

What is Psychological safety and why does it matter?

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By now you've probably heard the term "psychological safety" a few times, but you're not completely understanding what it is. Truth is that it's an important component of our everyday lives, and most of us are probably completely unaware of this. Many of you may not remember your freshman psychology class or learning about Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. In the Hierarchy of Needs, it was proposed that people have specific needs that must be met in order to live a fulfilling and happy life. The Hierarchy of Needs is most commonly associated with motivation; essentially people are motivated to ensure their needs are met. However, if those needs are not met, they are not able to function at their optimal level. Therefore, meeting the person's psychological safety needs at work is essential for them to perform at their highest ability.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



(Image from PMPHealthNP)

Psychological safety is considered a safety need and is more specifically identified as an emotional need. In a work environment, a person is more likely to experience psychological safety when their workplace has people who are trustworthy, friendly, and cooperative. Additionally, people are likely to report higher levels of psychological safety when their workplace has an open environment where people are encouraged to share their thoughts, ideas, and feelings without fear of ridicule or repercussions. Some of this may include others telling them that their ideas are not good or that their feelings are "overreactions" to something that others have deemed not that important. An open work environment is one where a person's ideas and thoughts are received gracefully (e.g. "that could be a really useful idea") and where their feelings are validated (e.g. "we're really sorry that situation made you feel that way; how can we help?").

Of course, this does not mean that these exchanges have to happen in a group or team environment; rather, they can occur in one-on-one meetings or coaching sessions. Creating psychological safety starts with the culture of the organization. It's driven by the leadership. This means that leaders at all levels are essential for creating and maintaining psychological safety within a workplace. If employees do not feel safe, they will not develop positive social relationships with others in their workplace. They will not

feel like they belong there. They aren't going to care for recognition in a workplace that doesn't value who they are as a person.

This is essential: these people will not value recognition from a company that fails to recognize the person. If they don't value the recognition, they aren't going to work to get recognition. If they're not working hard, you're not getting their 100%. Therefore, their performance is not indicative of what they are truly capable of. This means that you are losing money in lost productivity. And it's not the employee's fault.

How do we fix this problem? By ensuring that we ensure that we eliminate or minimize psychological safety hazards. These can include things like unreasonably high work demands, long hours, poor organizational support, poor workplace relationships, low role clarity, poor change management, isolation, and low recognition and reward. While you may not be able to eliminate all of these hazards, it is up to you to ensure that your leadership controls the controllables and provides as much support and help where possible. It may also be essential to ensure that potential issues are addressed and that the people are aware of how to maintain the highest level of psychological safety.

When organizations provide the opportunities to address and eliminate or minimize psychological safety hazards, employee psychological safety, organizational commitment, and even morale will increase. When these increase, so does productivity. When productivity increases, companies have greater ROI. Psychological safety isn't just the latest buzz-word, it's a necessary organizational component of culture that drives success.