DEVELOPING AND SUPPORTING FABULOUS TEAMS

TOPIC
3

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY
TOPIC OVERVIEW

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AWARENESS

What is psychological safety?

Psychological safety is a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, such as speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or making mistakes.

UNDERSTANDING

Key take-home messages.

1 **Psychologically safe environments are rare.** This is primarily because we have been programmed to see mistakes as negative and problematic rather than opportunities for growth and learning (Lean Learning Center, 2022).

2 **Contributing to team psychological safety requires self-awareness.**
We tend to judge ourselves by our intent—giving ourselves the benefit of the doubt that we meant well regardless of the impact of our behaviors. We tend to judge others on their impact—often assuming the worst about their motivations, character, or abilities.

3 **Reframe mistakes.** Every time you make a mistake, you learn something new. And when you learn something new, you can teach others.

TRANSFORMATION

Specific actions you can take to generate positive DEI change with your team, workplace, clients and community.

1 Regularly measure your team's psychological safety. Encourage discussion about safety and culture.

2 Act "as if." To create psychological safety in a group, each team member must act as if it's their responsibility to develop and maintain safety for the entire team. This sense of personal ownership leads responsible team members to act where action can be taken.

3 When things don't go as expected, it's easy to look for someone else to blame. We often ask "why" questions, like "Why did you do that?" and "Why did this happen?" Replace your blame with nonjudgmental curiosity by asking "what" questions instead, such as "What did we learn from this outcome?" and "What can we do differently next time?"

AVMA

VETERINARY MEDICAL ASSOCIATION EXECUTIVES

TOPIC ESSAY

Psychological Safety

What is Psychological Safety?

Dr. Amy Edmondson, an organizational behavior scientist and leading pioneer in leadership and teaming research and education, defines psychological safety as "a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking" (Edmondson 2019; Edmondson, 1999). Members of psychologically safe teams have confidence that they will not be punished, criticized, or humiliated for speaking up about ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes (Psychological Safety Tool Kit, n.d.).

Understanding: Importance To Our Community

The human instinct to fit in can make speaking up at work feel unsafe. Behaviors such as asking questions, seeking or providing constructive feedback, or challenging the status quo, may increase our risk of being judged as incompetent, incapable, or disruptive. Rather than risk embarrassment, rejection, or disciplinary action, team members may prioritize self-preservation over sharing their ideas, knowledge, and insight, even though this impedes collaboration, inclusion, creativity, effective problem-solving, and timely decision-making (Barawy, n.d.). From a financial perspective, US businesses reportedly lose a trillion dollars each year due to voluntary turnover (Wigert, 2022). Organizations that design cultures of high psychological safety experience many benefits, including reductions in turnover, higher levels of engagement, more productivity, greater innovation, less stress, greater capacity to adapt well to change, more life satisfaction, greater collaboration among team members, and greater skill preparedness due to faster learning rates (The Missing Element in Nearly Every Learning Strategy, n.d.; Gallup, Inc., 2022; The Neuroscience of Trust, 2021; Jiménez, J., 2022). Psychologically safe workplaces are important because they contribute to greater team member wellbeing, better team performance, and in healthcare settings, improved patient outcomes.

Sustainability: Making Change

More research and assessment are needed to determine the most effective pathways for embedding psychological safety at the individual, team, and organizational levels and across different workplace settings. What is known, however, is that psychologically safe environments are rare, and we create a work culture in one of two ways: through default or by design. We thrive in environments that allow us to feel a) included, b) safe to learn, c) safe to contribute, and d) safe to challenge the status quo (Clark, 2020).

Initiating the process toward a psychologically safe workplace must begin with the recognition that every member of the team is not starting with the same baseline of safety. For example, suppose a member of your team is the sole Black female in a workplace decorated with portraits or digital images of all white men, run by a leadership team of all white individuals. In that case, it is already an environment where they may feel unsafe to ask questions, fully engage, or share their viewpoints or perspectives because nothing in that environment suggests that it is safe to show up as their authentic self. It is not that singular individual's responsibility to risk speaking up until the organization has done its own work. In these instances, it is the responsibility of the team or organization to address and resolve those factors to establish a new baseline for safety. Once that new baseline is established, we can begin to ask questions that stimulate reflective conversation (Edmondson, 2018). Throughout this process, it is essential to consider how your responses differ when answering from the perspective of someone who is not in a position of power, has not seen themselves represented in positions of leadership, does not represent a majority of the existing team, and/or has been historically excluded from decision-making on behalf of the team or organization to date. In other

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words, consider these questions from the perspective of someone who actively feels unsafe, even if that has never been your personal experience. If you find yourself wanting to invalidate the perspective of someone who feels unsafe with a "yes, but" take a closer look. .You cannot address what you do not acknowledge.

Inclusion safety: How are we including all members of the team, regardless of our differences? How are we acknowledging individual strengths and rejecting false theories of superiority based on title, role, race, gender identity, or other characteristics? What specific, concrete, measurable steps are we taking to address stereotypes and preconceptions and conduct diversity and inclusion assessments.

Learner safety: What standards and behaviors are in place that allow team members to engage in all aspects of learning without being embarrassed, marginalized, or punished? How do team members know it is safe to give feedback? Make mistakes?

Contributor safety: Humans have an intrinsic need to contribute. We need to be seen, heard, and valued. We need to know we matter. We need autonomy, direction, and encouragement. In what ways are team members invited to contribute what they know to the team and apply what they have learned? What steps are taken to bring in voices that have not contributed and to better understand and remove barriers to contribution?

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Challenger safety: Healthy work cultures foster a growth mindset. Challenger safety means you feel safe to challenge the status quo without fear of jeopardizing your personal standing or reputation. In what ways are team members encouraged to innovate? How do we acknowledge that innovation requires some level of risk, discomfort, or "creative abrasion" and give the green light to try new things anyway? In what ways are we making it safe to engage in clear, candid discussions and hold each other accountable for standards of behavior that uphold psychological safety? (Stage 1: Inclusion Safety, n.d.)

Building a culture in which team members cooperate, share their fears, acknowledge mistakes, and strive to continually improve requires intentional, targeted effort and integrated engineering throughout all stages of organizational development, from policy design to implementation, evaluation, and learning. Although leaders play a key role in shaping cultural expectations and behaviors, any team member can help or hinder psychological safety in the workplace.

Psychological Safety in the Veterinary Workplace
Psychological safety is a multilevel construct. It is affected by the behaviors of the individuals who comprise the team, the team dynamics, and organizational norms around a growth mindset, continuous learning, debriefing, open and candid communication, and other workplace systems and processes. Establishing psychological safety as a workplace priority requires self-awareness, intentional behaviors, and assessment at all levels of the organization. The following techniques and practices were adapted from research in healthcare and other workplace settings and support three categories of tasks for establishing psychological safety: setting the stage, inviting participation, and responding productively (Hunt, 2021; Annual Perspective: Psychological Safety of Healthcare Staff, PSNet, 2022).

1. Begin with the end in mind (Covey & Collins, 2015). Survey your team (provide an option that ensures anonymity) to measure current perceptions of psychological safety in the organizational culture and to serve as a baseline for measuring the efficacy of future organizational interventions. For information on measuring psychological safety in healthcare teams, please see: https://bmcmedresmethodol.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12874-020-01066-z

2. Establish and maintain a team code of conduct. Agreeing on a set of clear behavioral standards provides healthy boundaries for team relationships, ensures team members know what is expected of them and what they can expect from each other, enhances communication, promotes accountability, creates a collaborative, consistent approach to effectively navigating conflict within the team, and empowers leaders to better facilitate healthy team dynamics through feedback and education (Costello et al., 2010). To make it simple to embed psychological safety norms into daily habits, codes of conduct need to be specific, measurable and targeted to a specific team. Once agreed upon, teams are encouraged to print and display their team code of conduct, and schedule time to review the standards and team behaviors on a routine basis. For more information on creating a team code of conduct, please see "Writing a Code of Conduct" at https://projectinclude.org/writing_cocs#.

3. Reframe failure. Guess what? Even well-intentioned efforts at change may fail, including efforts to increase psychological safety in the workplace. Many of us have come to conflate our personal sense of self-value with success. Rather than risk failure, we may take no risks at all. As a result, we don't grow or change. We stay stuck. And so does our team. The reality is that if we want different outcomes for ourselves and our teams, we'll need to try new approaches. Maybe the new approach is just a slight tweak to current standards and processes. Sometimes it will need to be a complete overhaul, and sometimes, a blend between tradition and innovation. Rather than failure being a sign of our worth, what if we viewed failure as simply a data point to make a more informed attempt the next time? What if the biggest failure is making no attempt at growth at all? The next time you attempt to change and fail—fail forward. Deconstruct the event by considering the following:

- What aspects of the attempt were most useful? What aspects were least useful?
- What did we learn from this attempt?
- What about the attempt was surprising?
- What will we do differently on the next attempt?
- Where else can we get additional knowledge to inform our next attempt? ▪

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RESOURCES

Books, articles, videos and blog posts about psychological safety:
https://amycedmondson.com/psychological-safety/

Measuring psychological safety:
https://psychsafety.co.uk/measure-psychological-safety/

Building a psychologically safe workplace, TedXHGSE talk:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhoLuui9gX8

Psychological safety of healthcare staff, open access article:
https://psnet.ahrq.gov/perspective/annual-perspective-psychological-safety-healthcare-staff

Insights Discovery Assessment Tool:
www.insights.com/us

Sense of belonging Assessment Tool from Imperial College London:
https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/staff/education-development-unit/public/Sense-of-belonging-at-Imperial-College-London-scale.pdf

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