
Effective Strategies for Building and Boosting Psychological Safety



By Mark Mortensen , Maria Guadalupe , Nathan Furr and Henrik Bresman , INSEAD

INSEAD research highlights practical approaches to integrate psychological safety into team dynamics.

In recent years, the modern workplace has recognised the intrinsic value of psychological safety. This has redefined not only how teams collaborate and innovate but also how leaders foster an environment of inclusion and innovation.

At its core, psychological safety encapsulates the concept of feeling secure enough to voice opinions, take risks and engage in open, honest dialogue. It is a way for progressive organisations to empower individuals, allowing them to bring their authentic selves to the workplace. Such an approach not only leads to the formation of high-performing teams but also serves as a powerful catalyst for both personal growth and organisational progress.

As organisations strive to adapt to the challenges of today's business landscape, recent research insights from INSEAD faculty highlight a variety of approaches aimed at cultivating and enhancing psychological safety within teams.

The winning formula for psychological safety in risky times

Mark Mortensen, Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour

It should come as no surprise that in unstable times, employees become even more risk averse and hesitant to speak up. It stands to reason as speaking up about issues or challenges to the status quo benefit the organisation, but sometimes at the expense of the speaker. Choosing to remain silent provides employees with an immediate and certain sense of safety from potential exposure. Making matters worse, it's not just low-level employees who need psychological safety in order to use their voices at work. As individuals climb the corporate ladder, the pressure to hold back intensifies.

In a ***recent Harvard Business Review article***, my co-authors and I leverage our research and consulting with numerous organisations to delineate strategies for cultivating an environment of psychological safety within workplaces. We build on Amy C. Edmondson's winning formula, which entails several key elements, including clarifying the rationale for speaking up, extending structured invitations for participation, eradicating punitive measures and enhancing recognition.

In practice, this means clearly demonstrating how individual input aligns with immediate business objectives, offering explicit directions for sharing insights, promptly correcting any adverse consequences that emerge from speaking up and consistently expressing gratitude for employees' contributions.

Amid heightened uncertainty, adhering to routine business practices proves inadequate. Creativity, experimentation, learning and flexibility are now essential, but these can feel riskier than ever to employees. Psychological safety therefore becomes crucial for leaders to tap into the complete potential of their workforce, drawing upon employees' ideas, talents and insights.

Read the full article ***here***.

Tangible interventions to encourage team members to speak up

Maria Guadalupe, Professor of Economics

While organisations are dedicating significant effort and resources to cultivate a safe and productive work environment, recommendations for increasing psychological safety are often generic. There is little causal evidence on what works in practice and limited knowledge on what firms can do to promote it.

In a [recent study](#), we found that short-term interventions – such as strategic one-on-one meetings – can effectively enhance the level of psychological safety within teams. My co-authors and I ran a randomised control trial with around 7,000 employees in 1,000 teams at Sandoz, a division of major pharmaceutical firm Novartis. Managers in two treatment groups were emailed meeting guidance encouraging them to either use their one-on-one time to discover and adapt to the individual needs of their team (needs treatment) or help team members better execute tasks and remove blockers that may impede them from being effective (tasks treatment).

We found that both treatments led to an increase in the number of one-on-one meetings, as well as a meaningful increase in psychological safety at the team level. We found that the needs treatment was particularly effective for teams with low levels of psychological safety. On the other hand, the tasks treatment was highly effective for teams with initially moderate levels psychological safety.

These results indicate that addressing individual needs is essential for teams with low psychological safety. However, as psychological safety increases, this becomes less important, possibly because managers are already meeting those needs. Instead, focusing on other aspects, such as task execution and removing obstacles, becomes more valuable.

Read the full article [here](#).

Striking the right balance between intellectual honesty and psychological safety

[Nathan Furr](#), Professor of Strategy

As leaders increasingly strive to foster psychological safety, managers need to pay special attention to cultivating conditions for healthy debate. If intellectual honesty, where you proactively voice disagreement in a rational way, is handled improperly, it can chip away at the social cohesion often at the heart of psychological safety. In the most extreme cases, intellectual

honesty can even destroy psychological safety, leading to highly vocal debates and environments charged with anxiety.

Striking the right balance is crucial but challenging. In a study of more than 60 start-ups and established firms across various industries, my collaborators and I found that many teams prioritise psychological safety without realising that it can sometimes undermine intellectual honesty – and vice versa. We identified four principles that are most important to achieving an innovative, high-performance team culture.

First, leaders must foster emotional intelligence and integrate self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management to facilitate candid yet safe discussions. Second, it is important to hire and develop proactive employees who exhibit personal initiative and are willing to challenge ideas. Third, organisations can alleviate employees' apprehensions about speaking out by implementing management principles or processes that validate and encourage honesty. Fourth, fostering open discourse and honesty can be achieved by prioritising a shared mission and sense of working towards a common goal.

Psychological safety and intellectual honesty can sometimes work against each other. The challenge for leaders is to promote candid debate that is focused on the problems the team needs to solve and defuse interpersonal conflict. By doing so, they can nurture a culture that leads to higher performance.

Read the full article [here](#).

Cultivating psychological safety to help diverse teams excel

[Henrik Bresman](#), Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour

The idea that psychological safety is key to the performance of diverse teams is not new, but lacked empirical evidence until recently. In our research, Amy C. Edmondson and I found that team diversity within large pharmaceutical firms slightly hampered performance. This was even more so for teams whose psychological safety score was below average. However, in teams with high psychological safety, diversity improved performance.

In addition, we found that psychological safety increased the well-being of diverse team members, aside from boosting the performance of the team as

a whole.

To cultivate psychological safety within diverse teams, we recommend an approach encompassing framing, inquiry and bridging boundaries. Framing involves clarifying meeting purposes and the value of different perspectives. Managers should take care to shift discussions towards sharing information and ideas, as opposed to decision-making.

Inquiry encourages everyone to contribute by explicitly asking team members for input. When team leaders genuinely inquire about every team member's ideas and listen thoughtfully to what is shared, it fosters psychological safety. Finally, individuals can bridge boundaries by seeking to understand where their team members are coming from. This means asking them about their hopes and goals, resources and skills, worries and concerns.

By combining these approaches, diverse teams can promote psychological safety, fostering open dialogue and collaboration.

Read the full article [here](#).

To help teams adapt to [changing workplace dynamics](#), managers could – and should – be doing more to build and enhance psychological safety. These research findings offer valuable insights into creating an environment where employees feel empowered to share their opinions; adapting one-to-one meetings to emphasise individual needs or tasks; finding a harmonious balance between psychological safety and intellectual honesty; and promoting the appreciation of different perspectives within diverse teams.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/effective-strategies-building-and-boosting-psychological-safety>

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