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# Without Psychological Safety, Hybrid Work Won't Work



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## **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.

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?"

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.

*This is an adaptation of an [article](#) published in Harvard Business Review.*

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### About the author(s)

**Mark Mortensen** is an Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD. For more than 20 years he has helped leaders understand and adapt to how work is changing -- currently with a focus on remote and hybrid work and the changing employee value proposition. At INSEAD he directs numerous company-specific executive education programmes, including **Emerging Leaders in a Digital Age**, and teaches the OB core in the MBA and EMBA.

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