

Staff Blog

[Psychological safety at work - A blog from Sarah Hill](#)

22 November 2023

What does it mean to be psychological safe at work?

Psychological safety is important if you want to treat employees well, supporting their mental wellbeing and avoiding burnout. It's important if you want to attract and keep a diverse workforce who feel included, valued and seen. And it's important if you want people to be productive.

Psychological safety is what makes the best and most productive workplaces. Google has studied what makes a good team great. More so than tenure, experience, or education, psychological safety was found to be the number one contributor in their most successful teams.

Can you take a risk?
Can you speak up?
Can you safely dissent?

Are the constraints and boundaries clear?
Are things consistent and predictable?
Are things transparent and happening in the open?

Are there role models for everyone?
Are you able to be your whole self?
Are different perspectives valued?

Will seniors back you up?
Are juniors included in the conversation?
Can we collaborate and compromise?

Can you take a rest?
Are there people around who can support you and who have enough slack to do that when you need it?

This is what comes to mind when I think about feelings of psychological safety. I've seen these things done well and done badly in my career. So how can this be practiced well individually, as a team and as an organisation?

Creating psychological safety in organisations

At an organisation level, policies and culture have the biggest impact. Who are we recruiting and how do we make it easy for them to apply? How do we make sure people's real life can fit into work? What's baked-in that makes it easy for people to talk.

What I've seen that works:

- Sharing the salary in the job advert;

- Adapting interviews to suit user's needs;
- Flexible working, applied liberally;
- Structures that support regular, two-way feedback;
- Room to take risks, make mistakes, innovate and learn;
- Explaining the 'why' behind rules and policies.

Creating psychological safety in teams

In teams, being active about building psychological safety is important – often the things that do this are seen as 'extras'. Making things mandatory for the many that might only be 'necessary' for a few like Employee Passports or sharing pronouns. Creating space for informal relationships to flourish and making sure no one is under too much pressure to adapt, get involved and support each other is key.

What I've seen that works:

- 'User manuals' stored centrally where all team members share their work preferences and needs (for example how they best focus, learn, collaborate or receive feedback);
- A calendar of social and support events to ensure people aren't out on their own; senior people making time to attend these;
- Tenured staff being encouraged to put intros in the diary with any new starts;
- Formal and informal places set up where people can ask for help and can see others doing this and having that help given;
- People being allies for others - the person advocating for the gender neutral bathroom shouldn't have to be a trans or non-binary staff member;
- Being candid with one another about challenges faced.

Creating psychological safety individually

The individual level is the bit we have the most - and the least - control over. In the right organisation and team, we can actively role model what we want to see. But that's not safe in a difficult team or oppressive culture. Leaders, those in positions of 'power' over others, those with social capital and privilege, have the most opportunity to create this.

What I've seen that works:

- Senior people being upfront. Someone who later became my line manager said on one of our first meetings 'I got my period today and I don't feel 100%'. I knew I could always be open with them in future;
- Being vulnerable - sharing when you are not sure about something or when something has gone wrong give others the permission to do the same. Do this if you feel you can;
- Being visible. If you have a protected characteristic, and feel safe to speak up, do it. This could be about your achievements, your work or could be taking a risk or dissenting. Seeing you do this will help someone else with your characteristic feel they can too;
- People taking time off when they need to;
- Make space for others, invite them to contribute and encourage their opinions;
- Invite feedback and be open to it.

Why is this important

People don't perform well when they are stressed – and they don't feel happy either. Unclear boundaries, policies applied inconsistently, colleagues too busy to help, unexpected changes, secrets and whispers, no mechanisms for feedback, insincere communications and nowhere to be seen as your whole self – all of these erode psychological safety and create stressed, anxious and burned out people.

Psychological safety is hard to build but easy to destroy and getting just one part wrong can have a huge negative impact. It's often not thought about actively in teams or organisations. But it should be.

When all the positive indicators of psychological safety start to come together well, we feel safe. We do our best work. We feel at ease, fulfilled and less stressed. We can help others. We can innovate. And we stay in our roles because we feel seen, valued and able to contribute to the best of our abilities.

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Sarah is a member of the Equalities Staff Network which has been exploring what might make staff feel safer and how we can all work together to embed a culture of psychological safety in ES.