contagion is importantly at play here. In workplace settings, emotional contagion refers to the phenomenon of affect spreading subconsciously from one individual, especially an influential one, to other workers and groups as a whole. Executive leaders, Wharton researcher Sigal Barsade notes in a 2014 *Psychology Today* blog article, "Faster than a Speeding Text: 'Emotional Contagion' at Work," can "create more positive team dynamics, increase performance, and decrease turnover by consciously managing their own emotions and the emotions they want to spread."

HOW TO TRAIN AND COACH FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Careful consideration of the empirical evidence demonstrating the power of psychological safety could persuade business leaders to find practical ways to bring it into the workplace intentionally. Its role in enhancing quality of life, interpersonal bonding, productivity, and profitability are remarkable. The concept is powerful and the budding research base is remarkable. But infusing workplaces with a culture of psychological safety is challenging. How might business leaders ensure that psychological safety permeates team interactions?

Coaching and training programs that focus specifically on psychological safety for teams, and managing one's own emotions, in order to cultivate psychological safety may help. Such programs may be delivered internally by HR professionals and talent development specialists. External coaches and trainers also may teach and guide teams to nurture psychological safety. Either way, the training programs themselves ought not to be strictly didactic, but actually model the behaviors they champion. There is no better way to learn how to promote psychological safety than to practice it in vivo, alongside the very team members with whom workers interact on a regular basis.

Experiential learning is most stimulating and impactful. Certain exercises can have profound effects. The 2017 *Harvard Business Review* article previously mentioned, in which team members each related an embarrassing story and then brainstormed with colleagues, provides one example of this kind of exercise. Leadership development programs and team coaching sessions can be designed specifically to foster a culture of psychological safety. They call on each team member to allow themselves to experience a modulated degree of vulnerability (the importance of which has been described by Brené Brown in *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* [Penguin/Random House, 2012]), which can serve to bind the team together on an emotional level and to facilitate creative and strategic conversations.

"Active Inquiry" exercises are particularly effective in developing psychological safety among team members. In team programs that my colleagues and I have run, the participants are given the task of having one-to-one conversations that include only thought-provoking, open-ended questions (as well as periodic clarifying statements)

intended to enable a deep dive into sensitive issues. In some cases, the Active Inquiry conversation can take place in front of the whole group, followed by discussion among team members. In other cases, we have team members break out into dyads for the conversations (each of which last 20 to 30 minutes) followed by a large group debrief about the Active Inquiry sessions. Team members are first taught how to restrict themselves to asking questions that foster dialogue and making facilitative statements that clarify the topic and ensure mutual understanding.

When people learn to promote this kind of nonjudgmental exchange about a salient topic, they tend to relax and speak their minds freely, without fear of reprisal or denigration. This is true of both the person asking the questions and the one responding to them. Many people find the exercise surprisingly difficult, because they are so accustomed to giving advice or direction rather than asking open-ended questions and listening carefully to the responses. But when we don't discipline ourselves to ask good questions and reserve judgment until we receive potentially informative responses, we can stifle the psychological safety that is so necessary for high-quality team performance.

In an Active Inquiry session I facilitated with a colleague, one team member was inquiring of the other about how the teams could be more collaborative. The inquirer was an attorney who provided legal and regulatory expertise on a team of engineers who were designing novel building materials. When the attorney asked the engineer how her legal team could best serve the engineering team, the engineer responded that the legal department was widely seen as throwing up roadblocks to business development based on murky yet overblown regulatory concerns. The engineers felt that the attorneys didn't "get it" about the promise of new technologies and how they could fuel growth. They perceived the company's attorneys as dismissive and disengaged.

The lead attorney in this business unit, who had only heard what she perceived to be unfair but vague criticism of her team, hadn't ever heard this feedback so directly and clearly. The Active Inquiry exercise in front of the group created an atmosphere of psychological safety in which people could express their frustrations as well as work toward a solution together. With prompting by the facilitators, the attorney/engineer pair was encouraged to role-play a new kind of interaction when an engineer approaches an attorney on the team for regulatory and legal advice. The attorney now had the opportunity to express her frustration that the engineers often seek legal/regulatory advice without first doing their homework on relevant regulations and statutes that pertain to the project.

Now the opportunity arose for the entire group of 12 to brainstorm about how the attorney/engineer interactions could be more satisfying and productive. The power of the Active Inquiry exercise prompted them to hypothesize that asking open-ended questions of each other in day-to-day work could enhance psychological safety and collaborative conversation. The attorneys on the team agreed not to judge engineering projects and proposals before engaging in an Active Inquiry exercise with the engineers. At the same time, the engineers pledged to ask the attorneys more regularly about their legal concerns and explore creative ways to grow the business, while at the same time putting necessary protections in place. Months later, they reported ongoing improvements in dialogue and implementation of projects that had been bogged down by intractable disagreements.

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Psychological safety relies on wide-open dialogue, expression of emotion, and brainstorming. But it should never become a messy free-for-all. Team leaders must create structure around the dialogues. Respectful expression of one's thoughts and feelings is essential, especially considering that hot-button issues are often in play. Leadership development programs and executive coaching can help team members to modulate their emotional expression and optimize their communication style. Certain kinds of mindful breathing and self-reflection exercises can enhance team members' capacity to regulate their emotions and thereby foster psychological safety.

Active Inquiry sessions are focused on practical solutions and team enhancement, not on venting or whining. People must be careful how they speak—not every idea or way of speaking is acceptable, and free expression of prejudiced thoughts may be toxic or destructive. Team members must be careful about racial, ethnic, sexual, political, and other sensitive topics for a variety of reasons—not least of which is to guarantee psychological safety for diverse team members. Executives and team leaders should set a positive tone, establish norms and ground rules, leverage the phenomenon of emotional contagion, and nurture a culture of psychological safety in the workplace.

There is growing reason to believe that enhancing psychological safety in the workplace is the key to improving quality of life and fueling corporate growth in the 21st century. Empirical research continues to elucidate the observable, pragmatic effects of psychological safety. Drawing on these research findings, rigorous training and coaching programs can serve a supportive role in shifting corporate culture toward embracing psychological safety, which very well may be the single best guarantor of workplace success for individuals and teams alike. AQ

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