

Psychological Safety: simple, important, and fragile



In this article you will learn what psychological safety is and why it is simple, important, and fragile.

Definition of psychological safety

Psychological safety means that people feel safe to speak up about concerns, new ideas, negative feelings, and disagreements.

People can trust what they say will be understood and explored, not attacked or discounted. Psychological safety is not a separate program. It is *how* we talk together to get work done. It is *the way* we define problems, create solutions, make decisions, and give and receive feedback.

How to create it

Creating psychological safety is conceptually relatively simple. It requires inviting participation including explicitly asking for and exploring different viewpoints as opposed to arguing back and forth. For example, a leader might say multiple times during a meeting: “No one has all the answers including me. It is very easy to get off on the wrong track. We need to hear from all of you, especially when you disagree or have concerns.”

What makes it important

Psychological safety is very important as studies have shown it enables performance. (1) Particularly with complex problems, the best results arise from collaborative learning which requires openness and honesty. Also, inviting people to say what they really think facilitates intrinsic motivation which enhances outcomes because it means approaching work out of genuine interest and commitment.

Why it is so difficult to develop and sustain

Despite the conceptual simplicity of psychological safety, it is quite difficult to develop and sustain. Our brains were hard-wired early in our evolution for quick reactions for survival. Even minor stresses in team interactions can activate this hard-wiring causing leaps to biased conclusions, often outside of awareness. This diminishes curiosity and openness which are already hard to sustain in the midst of the usual, constant pressure for quick solutions.

Also, multiple studies have also shown that it is inherently difficult in group situations for people to speak up with views contrary to others.(2) For example, in healthcare it is surprisingly common for experienced professionals to not speak up even when surgical patients are about to be harmed. (3, 4) This tendency to silence is magnified when work is fast-paced and by the presence of power differentials. Ultimately, even highly experienced professionals need *repeated, explicit* invitations and support to consistently speak up.

The fragility of psychological safety

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of psychological safety is that it demands leaders who cultivate their own self-awareness, vulnerability, and humility: *self-awareness* because our

minds can so easily be hijacked by the survival brain; *vulnerability* because we have to ask for and carefully listen to disagreements about things we really care about; and *humility* because we must admit when we are wrong and that we need advice and help.

All of these issues make psychological safety quite fragile. Developing and sustaining it is a matter of life-long commitment and practice.

References

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About Neil Baker M.D.

Neil Baker M.D. works with organizations to enhance leadership and team impact through *In-the-Moment Leadership Strategies*. This means using any work situation, even the most complex and difficult, as an opportunity to achieve immediate impact on quality of work relationships and on progress toward results.

He has developed these approaches as a leader, speaker, consultant, and executive coach for 30 years. Past positions include serving as Director of Psychiatric Inpatient Services at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver, Colorado; Medical Director of Clinical Improvement at Group Health Cooperative in Seattle, Washington; and faculty and improvement advisor for more than twelve years for the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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