

Working scared

Why leaders must continuously cultivate psychological safety

By Martha Acosta, human and organisational performance improvement consultant

It's a stressful time, no doubt about that. The entire world is living through the uncertainty of a pandemic. Different countries are experiencing social unrest, and economic pressure of various types and degrees, based on their history and situations. Industries and organisations are reeling, either from loss of business or immense pressures to produce and innovate. Business units, work teams, crews, families, couples – every size of human organisation – are addressing how to interact when the context of being together has changed. In all this, our minds go first to safety, whether the threat is illness, violence, loss of livelihood, or social isolation. It reminds us that safety isn't something we have or don't have; it's something we actively create – and none more so than psychological safety.

Professor Amy Edmondson, of Harvard Business School, coined the term 'psychological safety' to describe a group phenomenon where people share the belief that it is safe to take emotional risks. What kind of risks are we talking about? The risk of being seen as different; of being seen as difficult; of not belonging; of being rejected – these are fundamental existential human fears. E O Wilson, professor emeritus at Harvard University and 'the father of sociobiology', says human beings are not just social creatures; the social group is the unit of evolution, not the individual human organism. In other words, living and operating in groups isn't just how we survive, it is who we are. Humans, like mole rats, ants and termites, are eusocial – we can't exist without each other. So it shouldn't be too difficult to understand that, when group dynamics change – for example, when new ad hoc

teams are assembled to respond to schedule changes and other shifting demands, or when existing teams are interacting with each other over a different medium, such as Zoom – people feel psychologically unsafe. Uncertainty, ambiguity and volatility in social structures are emotionally threatening. So, we can assume that, right now, most people are feeling psychologically unsafe. However, only in an environment of psychological safety can we improve the conditions in which we are working.

Uncertain terms

Some teams are always formed in an environment of uncertainty, ambiguity and lack of familiarity, such as the incident-response flight crews that form to execute emergency and search-and-rescue operations at the Grand Canyon. Retired chief ranger Marc Yeston spent the bulk of his career as a rescue ranger at Grand Canyon National Park, in the United States. He describes how helicopter flight crews are assembled: pilots, medics, rangers, firefighters and other emergencies specialists – many

of whom have never met – come together from different agencies and organisations to address unique situations. Critical to the success of these teams are the pre-job briefings that Yeston conducted as the incident commander, following a process described by Professor Karl Weick, at the University of Michigan. In these, he would say: "Here's what I think we face, here's what I think we should do, here's why, here's what we should keep our eye on... now, talk to me!"

The most important part of the briefings, as Yeston recounts them, is the last part: "Now talk to me!" Research in the field of organisational and human performance tells us that creativity, problem solving, decision-making and physical safety all require candid dialogue, open inquiry, dissenting views, and openly admitting mistakes and misconceptions. This is what Yeston was inviting, but he didn't always get it. All of these behaviours require individuals to be emotionally vulnerable, and vulnerability requires psychological safety within the group and throughout the organisation. Google's Project Aristotle, which spent two years studying 180 teams and analysing 250 team attributes, found that the single most important attribute of high-performing teams is psychological safety.

Building psychological safety

OK. We know that individuals need it and that it is something that happens in groups, but how do we create psychological safety? The answer from Edmondson and her colleagues is resounding and singular: leadership. It is the leader's responsibility – if not purpose – to build psychological safety within the teams, groups and organisations they lead and influence. Professor Linda Hill, of Harvard Business School, has identified four levers that leaders use to influence actions and attitudes, and shape culture: roles, processes, communication and measurement. Edmondson describes four leadership behaviours that she has observed to promote psychological safety: setting boundaries, expectations and social norms; being approachable, curious and open; accepting fallibility in yourself and others; and engaging and empowering others to speak up and take ownership. If we

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integrate the scholarship of these two professors, we can build an action plan for creating and maintaining a culture of psychological safety.

First, let's consider how leaders define roles to build identity in teams and individuals. We tend to think that a job title and a list of tasks and responsibilities is enough to define a role. But roles, like identity, aren't just about how we define ourselves, but are also about how others see us and how others respond to us. As people move from one team to another, or



Marc Yeston, retired chief ranger, United States National Park Service

work in different contexts, roles shift – especially now, in conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity – so leaders must continuously define roles. This creates an opportunity to build psychological safety.

Although crews, such as those at the Grand Canyon, use crew resource management to reduce communication failures, poor decision-making and poor task allocation, people respond to implicit social cues more readily than explicit communications. We are better at observing the unspoken rules and subtext than listening to the actual words uttered by leaders. So, Yeston would often devise a ‘teaching moment’ for newly formed crews to help them understand that feedback was an expectation of their role. He would propose an outlandish approach to the incident – one that clearly violated the safety envelope defined for the operation – then he would look to see who might speak up. He called this the ‘eyebrow test’, because he would look for puzzled faces and ask those people directly what they thought was wrong with his idea. Dissent and challenges would be praised and rewarded, alleviating the interpersonal fear of speaking up against the incident commander.

Much of the fear of speaking up can be attributed to not knowing what might be the consequences of doing so. Yeston’s eyebrow test provides immediate feedback, but it is also important to be clear that there are limits to endless debate, to being questioned and to being challenged. Discussing how roles work together to achieve the team’s shared purpose, and addressing how role conflicts will be resolved, are vital to pre-job briefings.

Process

A process just describes how we do things. It could be a formal process that is written down, or a regular pattern of doing work that everyone takes for granted. Processes may, unintentionally, inhibit psychological safety by discouraging dialogue, inquiry, dissent and acknowledgment of fallibility. So, leaders must cultivate curiosity about processes and openly challenge the assumptions on which they are built.

At the Grand Canyon, emergency and search-and-rescue operations were immediately followed by an After Action Review. Flight and ground crews asked themselves: what was planned versus what actually happened? Participants reflected on where they had to adapt processes and procedures, and considered what they learned from doing so. Perhaps most important, the review identified what needed to be shared with others. Without psychological safety, such reviews would be shallow and meaningless, and yet the practice of these reviews cultivates and reinforces psychological safety.

Even if work is routine – or, perhaps, especially when work is routine – it’s important to assess processes and procedures as they are defined versus how they are executed. To ensure psychological safety, ask these questions:

- 1) Does this process lead people to believe there are limits and boundaries that are, in fact, unnecessary?
- 2) Does this process create blind spots and keep people

S Structure: boundaries, expectations and norms

Role: how we identify

A Accessible and Approachable: curiosity, openness, inquisitiveness

Process: how we do things

F Fallibility: emphasise learning over being right

Communications: how we interact

E Engage and Empower: speak up, stand up and take ownership

Measurement: what success looks like



from being open to other, more effective, alternatives?

- 3) Does this process create a false sense of being right and, therefore, discourage learning?
- 4) Does this process keep people from taking ownership of a situation, or create an expectation that they and others should not ‘get out of line’?

Communication

Psychological safety promotes open and honest communication, yet how we interact and speak to each other in a team strongly signals whether or not it is safe to be vulnerable in this way. That’s why leaders cannot just let communication happen and, when it



Psychological safety is a shared belief among a group of people that it is safe to take emotional risk

breaks down, blame those involved as being poor communicators. Leaders must explicitly define expectations on how the team interacts.

One difficult communication that Yeston says challenged him was admitting that he was wrong. The eyebrow test worked so well that crew members were eager to question what he calls his “cockamamie ideas”. Sometimes, those ideas were not deliberately flawed, but were, in fact, sincere and enthusiastic proposals. It would have been a simple face-saving device to say: “Ha ha, fooled you once, but I can’t fool you twice. Well done!” But, as a leader, Yeston knew it was important to admit: “You are right. My idea violates the safety envelope we established. This is why these conversations are so important, because, if you had followed me blindly, I would have taken you some place neither of us should have gone.”

To build psychological safety, modelling candour is key. Engage the team in conversation. Demonstrate genuine curiosity by asking questions and listening to the answers without judgement. Seek out diverse perspectives and contradictory opinions; don’t expect them to come to you. Talk about what you don’t know and what you might be mistaken about. Be courageous and speak up

to those with power over you and take ownership on issues that affect your team, even if you don’t have full control over the outcome. All of these behaviours will signal to team members that it is safe to take similar risks.

Measurement

What leaders measure is what gets done. Measurement signals what success looks like, and if leaders only focus on outcomes, people will take any path to achieve those outcomes – even if it undermines safety, psychological or physical. Creating and emphasising predictive and progress measures can help build psychological safety.

Emergency and search-and-rescue operations don’t always have good endings. According to the National Park Service chief spokesman, Jeremy Barnum, an average of six people die within the United States’ 61 National Parks in any given week. The success of Yeston’s incident-response crews at the Grand Canyon could not be evaluated by how many lost hikers are reunited with their families. Doing the right thing, such as not putting crew members’ lives at risk unnecessarily to save a life, can feel more like a failure than a success. So, measures of an effective operation must focus more on how it was executed rather than what happened in the end. Attention to adaptation and resilience – both of which require high levels of psychological safety – is critical to improving emergency operations.

Consider how you might find indicators of learning and innovation, which are excellent predictors of improved performance. Candidness, debate, experimentation, inclusiveness, inconsequential failures, questioning the status quo, and generating multiple possibilities are all observable predictors of increased learning and innovation. Framing these activities as ‘what success looks like’ will not only increase their frequency, but also foster psychological safety – because all of them require emotional courage.

Psychological safety is an essential attribute of successful teams and other human organisations. One cannot assume it exists without cultivation and management. Leaders can create psychological safety through their conscious actions and interactions with their teams and the organisational systems and structures within which they work. ■

About the author

Martha Acosta is a human and organisational performance improvement consultant. For more than two decades, she has helped leaders and high-potentials succeed within some of the world’s largest and most influential corporations, including Cisco Systems, Intel Corporation, Mars, Dow Chemical, and American Express. Acosta also represents Harvard Business Publishing (a subsidiary of Harvard Business School) as moderator, who designs and facilitates leadership development programmes based on Harvard scholarship. Before joining Harvard, she was a training manager for nuclear operations at Los Alamos National Laboratory, where she helped develop the Human Performance Improvement safety initiative for the Department of Energy and its laboratories. Acosta lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA.