



Strategy

12 min of reading

by Aelaschool.com

Psychological Safety: Trust and Inclusion for Innovation and Efficiency

The following situation is more common than it should be: You have just started a new job. In your first meeting with the team, you propose an idea to make the department's processes more efficient. At that moment, your leader mocks your proposal in a wry tone: - Oh no, that will never work! It's not how we operate. You have just arrived, and you don't know how things work here yet. Your co-workers laugh, and you feel embarrassed and humiliated. After this situation, you will probably feel uncomfortable expressing your opinion, ideas, or concerns in front of these people again - for fear of...

The journey to success starts with one step

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I'm excited to follow your progress and work with you to reach your goals. Have a great read!

Cheers



Felipe Guimarães
founder of Aela

A blue handwritten signature of Felipe Guimarães, consisting of a stylized 'F' followed by a wavy line.



Psychological Safety: Trust and Inclusion for Innovation and Efficiency

By Editorial Aela 11 Mar, 2022 12 min of reading

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The following situation is more common than it should be:

You have just started a new job. In your first meeting with the team, you propose an idea to make the department's processes more efficient.

At that moment, your leader mocks your proposal in a wry tone:

– Oh no, that will never work! It's not how we operate. You have just arrived, and you don't know how things work here yet.

Your co-workers laugh, and you feel embarrassed and humiliated.

After this situation, you will probably **feel uncomfortable expressing your opinion, ideas, or concerns in front of these people again** – for fear of being criticized.

The experience above signals low levels of psychological safety within the said team, consequently affecting people's efficiency, creativity, and ability to innovate.

This article will discuss **psychological safety, its importance, and how to build it in our teams!**

[Reading tip: How to Facilitate Successful Workshops in Product Design](#)

What is psychological safety?

Psychological safety believes that **there will be no punishment, humiliation, shame, or judgment when sharing our ideas, questions, and concerns** with others.

With this in mind, psychological safety can – and should be – present in all kinds of relationships, whether it's work-related or not.

Keep reading to know more about psychological safety issues in the workplace and how this factor can determine productivity and innovations within teams.

Inclusion, trust, and belonging



Psychological safety is highly related to feelings of **inclusion, trust, and belonging**.

It's only natural for people to seek connection and a sense of belonging – at work or elsewhere – and this inclusion of each individual is the foundation for building an environment of learning, contribution, innovation, and resilience.

Therefore, **psychological safety does not exist without an environment of interpersonal trust** where members feel free to speak up and ask questions without dreading humiliation or punishment.

We can recognize good levels of psychological safety when team members feel confident to openly disagree with a decision during meetings, showing their concerns and fears. And in response, their colleagues and managers won't judge, humiliate or shame them for this.

Understand that **psychological safety is a two-way street**. First, of course, there should be confidence in exposing oneself. But more importantly, their peers and leaders should empower that confidence by making room for honest, non-judgmental discussions.

[Reading tip: Social Media And Our Mental Health](#)

The 4 stages of psychological safety

If you want to raise a psychologically safe environment, it's essential to **cultivate a climate where people feel included**. A place where employees feel safe to learn, free to contribute, and bold to challenge the status quo.

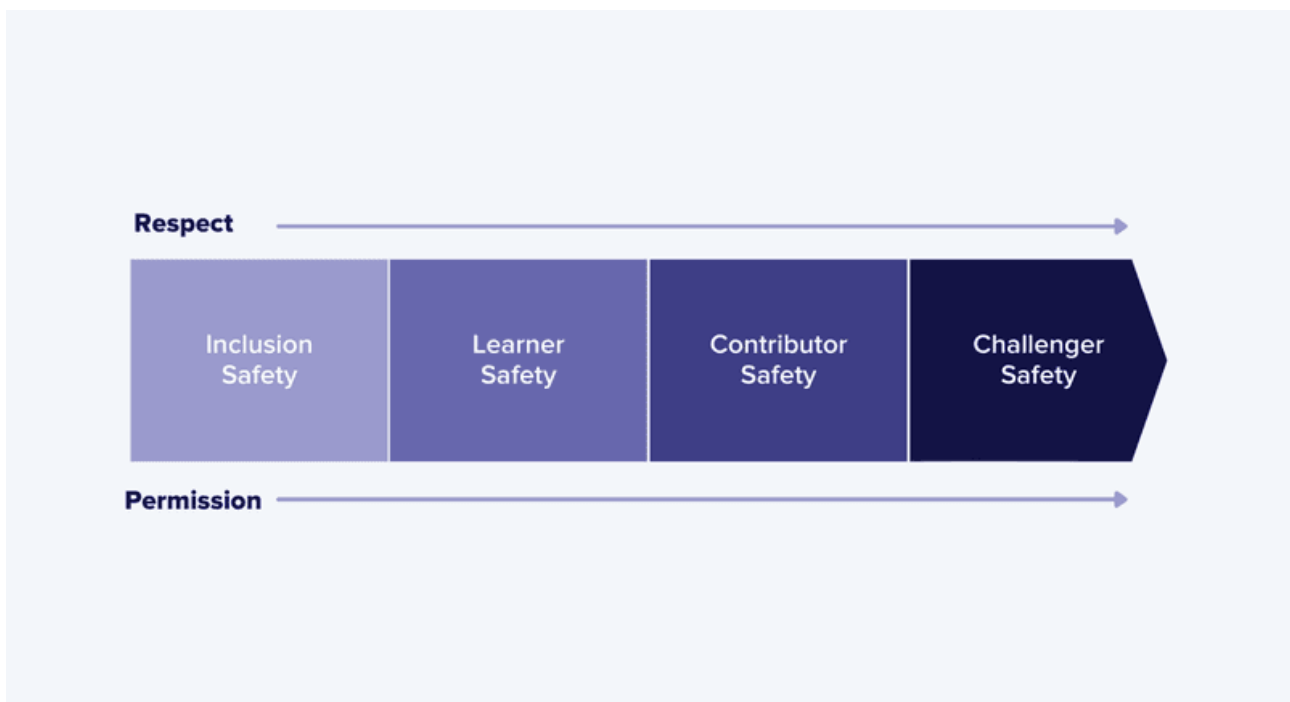
According to Timothy R. Clark, **people can fall into "gutters" when there's no balance between respect and permission.**

When the manager or the team **grants a person respect but no permission**, this person falls into the gutter of **paternalism** - which is nothing more than micromangement.

On the other hand, when a person is **granted permission but no respect**, this person falls into **exploitation**. In this situation, the manager or the team tries to extract value without valuing the person.

In his book, the author describes the four stages necessary to build psychological safety:

1. Inclusion Safety;
2. Learner Safety;
3. Contributor Safety;
4. Challenger Safety.



Inclusion safety

The first stage of psychological safety addresses a basic human need: **to belong and feel included.**

Before thinking about building an environment that is willing to discuss ideas and share learnings, it's crucial to develop an atmosphere in which **people feel safe to be who they are** and, more than that, that **they feel included** in groups and teams.

The aspect of **inclusion comes before any other need** when it comes to psychological safety. When we feel part of a team, we feel accepted and confident in establishing interactions

without fear or reservations.

If there's no inclusion safety, we feel debilitated, stressed, and consequently, pain centers are activated in our brain.

Learner safety

The learner safety stage satisfies the need to learn and grow.

At first, we may evaluate learning as something rational and intellectual, but truth be told: **many emotional aspects are involved.**

Who has never been scared to raise their hand in class to ask a question?

We often feel ashamed and worried that we'll look foolish in front of others.

In this sense, creating a safe space for learning is about **lowering inhibition**, anxiety, and any other negative feelings that can come up during the learning process.

At this level of psychological safety, we feel more confident to test, experiment, and fail. And this is fundamental within a group that works with developments and innovations.

Contributor safety

Contributor safety is about **collaborating and feeling like we make a difference** in a given situation.

After learning, we want to **put theory into practice** and contribute somehow to the growth and development of a company or team.

Therefore, it's essential to create an **environment of trust** where leaders and managers empower their employees to use their skills and explore their abilities.

Contributor safety impacts directly on management style – when contributor safety levels are low or nonexistent, leaders tend to **micromanage**. And when this happens, employees feel undermined and stifled, which leads them to explore their abilities less. Triggering then feelings of inefficiency, inadequacy, and inability.

Challenger safety

The final stage of psychological safety satisfies the need to make things better and **challenge the status quo**.

Challenger safety **allows people to ask questions**, enabling them to improve processes, products, projects, and just about anything else. However, because our level of exposure and vulnerability are also at the highest level, we need the highest level of Psychological Safety to protect us if we are going to engage in challenging the status quo.

When we create an environment with this level of security, **there's no room for retaliation or the risk of damaging our personal standing or reputation.**

And this very last stage is where we see **creativity and innovation** flowing unhindered.

[Reading tip: Animation in UI: How to Create Motion Design](#)

Why is psychological safety important?

Once we understand the basic definition of psychological safety, we can see its importance to the individual.

So now you can see that creating a safe environment for discussing ideas is also extremely **beneficial to the company.**

In this sense, psychological safety enables:

- a favorable environment for **rapid innovation**;
- extracting maximum benefits from **teams' diversity**;
- **resilience and adaptability** to change;
- a culture focused on **problem-solving**;
- encouraging **creativity**;
- improving employees' **quality of life**;
- enhancing teams' **communication** and relationships.

However, it's important to remember that these benefits are not "extra features." The lack of psychological safety also means great loss for the company.

Delay or deny efforts around psychological safety can harm a company's productivity, innovation, creativity, and employee's well-being.

Innovation and psychological safety go hand in hand



One of the most important benefits of psychological safety is how it can help to foster efficient and innovation-friendly environments.

A study by **Yuwen Liu and Robert T. Keller** found that **psychological safety encourages R&D teams to discuss, debate, and take the initiative against paradigms of existing technologies.**

In this sense, R&D teams with high levels of trust and psychological safety perform better in their activities, sharing knowledge, and developing new technologies.

Therefore, ensuring psychological safety is fundamental for companies and teams **to develop and deploy great innovations.**

Google's research on the efficiency of their teams

In 2015, Google conducted an internal survey that sought to answer the following question: **What makes a successful team at Google?**

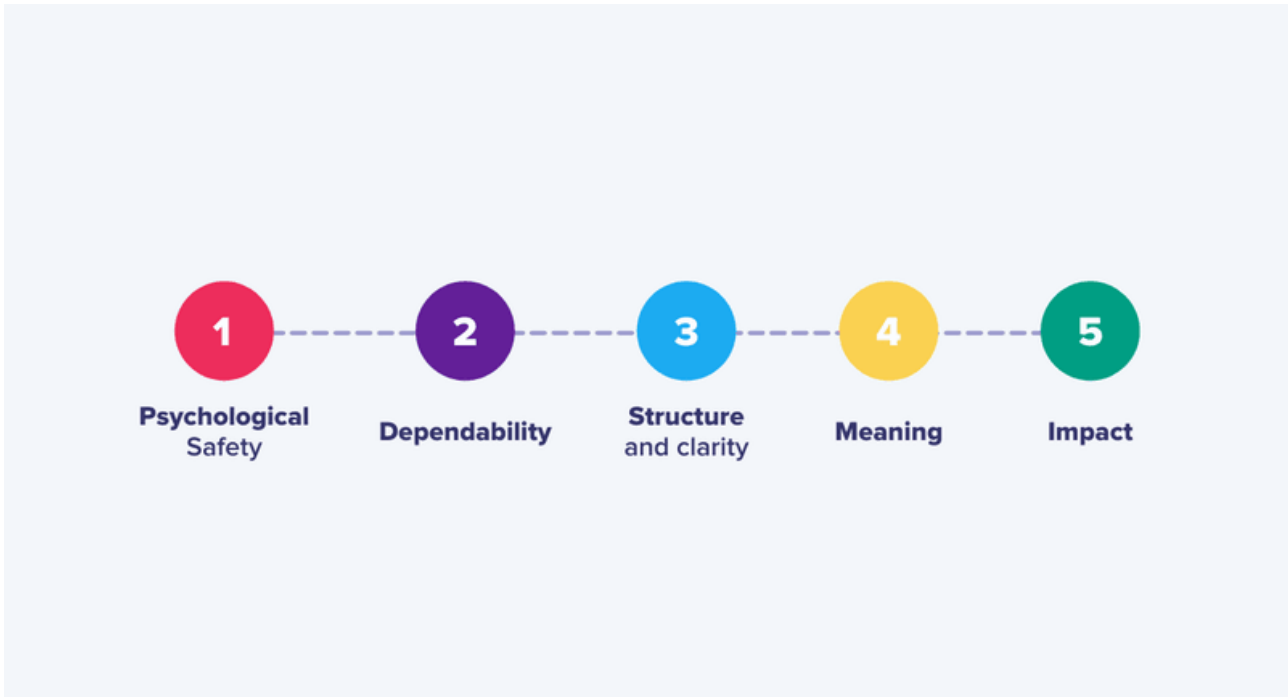
After collecting data and information from 180 teams, Google's research team used statistical models to see what variables could be related to effectiveness.

The research showed that what matters most for a team's productivity is not much about who is on the team but rather **how well team members work together.**

The researchers identified **5 key factors** that contribute to teams' productivity and efficiency; here, we list them in order of importance:

1. **Psychological Safety:** the individual's perception of a safe environment to express

- opinions and ideas without suffering retaliation;
2. **Dependability:** in reliable teams, work is done on time and with quality;
 3. **Structure and clarity:** team members must be clear about the expectations, duties, and responsibilities of their work, as well as the consequences of their results;
 4. **Meaning:** seeing a purpose in work is fundamental to productivity;
 5. **Impact:** employees and teams must perceive that their work matters and creates change.



Although the study's objective was not the importance of psychological safety, finding this key factor as fundamental for teams' productivity is extremely relevant to understanding the **dimension of its benefits**.

Since psychological safety was the most important factor identified, it serves as a foundation for all the other factors.

Google's research has shown us that an environment of trust and inclusion is what makes teams thrive.

How to measure psychological safety?

If you are a leader or director of a company - or even the president/founder - it's crucial to pay attention to psychological safety. Not only to maintain the well-being of your employees but also to foster a creative and innovative environment.

The first premise you should keep in mind is that **your perception of the environment is not necessarily the same as your team's**, quoting here the UX Design mantra that says "you are not the user."

Therefore, it's not enough to "assume" that the environment is psychologically safe; you must

collect data to support arguments and decisions.

In this sense, the simplest and most direct way to learn about the psychological safety of your company or team is to conduct a **survey** on the matter.

Amy Edmondson, a behavioral scientist, points out some questions to be asked to measure the degree of psychological safety:

1. If you make a mistake, others point fingers at you;
2. Team members can bring up problems and difficult situations for discussion;
3. People on the team sometimes reject others because they are different;
4. It's safe to take risks in this team;
5. It's difficult to ask teammates for help;
6. No one on the team will deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts;
7. My talents and skills are valued on this team.

The idea is to promote this survey and ask people to answer **whether they agree or disagree with the above sentences**.

If you want, you can use a **Likert scale** to capture nuances beyond "agree" and "disagree."

In addition, you can create and add other questions to your survey, keeping in mind the question template indicated by Edmondson.

After collecting the data, use metrics to analyze the results and calculate your team's psychological safety levels.

Fostering psychological safety

As seen so far, psychological safety is essential for creating a trusting environment that encourages creativity, innovation, and productivity in teams.

However, many people and companies are not yet familiar with this concept or its benefits.

So we'll list some **practical steps that companies, leaders, and teammates can follow** to promote psychological safety.

How can companies build psychological safety?



Companies, in general, can make greater changes in terms of **organizational culture**. Naturally, therefore, organizations must be concerned about psychological safety.

McKinsey has described some actions that can help disseminate and change the behavior and mentality of employees to improve organizational climate.

1) Leadership-development training programs

More efficient than covering many topics in learning programs, companies should invest in training programs that aim to develop leadership, not only in technical skills but also and mainly in behavioral and social skills – **fostering psychological safety**.

Changing behavior is challenging, so one-off training programs can be ineffective in building **great changes in mindset** and establishing psychological safety.

Companies must deploy an at-scale system that encourages leaders' learning and growth, allowing them to serve as role models with their own learning process, promoting cultural change on a deeper level.

2) Invest in immersive, emotional, and sensory training

Emotional and immersive training tends to have a **greater impact** and remain longer in people's minds.

Yes, a learning program should focus on its content, but more than that, it should include sensory aspects to illustrate situations and trigger moments of **introspection and self-awareness**.

3) Build mechanisms to make development a part of day-to-day work

It's not enough to train your leaders and other employees in psychological safety if mechanisms to implement these learnings aren't built.

In this sense, organizations should carry out a **system for changes** to promote actions that best reflect the learnings from the training programs.

How can leaders build psychological safety in their teams?

Leaders and managers can increase the psychological safety levels of their teams by **creating a climate, behavior, and mindset that fosters trust and inclusion.**

Going back to the Google study, the research identified that leaders who possess the following skills and behaviors could more easily and effectively promote psychological safety in their teams:

- Empower their team without micromanaging;
- Value personal and professional success of their collaborators;
- Results-oriented;
- Good communicators;
- Helping with employee's career development;
- They are supportive and consultative, making it easier to advise the team;
- They are strong decision-makers.

In addition to these characteristics, some actions can help leaders and managers to implement a safe environment for their team:

1. **Retrospective meetings:** holding meetings to recap the last challenges, identifying and understanding the difficulties, achievements, and possible insights to improve work;
2. **Creating empathy among members:** facilitating cross-functional teamwork helps members understand each other's work and thus creating empathy about different roles and functions;
3. **Feedback:** learning to give and receive feedback constantly;
4. **Encouraging interactions outside work:** fostering relationships outside of work to encourage team bonding.

How can colleagues build psychological safety?



Companies and leaders play a crucial role in implementing and disseminating psychological safety.

However, it's also important to understand that co-workers and teams also play a key role in **maintaining** an environment of trust.

A top-down proposal for change will only be effective if all levels of the organization are on the same boat, aligned, and committed to the new mindsets.

In this sense, as a team member, it's important to think about actions and attitudes, such as:

- **Promoting communication** by listening to colleagues without judgment, bringing issues up for debate, and taking into consideration each person's emotions and values;
- **Sharing failures and mistakes**, recognizing that they are important for growth and learning;
- **Using kindness** when expressing compliments, gratitude, or disappointment
- **Reaching out** and helping whenever asked;
- **Encouraging** kindness and **gratitude** among the team;
- **Calling up** when there are attitudes that harm the team's psychological safety.

[Reading tip: Benchmarking: How To Conduct One?](#)

UX Design teams and psychological safety

Balanced and multidisciplinary teams are essential in companies and UX Design teams.

Different people with diverse skills bring more innovation and creativity to problem-solving.

However, along with the benefits, a multidisciplinary team also faces a major challenge that arises precisely from its competitive advantage: **different people also have different opinions.**

In this sense, organizing a UX Design team also requires attention to psychological safety.

When we work with people with similar backgrounds, functions, and visions, it's easier to discuss ideas because the tendency is that agreement and empathy are greater.

On the other hand, working with people from different backgrounds **may feel like interacting with strangers or foreigners.**

We don't know their culture, habits, values, or ideas. And at first, this can cause a lot of discomfort, preconceptions, and judgments.

Therefore, to ensure the efficiency of a multidisciplinary UX design team, it's important to consider all actions and attitudes that could help implement an environment of trust and psychological safety.

The bottom line is, **diversity should bring more benefits than disadvantages** for a team or a company. And the effort to build trust and security is fundamental to harvest success in the future.

We cannot forget that innovation and psychological safety always go hand in hand.

Congratulations on completing this ebook! We now have two recommendations for you to learn even more.

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