

CHAPTER 19

Psychological Safety: A Manager's Responsibility

Rami Tejaskumar Anilbhai and Subhashree S.***

ABSTRACT

Organisations in the modern workplace face rapid change driven by technological advance, globalisation and intensifying competition. To survive and grow in such conditions they require employees who are confident, inventive and willing to collaborate, and one of the most important conditions supporting these qualities is psychological safety. The term denotes a working environment in which employees feel secure enough to express ideas, raise concerns, ask questions and admit mistakes without fear of punishment, humiliation or adverse consequence. Psychological safety has acquired prominence because it bears directly on engagement, team performance, innovation and organisational effectiveness. Managers occupy a decisive position in creating and sustaining it, since their conduct shapes what employees experience from day to day: how errors are received, how dissent is handled and how expectations are communicated all register more powerfully than any written policy. This article examines the concept of psychological safety, explains its importance in the workplace, sets out the specific responsibilities it places on managers and proposes practical strategies for building a psychologically safe environment. It further considers the obstacles managers encounter — rigid hierarchy, cultural norms discouraging disagreement, performance pressure and unexamined bias — and the longer-term benefits that accrue to employees and organisations alike where those obstacles are addressed.

Keywords: Psychological safety; Trust; Open communication; Team performance; Managerial responsibility.

1.0 Introduction

Organisations today operate in dynamic and highly competitive environments. Employees are expected to meet demanding deadlines, adapt to unfamiliar technologies and improve their performance continually, while teamwork, communication and innovation have become essential to success.

**Corresponding author; MBA Student, Indukaka Ipcowala Institute of Management, Charotar University of Science and Technology (CHARUSAT), Changa, Gujarat, India
(E-mail: 24mba161@charusat.edu.in)*

***Assistant Professor, Indukaka Ipcowala Institute of Management, Charotar University of Science and Technology (CHARUSAT), Changa, Gujarat, India (E-mail: subhashrees.mba@charusat.ac.in)*

These expectations cannot be met, however, where people work in an atmosphere of fear, pressure or insecurity. Many organisations retain management practices centred on strict control, positional authority and the punishment of error. Such practices discourage employees from speaking openly, offering ideas or reporting difficulties. Mistakes are concealed rather than examined, creativity diminishes, and trust between employees and management weakens. Over time the effect on both individual well-being and organisational performance is considerable.

Psychological safety offers a remedy. It establishes a supportive environment in which employees feel able to express themselves without apprehension. Organisational policy and culture contribute to it, but managers exert the strongest influence because they interact with employees daily; their leadership style, manner of communication and immediate reactions shape what employees believe to be safe. Psychological safety should therefore be regarded as a core responsibility of managers rather than an optional organisational practice.

2.0 Concept Explanation: Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is a shared belief among the members of a group that their workplace is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. The concept was established in the management literature by Amy Edmondson, who described it as a climate in which individuals feel able to take the risks associated with communication and learning: asking questions, admitting mistakes, offering suggestions and voicing dissenting opinions (Edmondson, 1999).

Psychological safety does not mean that employees may evade responsibility or fall short of performance standards. It supports high performance precisely by allowing people to learn from error and improve continuously. In psychologically safe workplaces mistakes are treated as occasions for learning rather than as grounds for blame, and the distinction between a safe climate and a permissive one is well established in the subsequent literature (Newman et al., 2017).

At the level of everyday practice, psychological safety is expressed in a small number of recognisable conditions:

- Freedom to express opinions without fear of reprisal.
- Confidence to ask for help or for clarification.
- Acceptance of differing viewpoints and unfamiliar ideas.
- Respectful conduct on the part of managers and colleagues alike.
- Trust in the decisions and intentions of those in leadership.

3.0 The Importance of Psychological Safety in the Workplace

Psychological safety contributes materially to both individual and organisational outcomes, and its importance may be understood across five dimensions.

3.1 Employee engagement and motivation

Employees who feel psychologically safe also feel valued and respected, which strengthens their attachment to the organisation. Engaged employees display higher motivation, take initiative and are willing to contribute beyond the strict requirements of their role (Kahn, 1990).

3.2 Innovation and creativity

Innovation requires experiment, and experiment entails the risk of failure. Employees are unlikely to advance untested ideas where they anticipate criticism or penalty. Psychological safety encourages people to think creatively and to propose new solutions, which sustains both continuous improvement and genuine innovation.

3.3 Team performance and collaboration

Teams characterised by high psychological safety communicate openly and support one another. Members share information readily, offer feedback and address disagreement constructively, with corresponding improvements in coordination and in the quality of decisions. Meta-analytic evidence confirms a consistent association between psychological safety and team performance across a wide range of settings (Frazier et al., 2017).

3.4 Learning and continuous improvement

Errors are inevitable in any organisation. Where the climate is safe, employees discuss them openly and learn from them; where it is not, the same errors recur because no one is willing to name them. Openness of this kind is what allows an organisation to adapt as its circumstances change.

3.5 Employee well-being and retention

Workplaces governed by fear generate stress, exhaustion and dissatisfaction. Psychological safety reduces emotional strain and improves satisfaction with work, with consequent reductions in turnover and absenteeism.

4.0 Psychological Safety as a Managerial Responsibility

Managers stand between organisational policy and the daily experience of employees, and their conduct determines directly how safe people feel. The responsibility is therefore managerial before it is institutional.

4.1 The influence of managerial behaviour

Managers shape psychological safety principally through four kinds of conduct: how they respond to mistakes; how they receive feedback and dissent; how they communicate expectations; and how they treat employees during conflict. A manager who listens patiently, shows empathy and encourages discussion creates a supportive environment. One who reacts harshly, dismisses suggestions or attributes blame to individuals undermines it, frequently without intending to do so.

4.2 Establishing trust and respect

Trust is the foundation on which psychological safety rests. Managers establish it by demonstrating integrity, fairness and consistency over time. Employees who trust a manager are markedly more willing to speak openly and to take initiative, since they can predict how their candour will be received.

4.3 Encouraging open communication

Managers should actively invite contribution and acknowledge it when offered. Regular team meetings, individual discussions and genuinely accessible channels of communication all assist, provided that what is said through them is demonstrably acted upon (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006).

4.4 Leading by example

Managers set the behavioural norms of a team. Where a manager admits their own mistakes, solicits feedback on their own performance and acknowledges uncertainty, employees are encouraged to do likewise. Little else a manager says on the subject carries comparable weight (Schein & Schein, 2018).

5.0 Practical Strategies for Managers

5.1 Encourage participation

Managers should ensure that every member of a team has the opportunity to express a view. Dominating discussion, or consistently favouring particular individuals, discourages others from contributing at all.

5.2 Respond constructively to mistakes

Rather than attributing blame, managers should concentrate on understanding why an error occurred and on determining what should follow. Consistency in this respect builds confidence more effectively than any assurance offered in advance.

5.3 Provide constructive feedback

Feedback should be specific, respectful and directed at behaviour rather than at personal characteristics, so that employees can act on it without feeling that their competence or character has been impugned.

5.4 Promote inclusiveness

Managers should treat diversity of background, experience and opinion as an asset. Inclusive conduct strengthens psychological safety directly, since those most likely to withhold a dissenting view are generally those who feel least securely established within the group.

5.5 Set clear expectations

Ambiguity generates anxiety. Managers should communicate objectives, responsibilities and standards of performance plainly, so that employees are not left to infer what is required of them from indirect evidence.

6.0 Challenges in Building Psychological Safety

6.1 Organisational hierarchy

Rigid hierarchies discourage open communication. Employees may reasonably fear adverse consequences when addressing senior managers, particularly where seniority is emphasised in the ordinary conduct of business.

6.2 Cultural barriers

In some cultural settings the questioning of authority or the open expression of disagreement is discouraged as a matter of established norm. Managers must remain sensitive to such differences while continuing to create room for candour, which generally requires more deliberate invitation than would be necessary elsewhere.

6.3 Performance pressure

Demanding performance requirements can appear to conflict with psychological safety. The conflict is largely apparent rather than real, but managers must nonetheless hold accountability and support in balance rather than sacrificing either to the other.

6.4 Managerial bias

Unconscious bias affects how managers treat individual employees, with the result that psychological safety may be distributed unevenly across a single team. Recognising these obstacles is the first step towards addressing them effectively.

7.0 Long-Term Benefits

Organisations that give priority to psychological safety experience a number of durable benefits: higher engagement, improved innovation and adaptability, stronger cohesion within teams, reduced turnover and absenteeism, and an enhanced reputation as an employer. From a managerial standpoint, psychologically safe teams are also easier to lead, since they require less direct control and supervision; employees become self-motivated and assume responsibility for their own work.

8.0 Conclusion

Psychological safety has become a critical requirement for organisational success in a knowledge-driven economy. Managers occupy the decisive position in creating environments where employees feel able to express ideas, admit mistakes and contribute fully. By building trust, encouraging open communication, responding constructively to error and leading with empathy, managers can establish psychologically safe workplaces. Obstacles exist, but the benefits substantially outweigh the effort required. Psychological safety is not merely an organisational aspiration; it is a fundamental responsibility of every manager.

References

1. Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2), 350–383. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2666999>
2. Edmondson, A. C. (2019). *The fearless organization: Creating psychological safety in the workplace for learning, innovation, and growth*. Wiley.
3. Frazier, M. L., Fainshmidt, S., Klinger, R. L., Pezeshkan, A., & Vacheva, V. (2017). Psychological safety: A meta-analytic review and extension. *Personnel Psychology*, 70(1), 113–165. <https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12183>
4. Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33(4), 692–724. <https://doi.org/10.5465/256287>
5. Nembhard, I. M., & Edmondson, A. C. (2006). Making it safe: The effects of leader inclusiveness and professional status on psychological safety and improvement efforts in health care teams. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 27(7), 941–966. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.413>

6. Newman, A., Donohue, R., & Eva, N. (2017). Psychological safety: A systematic review of the literature. *Human Resource Management Review*, 27(3), 521–535. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2017.01.001>
7. Schein, E. H., & Schein, P. A. (2018). *Humble leadership: The power of relationships, openness, and trust*. Berrett-Koehler.