Without Psychological Safety, Hybrid Work Won’t Work

People managers have their work cut out for them.

Before the pandemic, it was already difficult for managers to foster enough trust in their employees so that they would speak up if something was amiss at work. Psychological safety, which rests on the belief that no harm will come to dissenters or anyone expressing a candid opinion, can even be hard to come by in an operating room or an airplane cockpit, where it can make the difference between life and death.

Aside from ensuring high-quality decision making, psychological safety has been shown to promote healthy group dynamics and interpersonal relationships. It also plays a key role in innovation and team effectiveness. At this particular juncture, psychological safety can provide an extra benefit: helping managers navigate the complexity of the new hybrid work arrangements brought about by the pandemic.

While many offices are now re-opening, employees may have varied reasons to maintain some amount of working from home. Some may need to help a child struggling at school or to spend time with an ailing parent, while, for others, undisclosed personal health issues may underpin a reluctance to return to the office. These are frequently acknowledged reasons some favour WFH, but we have found a wide range of reasons employees have for not wanting to return to the office soon. Unfortunately, many feel unable to voice their concerns.

It’s not just employees who feel skittish about sharing their issues. Managers have for the most part long steered clear of conversations that felt perhaps too personal or just off-limits (including for legal reasons). Since the pandemic, however, many managers have found that they have had no choice but to broach topics like childcare, health-risk comfort levels and various personal or familial challenges, because more work is being carried out at home.

The ongoing shift to hybrid work means that managers’ scheduling and coordination challenges are not about to end. To overcome these challenges, they will need better information. That said, the solution won’t be to demand greater disclosure of personal details. Instead, managers will have to create an environment that encourages employees to share aspects of their personal situations as it pertains to work scheduling. Or else – or perhaps at the same time – they will have to trust employees to make the right choices for themselves and their families, while taking into account business imperatives.

An iterative learning process

In short, managers now face the delicate task of expanding the range of work-life issues that are safe
to raise. Obviously, it will take more than a few
magic words – such as “Just trust me” – for
employees to feel safe. We recommend a series of
five steps to nurture a culture of psychological safety
– not only about work, but about personal matters as
well – that will help employees and managers find
better solutions.

**Step 1: Frame the situation as a joint challenge.** First, you must help your team recognise
that managing this new hybrid workplace situation
is challenging for everyone involved. Promote
shared ownership of the problem through a
discussion.

Explain that the various “whys” of work – satisfying
customers, aligning with the mission, planning
career progression – matter just as much before, but
the “how” may change. Invite your employees to
play a creative and responsible role in managing
that change. As a group, everyone must agree to be
clear and transparent about the needs of the work
and of the team.

**Step 2: Lead by example.** Far too many managers
demand candour of their employees, while shying
away from it themselves. This is particularly true
when it comes to discussing mistakes or other
potentially embarrassing topics. Managers must be
ready to share their own WFH/hybrid work personal
challenges and constraints. Otherwise, how can they
possibly expect their staff to be candid with them?

**Step 3: Go slow and steady.** It takes time to build
trust. Even if the firm has already gained some
ground in terms of ensuring employees’
psychological safety, sharing a story of how you
failed during a presentation is completely different
from admitting that Covid-19 has left you filled with
anxiety and a spouse on the verge of burnout. Start
small and build to the bigger and tougher topics.

**Step 4: Build your case.** You may need to sell
employees on why sharing challenges is key to
business. Share your conviction that increased
transparency helps the team design new
arrangements that serve both not only
organisational goals but help meet individual
employee needs as well. When giving examples, be
sure not to ever disclose private information and
also to avoid creating pressure to conform. Use your
tact and skill to give employees the evidence they
need to buy in, but let them do so on their own.

**Step 5: Remember that psychological safety is
fragile.** Psychological safety takes time to build, but
moments to destroy. People will fail to share even
their most relevant thoughts at work if they sense
there is any risk. If one takes the plunge and speaks
up, only to get shot down, they and others will clam
up next time.

As the name implies, group dynamics are not static;
they’re emergent processes that always remain a
work in progress. A great start is having
conversations promoting trust and openness. As you
navigate the rest of the journey without a map, your
path is unlikely to be a straight line. In any case, it’s
better to test the waters than assuming certain topics
are off limits. Your safest bet is to view
psychological safety as a constant learning
endeavour.

A challenge for leaders is how to manage well-
meaning, but pressuring, comments like “So when
will we see you in the office?” or “Things will be
easier when we can all meet face to face”, which
may leave some employees feeling they’re letting
their teammates down. Of course, people may
genuinely miss their colleagues or need their help,
but you should help them frame any such remarks in
a more inclusive way. For example, “We understand
you may be facing constraints at the moment. What
do you think would be the best way for us to get
your inputs on XYZ?”

This is an adaptation of an [article](https://knowledge.insead.edu/blog/insead-blog/without-psychological-safety-hybrid-work-wont-work-16751) published in
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