

Developing psychological safety in organizations

Abstract

In the modern -day world of work, there has been a paradigm shift from hiring employees in organizations who are just academically intelligent to employees who are emotionally balanced and intelligent. Leadership of the 21st century essentially demands a leader to be emotionally intelligent and empathetic and at the same time a manager who can steer the best potential of their team and provide them with an environment that is psychologically safe yet motivating. According to Edmondson¹ psychological safety is defined as when members engage in any risky action in a team, the implementation of these actions is safe, can be accepted by colleagues. Taking this backdrop into consideration, the aim of the present paper is to highlight and discuss the various techniques and strategies that can be used in present day organizations to foster a psychologically safe and enriched work environment.

Keywords: psychological safety, organizations, work environment, strategies

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Introduction

In the modern-day world of work, there has been a paradigm shift from hiring employees in organizations who are just academically intelligent to employees who are emotionally balanced and intelligent. An employee may be a ninety percenter, but may lack skills and competencies to manage and regulate his or her own emotions and those of others. This may impact his/her own performance and that of getting work done from others in a big way, impacting the overall climate and productivity of the organization. Leadership of the 21st century essentially demands a leader to be emotionally intelligent and empathetic and at the same time a manager who can steer the best potential of their team and provide them with an environment that is psychologically safe yet motivating.

Creating an environment of psychological safety assists in facilitating behaviour that is adaptive and encouraging since it reduces excessive concern about others' reactions to actions that have the potential for embarrassment or threat, which are generally a part of any growing organization.¹ A psychologically safe environment helps employees to satisfy their curious gut through seeking feedback, sharing information, asking for help, talking about errors, innovating and experimenting.¹

The term Psychological safety was incepted by Harvard professor Dr. Amy Edmondson in 1999. According to Edmondson¹ psychological safety is defined as when members engage in any risky action in a team, the implementation of these actions is safe, can be accepted by colleagues. It is the belief that you won't be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes. In other words, it means to "brainstorm aloud".²

It is indicated that a psychologically safe environment occurs where:

1. Members in an organization can speak one's heart and mind out freely.
2. Members are encouraged to take risks and challenges.
3. There exists an environment of mutual trust and respect between employees.
4. Members have a common ground for their beliefs and opinions.¹

Brown & Leigh³ suggest that the inception of psychological safety occurs from the individual level and then travels to the level of the entire organization. It includes employees' perceptions about organizational environment characteristics such as: the support of management, clear job roles and freedom for self-expression.³

According to a study on the Google Aristotle Project psychological safety was the most crucial factor governing a successful team. The reasons for the same are attributed to factors such as better employee engagement and decision making, enhanced creativity and innovation, lower attrition rates, improved team cooperation, collaboration and well-being and fostering a culture of inclusivity, productivity and growth.⁴ However, research indicates that there are many factors that may contribute towards an employees psychological safety that are enlisted below:

1. It is indicated that good interpersonal interaction between employees provides a breeding ground for better negotiation, reduction in conflicts, fostering better trust and support and eliminating the prevalence of uncertainty, thereby facilitating psychological safety by Kahn, May.
2. A supportive, open and moral leadership style which is generally perceived by employees as generous and marked by a reasonable disposal of errors further assists in providing a psychologically safe environment by Kahn, Walumbwa.
3. An environment of willingness to share knowledge with each other is found to play a facilitative role in generating a psychologically safe environment in an organization. Research conducted by Zhang Yongjun indicated that psychological safety had a positive significant relationship with knowledge sharing willingness of employees, and played a mediating role between learning goal orientation and performance avoidance orientation.
4. Providing employees with scope for creativity, innovation and experimentation is further known to boost their psychological safety. Research conducted by Zhang Pengcheng affirms that there exists a positive relationship between employees indulging in creative pursuits and psychological safety in organizations.
5. Furthermore, an environment of psychological safety is known to boost an employees engagement and involvement in their job by Kahn, May.

Taking this backdrop into consideration, the aim of the present paper is to highlight and discuss the various techniques and strategies that can be used in present day organizations to foster a psychologically safe and enriched work environment.

Techniques & strategies to develop a psychologically safe environment

Post the global pandemic, it has become rather imperative for organizations to provide its employees with an environment that is physically conducive, psychologically and interpersonally nurtured and organizationally cooperative. According to Clark⁵ Psychological safety develops in four major stages which are as follows:

Stages of psychological safety	Description
Inclusion Safety	Feels wanted and accepted by others. Creates a culture of mutual respect, freedom to voice opinions, respect diversity and encourage inclusivity.
Learner Safety	Does not fear punishment while making mistakes and taking risks. Creates a culture of freedom for, learning, experimenting and risk taking.
Contributor Safety	Feels comfortable to share ideas and opinions without fear. Creates a culture where individuals are valued, empowered and motivated to make use of their skills and talent.
Challenger Safety	Feels comfortable in questioning and challenging status quo and speaking up about issues and concerns. Encourages to develop a democratic and participative culture with alternatives for consistent improvement.

Keeping this in mind various techniques and strategies to build and cultivate the culture of psychological safety in organizations will be covered under three broad headings which are as follows:

1. Physically conducive environment
2. Psychologically & interpersonally nurtured environment
3. Organizationally cooperative environment.

Physically conducive environment: Organizations should provide employees with a positive and productive work ergonomics to enhance professional and personal productivity since there is positive relationship between a more physically comfortable work environment and greater psychological safety. These can be enhanced by using the following techniques:

1. Keep the walls of the office in pastel tones such as beige, light gray, light green, peach etc.
2. Keep your desk clutter free and paperless.
3. Decorate your internal office spaces with oxygen producing and stress relieving plants such as snake plant, sygonium, spider plant and floral plants etc.
4. Switch off the AC, heaters and lights when not in office or when not required.
5. Empty electronic junk files and folders regularly.
6. Use eco -friendly dishware.

7. Replace normal lights with Led lights.
8. Keep common tea/coffee maker and water cooler for employees to use rather than individual electric kettles, plastic bottles etc.
9. Offer common public transport service or use car pool facility.
10. Write off old furniture and electronics.
11. Have team meetings to discuss better and greener ways of maintaining the organizational space occasionally.
12. Order or bring only that much food that can be consumed to avoid wastage.
13. Organize clutter reduction games.
14. Make use of eco-friendly technology as much as possible.
15. Create a physically safe and supportive environment for employees that are differently abled and impaired.

Psychologically & interpersonally nurtured environment: Edmondson described psychological safety as the “absence of interpersonal fear.” In order to attain this absence of interpersonal fear, organizations must maintain employee engagement by helping people feel comfortable and building the shared belief that the team is safe for risk-taking.⁶ According to a research conducted by the State of Talent Optimization Report, one in four companies consider psychological safety as the most significant factor for the retention of employees in organizations.⁶ Some psychological and interpersonal strategies can be incorporated in organizations to nurture psychological safety are as follows:

- A. Focus and concentrate on what is most important first.
- B. Interact with employees as a team more frequently.
- C. Encourage people to speak up/vocalize without hesitation and fear.
- D. Teach them the art of practicing positive affirmations such as “I am capable of handling any situation”.
- E. Practice the art of active listening when communicating with your colleagues and employees. In other words, “lend them an ear”.
- F. Cultivate the culture of compassion, empathy and kindness.
- G. Work on awareness of self and emotional regulation.
- H. Schedule picnics and family get togethers occasionally.
- I. Create an environment of creativity, innovation and growth through brainstorming sessions, trainings, workshops etc.
- J. Training employees to be rightly assertive “Never say yes when you want to say no”.
- K. Avoid playing blame games and indulging in negativity and office politics.
- L. Adopt democratic and participative leadership style in decision making.
- M. Be open to feedback and healthy criticism.
- N. Mentor both individuals and teams.
- O. Practice creative visualization to first envision and then execute your dreams.
- P. Remember its ok to be vulnerable sometimes.

- Q. Learn to conquer and deal with your limiting beliefs.
- R. Celebrate your victories and reinforce people for putting in efforts.
- S. Create a culture of inclusivity, openness and gregariousness.

Organizationally cooperative environment

Life blood and sustainability of organizations does not lie in its buildings and structures, rather in its ability to meld different components steered through a power packed and motivated human resource. This can be achieved through creating an environment of mutual trust, respect, cooperation and synergy. One such example that comes to my mind is the world's leading automobile giant Toyota Motor Corporation headquartered in Japan.

Toyota uses its corporate culture to maximize human resource capabilities in innovation, motivating workers to adopt effective problem-solving behavior, Personal magnetism, humility, teamwork, continuous improvement through learning, persistence and resilience that acts as adhesive strength to nurture a cooperative culture.⁷

Some strategies that can be incorporated to create a cooperative environment in organizations to foster psychological safety are as follows:

1. Use people's diverse skills as a strength to nurture teamwork.
2. Offer credible rewards and reinforcements for boosting morale of employees.
3. Create a culture of harnessing creativity from contradictions. This is one strategy Toyota Motor Corporation has been making use of since years.
4. Make a wise and judicious use of people and technology.
5. Create a culture mutual respect, trust and synergy.
6. Encourage employees towards collaborative thinking and working.
7. Exercise a participative and collaborative working leadership style.
8. Be non-judgmental and transparent in your approach and dealing.
9. Create a crystal- clear communication and feedback channel.
10. Invest in hard and soft skill- based learning and development. This concept of life -long learning for all is one of the major reasons for the success of Toyota Motor Corporation. A favorite saying of the former chairperson of Toyota, Hiroshi Okuda is "Reform business when business is good".⁷
11. Create your own organization specific core values/ mission statement - what is diligently practiced by Toyota Motors "We are always optimizing to enhance the happiness of every customer, as well as to build a better future for people, society, and the plant we share".⁷
12. Encourage every employee including the underperformers to make use of their potential to the fullest.
13. Create a room an environment for innovation and experimentation. Toyota encourages employees to think deeply but take small steps- and never give up.⁷ It first breaks down a big goal into manageable challenges, then experiments to come up with new initiatives for handling more difficult components of the challenge.⁷

Conclusion

In today's highly competitive and uncertain world of work where technology is virtually driving the human resource, I would like to end my article by quoting Joseph Fahrney's post on LinkedIn, "Psychological safety is crucial in nurturing a healthy organizational environment, enhancing individual well-being, and enabling the free exchange of ideas. It shapes the perceived consequences of interpersonal risk-taking."

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Conflicts of interest

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