

## Safety at Work

Team meetings are a time for leaders to exhibit behaviors that foster a psychologically safe environment.

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It has been more than 35 years since the Exxon Valdez spilled more than 10 million gallons of crude oil in Alaska's Prince William Sound. Still, that disaster has forever changed how ExxonMobil and organizations like it think about safety.

For instance, the safety minute is a practice Exxon implemented to decrease workplace accidents and injuries. It is a brief one-and-done presentation about a safety issue or concern at the start of a meeting. After the spill, safety minutes became the first agenda item of every meeting at every Exxon office.

Safety minutes have taken hold in other organizations, particularly those responsible for manufacturing or transporting dangerous goods. But is it enough in today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world? One way team leaders can focus on physical and psychological safety is to shift from safety minutes to safety methods.

### What it is

Safety methods are leadership behaviors that create an environment where employees feel comfortable speaking up. Safety methods come in multiple shapes and sizes, tailored to a leader's style or situation.

Take Google's Project Aristotle as an example. In a two-year quest to better understand Google's high-performing teams, researchers found that how teams operate is more important than who is on the team.

When the best Google teams gathered for meetings, leaders opened up and shared their mistakes or vulnerabilities. Leaders of the best teams didn't dominate meeting conversations. Instead, they divided their time between speaking and listening to their team members. Likewise, leaders of the best teams weren't listening to respond but listening to understand what their team members were saying. Throughout the meetings, team leads kept a pulse on individuals' emotional levels and checked in when someone seemed off or upset. With the findings from Project Aristotle, Google researchers stumbled upon the concept of psychological safety.

### How it works

Harvard University professor Amy Edmondson defines *psychological safety* as "the belief that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk taking." In more than 25 years of research, Edmondson and other researchers found that teams with psychological safety exhibit more learning behaviors, such as sharing knowledge, offering suggestions, and brainstorming alternatives.

In her early research on the topic, Edmondson examined the effects of teamwork on medical error rates in hospitals and discovered that better hospital teams talked openly about mistakes and ways to prevent them. Over time, she learned that high-



#### CHECKLIST

### Differences Between Safety Minutes and Safety Methods



Practice leadership behaviors consistently that direct reports can follow instead of giving a brief, one-time presentation.

performing teams across multiple industries and geographies had climates of psychological safety and felt more comfortable speaking up about problems and working together to solve them.

Team leaders play an essential role in establishing safe climates on their teams. They model psychologically safe behaviors that they want team members to adopt, and team meetings are one place where such modeling occurs.

## Guidelines

Speaking up at work is not always easy, but it can be quite rewarding. When individuals have the courage to speak up, they can solve pressing problems with innovative solutions. Team members are more likely to speak up when their leaders are humble, curious, present, and intentional in meetings.

**Be humble.** At the start of the meeting, acknowledge the novelty of the situation by mentioning, “This is new territory for me.” As appropriate, admit that you have made a mistake or don’t have all the answers with a statement such as “I’m not sure what to do.” Invite people to challenge and disagree more by saying, “Let’s have an open and honest debate.”

**Get curious.** Draw people into the conversation, especially introverts, by asking them what’s on their minds. Don’t limit the discussion to the cognitive space; tap into the senses with a question inquiring about what they are seeing, hearing, or feeling. Peel the onion—one layer at a time—with queries such as “Can you say more about that?”

**Stay present.** Summarize key takeaways with a statement such as “I’m hearing you say ...” Synthesize critical points from several people and add your interpretations when appropriate—for

## RESOURCES

Coll, S. 2012. *Private Empire: ExxonMobil and American Power*. New York: Penguin Books.

Detert, J. 2021. *Choosing Courage: The Everyday Guide to Being Brave at Work*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press.

Duhigg, C. 2016. “What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team.” *The New York Times*, February 25. [nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/what-google-learned-from-its-quest-to-build-the-perfect-team.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/what-google-learned-from-its-quest-to-build-the-perfect-team.html).

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Rider C., A. Ferrere, Z. Belovai, M. Guadalupe, and F. Englmaier. 2023. “Proven Tactics for Improving Teams’ Psychological Safety.” *MIT Sloan Management Review*, March 27. [sloanreview.mit.edu/article/proven-tactics-for-improving-teams-psychological-safety](https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/proven-tactics-for-improving-teams-psychological-safety).

example, say, “I’m picking up several themes. They are ...” Remain open to others’ opinions, even when they conflict with your own, by replying, “Interesting. Help me understand ...”

**Be intentional about how you close the meeting.** Evaluate what you have learned from the conversation with a comment such as “This conversation has moved me [or: us] forward in these ways.” Extend an offer to keep the conversation going with a request such as “If anything else comes to mind after today’s meeting, don’t hesitate to reach out.” Express appreciation to all involved for sharing their ideas and concerns with you.

## Results

As team leaders model psychologically safe behaviors and language in team meetings, remember that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to safety methods or increasing psychological safety overall. Leaders must decide what works best for any given situation.

What may work best for team leaders is to move beyond the traditional safety minute toward more comprehensive safety methods in team meetings. Start making that vital shift by experimenting with safe behaviors, such as being humble and curious, and safe language to get employees to open up and be vulnerable. By experimenting with safe behaviors and language in team meetings, you can improve psychological safety and learning in your teams.

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Forgo a safety minute at the beginning of meetings. Practice psychological safety throughout meetings by encouraging an open and honest dialogue.



Create a safe environment for employees to speak their minds by really listening to their thoughts and opinions.



Offer opportunities to increase learning within teams.



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