Leadership Bites:
Introducing Psychological Safety
LEADERSHIP LEARNING IN 20 MINUTES

**NHS Leadership Academy**
South East

What is Psychological Safety?

Psychological safety is a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes. It describes an environment, characterised by interpersonal trust and mutual respect. Dr Timothy Clark, author of "The 4 stages of Psychological Safety" says that it is a condition where you feel 1) included, 2) safe to learn, 3) safe to contribute, and 4) safe to challenge the status quo. In a psychologically safe environment, people feel comfortable being themselves and better able to bring their full - selves to work without fear of being embarrassed, marginalised or punished in some way because it is not expensive for them to be themselves.

People in teams with high psychological safety feel able to speak up, ask for help, say when they don't know something or admit error, they give and receive feedback, ask questions, expect answers, share their ideas, feelings about projects or potential issues on the horizon, feel able to disagree with each other, call out unfairness, and challenge the boss and each other. In essence, it creates an environment of rewarded vulnerability. Team members can do this because whilst intellectual friction is maintained and encouraged, it is done so in a way that minimises social friction yet retains and fosters a sense of togetherness and challenge.

What about Standards?

Psychological safety goes hand in hand with accountability and with high standards. Great things rarely happen from within a comfort zone or an apathetic environment, nor do great things or creativity flow easily when people feel anxious due to constantly having to watch their backs defend themselves. Performance, ambition, and improvements are expected. Standards are high and clearly set by a leader who is - and a team who are -

highly supportive and consultative. Ground is cleared for team members to rise to the occasion, get things done, take necessary risks, ask for help and offer it in return.
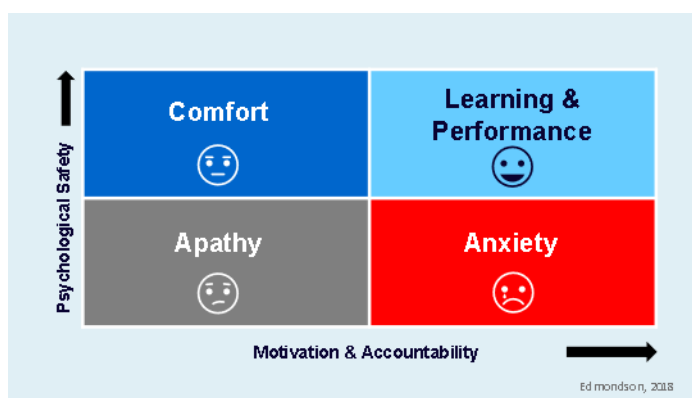
Psychological Safety and Performance
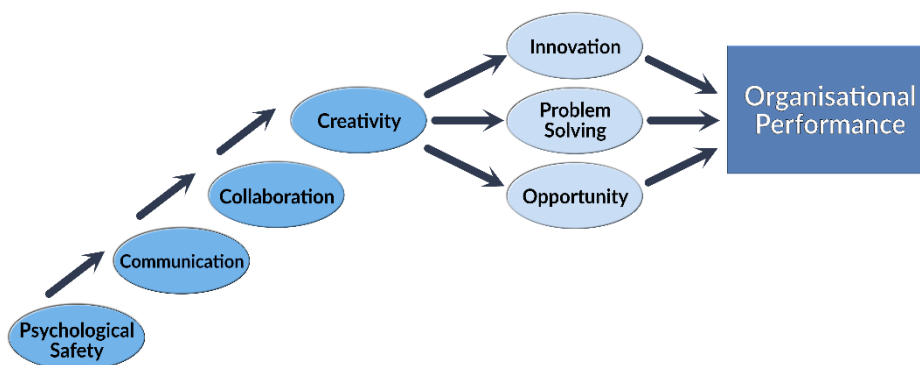
Psychological safety improves team and organisational performance due to a cascade of behaviours that originate from it. Communication is improved when people feel able to share and respond constructively to ideas and concerns. Team and departmental collaboration improves and due to this, creativity in turn is better able

to flow. More ideas reach the table, bad ideas are challenged earlier with less time wasted on them, problems are more efficiently solved, and business opportunities grasped because teams feel prepared and better able to take action.

Measuring Psychological Safety

These questions are based directly on Dr Amy Edmondson's initial research but simplified to make the scoring a little easier. You could answer these questions on your own, have your team complete it together.

1. If I make a mistake on this team, it is never held against me.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
①	①	①	①	①

2. All members of this team feel able to bring up problems and tough issues.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
①	①	①	①	①

3. People on this team never reject others for being different and nobody is left out.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
①	①	①	①	①

4. It is safe for me to take a risk in this team.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
①	①	①	①	①

5. It is easy for me to ask other members of this team for help.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
①	①	①	①	①

6. No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
①	①	①	①	①

7. My unique skills and talents are valued and utilized in this team.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
①	①	①	①	①

Scoring: Simply add your scores to get a total. If your total score is less than 17, then your team is psychologically unsafe. If it is between 18 – 27, then you have some psychological safety but there is definite room for improvement. If your score is greater than 28, then there is a good deal of psychological safety. You could also look at the average or the spread of scores for each item or simply use each question as a topic for a short conversation on what we could do to increase and maintain psychological safety in our team. What is one simple and quick win we could achieve?

Finally

Leaders are NEVER neutral when it comes to creating Psychological Safety. By virtue of your position, you either lead the way or you get in the way. you are radiating influence and there is no off-switch for this. You don't take the day off with psychological safety - nor does your team. The mindsets, behaviours, and communication needed for establishing psychological safety may not be our defaults, but they are teachable and observable. Stay curious, ask questions, and deepen your understanding of others' perspectives. Do the difficult work of holding yourself and others accountable for showing up in a way that's aligned with cultivating a culture where your creativity, and your team members, thrive.

Suggested Reading List
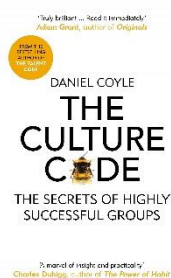
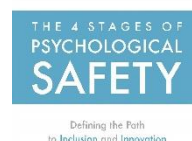This is a great introduction to the concept and gives some simple actions that teams can take to be psychologically safe.
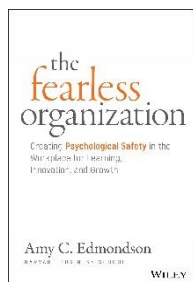
Tons of practical guidance on how to help people feel safer at work. Many examples of what researchers and businesses are doing to embed and apply Psychological Safety.

This is a practical and hands-on guide. It shows leaders how to build Psychological Safety and advises them on how to increase intellectual friction, challenge **problems** and **generate ideas whilst minimising** social tension.

Further learning …

For further information and learning, as well as suggested activities, feel free to visit the **People.NHS.uk** website or our **South East Leadership Academy site.**

Time to reflect...

Take some time to note down your thoughts on what you've learned.

What resonated?

What has made you curious?

What small changes could you make to start having an impact differently and quickly?

What might you need to share with your team, and commit to 'testing and learning' together?

Further learning …

For further information and learning, as well as suggested activities, feel free to visit the
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