

**The Relationship of Psychological Safety in the Workplace to the Fourth ICF
Competency of Cultivating Trust and Safety, and the Seventh ICF Competency of
Evokes Awareness**

Research Paper on Team Coaching Competencies

The Team Coach (ACTC-ICF Pathway)

Jennifer Stanley

Stanley Consulting

HR Consultant & ICF Certified Coach

March 25, 2026

Introduction

This research paper explores the maturing construct of psychological safety in the workplace, work teams, and as a mediator of team effectiveness and performance. More specifically, the history, background, and review of research to date on psychological safety and the connection to team performance will be looked at in relation to two complementary concepts within the International Coaching Federation's (ICF) Team Coaching competency framework.

In applying the ICF team competencies to the body of research around psychological safety, two competencies stand out. This paper posits that the fourth competency of cultivating trust and safety, and the seventh competency of evoking awareness are mediated and facilitated by an underlying requirement for psychological safety within the team, and promote organizational success when operating at the levels of the individual, group, and organization.

Since it may be abundantly obvious regarding a relationship between psychological safety and the fourth competency of cultivating trust and safety, this paper will primarily focus on the seventh competency with the intention to draw forth novel insights and practical applications which may be of use to readers. This research paper puts forward the assertion that without the mediating factor of psychological safety, a workplace team cannot operate as a high performing team. Thankfully, poor performing and dysfunctional teams may be rehabilitated through team coaching and other leader and organizational interventions described below.

Before introducing relevant research, models and frameworks, it will be helpful to cover some history, background and key terms related to psychological safety.

To begin, the concept of psychological safety was first introduced in a 1965 work by Edgar Schein and Warren Bennis, who described it as a necessary cognitive state of employees during organizational learning and change, allowing workers to remove barriers and perceived threats of retaliation for failures in performance.

The term evolved in its meaning, and in 1990, William Kahn explored the relationship of psychological safety of the individual to employee engagement, arguing that it is a necessary cognitive state for a worker's attachment to their role and the organization. Kahn identified four antecedents to psychological safety as interpersonal relationships, group dynamics, leadership, and organizational norms (Kahn, 1990).

Most literature now cites a definition from Edmondson's 1999 publication which now transcends the individual employee's cognitive state and regards psychological safety as a group-level construct, stating it is a shared belief amongst individuals as to whether it is safe to engage in interpersonal risk-taking in the workplace.

Another emergent definition is by Timothy R Clark who describes psychological safety as a condition in which one feels included, safe to learn, safe to contribute, and safe to challenge the status quo without fear of being embarrassed, marginalized, or punished (Clark, 2020).

Due to the slight nuances of the term in the literature, this paper will differentiate in our reference to psychological safety as being an individual, group-level or organization-level construct as needed for clarity. In order to begin to understand the connection between individuals, group or team, and organizational success, there are some additional key terms to introduce as relevant to this research paper.

First, a common definition of a team, by Alderfer (1987) is a group that exists within the context of a larger organization, has clearly defined membership, and shared responsibility for a team product or service.

Next, although similar to psychological safety, trust describes a dyadic relationship, person to person, where the other will give you the benefit of the doubt, and psychological safety is about where you will give others the benefit of the doubt (Edmondson, 2004). This is different from team cohesion which is about the felt sense of commitment and attachment to a group (Beal, Cohen, Burke, & McLendon, 2003).

The ICF defines team coaching as an experience that allows a team to work towards sustainable results and ongoing development (Team Coaching Competencies | ICF Standards Team Coaching, 2026). Hackman and Wageman (2005) define it as a direct interaction with a team intended to help members make coordinated and task-appropriate use of their collective resources in accomplishing the team's work. The literature distinguishes between internal and external coaches, which is also an important consideration within the practice of one to one coaching within the workplace.

In recent years, the topic of psychological safety has gained world-wide regard and prominence especially after the famous Google's Project Aristotle research which boldly declared that out of over one hundred team effectiveness variables, it mattered less about who was on a team but how the team worked together, and named psychological safety as the most important factor (Google Re:Work, 2014).

In a world with political, economic and social instability, challenging markets pose additional demands on organizations to remain competitive to maintain economic success. Increasingly, management is being challenged to lead their teams and

employees through process improvement, product and service innovations, and change management initiatives to remain viable in a rapidly changing world.

The ICF asserts a growing need for greater team functioning, stating teams must innovate and adapt quickly to internal and external changes, through an ongoing development process which may incorporate various modalities such as team building, consulting, mentoring, and facilitation in addition to coaching (Team Coaching Competencies | ICF Standards Team Coaching, 2026). The ICF is so committed to supporting this growing need that they launched their Advanced Certification in Team Coaching (ACTC) in January of 2023.

This paper will further review prior research on psychological safety, prominent frameworks and apply findings for driving the fourth and seventh ICF team Coaching competencies to support team effectiveness in the workplace. Drawing from the body of research, this paper will summarise and provide recommendations for actions to be taken by new, growing or dysfunctional teams to strive for greater team performance, supporting overall organizational success in challenging and changing markets.

Literature Review

The ever-expanding body of research on psychological safety spans individual, team, and organization-level perceptions, industries and work settings, individual task behaviour, worker and team motivation, organizational behaviour, change management, product and project implementations, research and development, innovation and more.

Frameworks have been created, antecedents for psychological safety have been put forward, and millions of employees around the world have been subjected to

surveys and evaluations seeking to measure and develop interventions to improve psychological safety and work performance outcomes.

Since Schein and Bennis first introduced the term psychological safety in 1965, through Kahn's, Edmondson's and Clark's further iterations, there has been great expansions of breadth and depth of research in this field. As such, key definitions and fundamentals of the body of research have already been introduced above. Some of the prominent research and findings are shared, which relate to the fourth and seventh ICF team coaching competencies.

Baer and Frese (2003) looked at 47 mid-size organizations, and found that process innovation in an organization was positively supported when mediated by cultural climate factors of psychological safety and initiative. Specifically, psychological safety and a climate that rewarded taking initiative fostered the process innovation that facilitated long term return on assets and goal achievement (Baer and Frese, 2003).

Carmeli and Gittell (2009) found that high-quality relationships and relational coordination foster team psychological safety, enabling employees to learn from failures to improve future performance. Authors define relational coordination as shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect (Carmeli and Gittell, 2009). Again, this research shows that psychological safety operates as a mediator to team effectiveness. Namely, psychological safety fosters a learning environment where workers feel comfortable to learn and grow through confronting errors.

Regarding negatively-associated team constructs, is research on team task conflicts. Bradley and colleagues (2012) furthered past research that task conflict can support team performance under certain conditions. As a point of clarification,

relationship conflict is about interpersonal clashes, whereas task conflict is about disagreements on matters of opinion. This research found that psychological safety within a team is a mediating factor to improve team performance even in situations with task conflict arising, possibly acting as an antidote to groupthink or too much cohesion, impairing constructive dissent (Bradley et al., 2012). It is important to note this relationship does not translate to relationship, interpersonal team conflicts.

Frazier and colleagues (2017) published a meta-analytic review of the psychological safety research thus far and summarized some broad hypotheses. Of particular interest was the finding that peer support and interpersonal relationships, even between colleagues, are drivers of psychological safety. Support does not need to come from a superior for a relationship to build psychological safety in a team. Further, when considering job design, research has shown that interdependence has a strong, positive impact on psychological safety (Frazier et al., 2017).

Newman and colleagues (2017) published a systematic review of the psychological safety literature, summarizing key antecedents for fostering psychological safety and positive outcomes. They call out opportunities for future research specifically at the organization-level of measurement of this construct as most to date have looked only at individual and group-level impact. They raise that future research into organization level and also the interrelationships between individual, group and organization will further insights on the construct overall (Newman et al, 2017).

Finally, we arrive at Amy Edmondson, the pre-eminent source of research and whose frameworks, literature, and 7-factor survey has become the standard for assessing psychological safety, in part due to their academic rigor, being empirically

investigated and the volume of data-backing. She and various colleagues have put forth research spanning decades, and most recently (2023) published a systematic-review amassing much of the available literature to that date.

In her widely cited 1999 paper, Edmondson studied 51 work teams in a manufacturing company, finding that team learning, and in particular willingness to report errors, was mediated by psychological safety, and lead to greater team performance as a result.

Edmondson's 2002 research into healthcare teams carried significant ethical implications which are discussed later. Despite formalized role hierarchies, where non-surgeons had higher levels of psychological safety, they were more likely to report errors by surgeons in patient treatment to superiors. Further, in implementation of new cardiac surgery technology, there were greater measures of implementation effectiveness where there was higher psychological safety (Edmondson et al., 2002).

In Edmondson and Bransby's (2023) review, they categorize the literature into four key themes: getting things done, learning behaviors, improving work experiences, and leadership. They suggest future areas of study on the subject of how to create psychological safety, longer-term longitudinal studies, contingent and moderator variables associated, and the study of less classically-structured, and emergent team formations and dynamics (Edmondson & Bransby, 2023).

Gaining prominence has been Timothy R Clark's Four Stages of Psychological Safety (2020), in which he presents a simple framework, but one whose efficacy has not yet been assessed from an empirical perspective. Clark puts forward a model of

psychological safety where team members can progress through four stages, from inclusion safety, learner safety, contributor safety, and into challenger safety (2020).

In reviewing Clark's framework, this author suggests that his assertions are in line with, and building on historic research, but could be further substantiated through undergoing similar academic and rigorous methods of study like those theories of Edmondson's and the other prominent researchers in the field.

Analysis & Practical Application

Before leaders or a team coach intervenes on team functioning, it is important to consider some limiting factors in individual performance as it pertains to team dynamics. There are several commonly accepted cognitive biases, and two of great relevance are the self-affirming bias, and the fundamental attribution error. In the former, a person is more likely to think and act in a way that confirms their own positive self-perception and self-esteem and the latter is about overestimating the contribution of one's own actions to their successes and underestimating the contributions of others or external factors.

Further, according to needs theories in psychology, such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, or Alderfer's Existence, Relatedness, and Growth (ERG) theory, people have different types of extrinsic needs such as survival, physiological and existence, ranging to more intrinsic and non-physical needs such as self-actualization and belongingness.

Without going too deeply into other areas of psychology, this paper will simply suggest that people are generally considered to have basic survival and belongingness needs which are more core to their motivations, before more non-physical intrinsic needs can be pursued. Put in another way, if a worker is primarily focused on satisfying drives of survival or for personal gains, there may be poorer team outcomes and

organizational outputs. And in the inverse, as psychological safety increases, the individual likelihood to act out of self-preservation for their self-image diminishes (Edmondson, 2002). Indeed, Edmondson states that in psychologically safe environments, people do not think mistakes will lead to being penalized or thought of as lesser than (2002). Instead, they transcend the individual survival needs, towards more intrinsic needs which may allow them to unify upon supraordinate goals of the team mission or organizational objectives.

In her 2002 paper, Amy Edmondson posits that psychological safety lays the foundation for effective learning in organizations, and that a structured team learning process is a critical element of that team process. This relates to the seventh ICF competency of evoking awareness. As per the ICF, it is the role of the team coach to enhance team development through challenging team dialogue and processing (2026).

Through competency seven, the coach attempts to support collective awareness and insight by the team. This is not only for business success, but could be connected to an ethical obligation towards seeking the greatest possible outcomes for stakeholders of the organization, and much wider sociocultural contexts. This paper posits there may be a real ethical imperative and due diligence to support an environment where workers feel safe to forego interpersonal safety for the highest good of their clients, or wider society, which Clark refers to as fourth and final stage of challenger safety (2020).

As introduced before in healthcare, where research has shown real, significant, positive outcomes for surgical patients, it suggests an ethical due diligence arising out of the finding that as psychological safety increases, more errors are reported, and new technology can be implemented more successfully. If a surgeon and their health teams

can have greater outcomes for their patients through the mediating factor of psychological safety, it should follow the logic: once you know better, do better.

And not just on a surgical team, Carmeli and Gittell's (2009) research suggests that as workers feel safe to confront their errors, and through relational coordination and high-quality relationships at work, future performance was improved. With the ICF's team coaching competency of evoking awareness, the coach attempts to support collective awareness and insight by the team. There is a transcendent notion here beyond individual performance to the team output, through learning in relation to one another and as a team.

The concept of having a growth mindset, and a learning organization has garnered great popularity in recent years with the assumption that through continuous learning, greater innovation and process improvements are elicited. Timothy R Clark states that without real fairness, inclusivity, and psychological safety within a team, there can be no expression of creativity, risk of failure, and therefore never a culture of innovation (2020).

Innovation and creativity is mission critical towards supporting continued business success in competitive and challenging markets. Clark (2020) declares that if you conduct a post mortem analysis of failure for almost any commercial organization that dies, you can trace the cause of death to lack of challenger safety. As the fourth and final stage of Clark's framework, it is the expression of psychological safety required for constructive dissent which he names as an antecedent for innovation.

This is where an ICF certified ACTC coach can have significant, positive impact for an organization. With an end goal of having a climate of innovation in order to deliver

performance excellence and remain competitive, a research-informed leadership team would interpret the body of research on psychological safety, and conclude that improving psychological safety in the workplace is very good for business. Specifically, through the mediating factor of psychological safety which aligns closely with the ICF competencies of trust and safety and evoking awareness within the team coaching context, the organization will enjoy greater productivity and innovation through greater team functioning and effectiveness.

Coming back to findings by Bradley and colleagues (2012) regarding team conflict, this author would be remiss not to address the presence of interpersonal conflict within teams which is seemingly not associated with team effectiveness through the mediator of psychological safety as per research to date. Instead of setting this finding aside, there may be other ways to address interpersonal and relationship conflict. First and foremost, there is an opportunity to widen the breadth of research on this subject. For now, team coaches may look to research from other areas such as conflict management or mediation to draw interdisciplinary but applicable interventions that may be extended into team coaching interventions.

At the end of the day, in order for team coaches to be invited to intervene on team dysfunction, organizational leadership must admit there are problems and an opportunity to address team dysfunction through psychological safety and other moderators. In order to influence leadership to address such a problem head-on, one would be wise to formulate a business case, make estimates of return on investments using available research and metrics, and clearly formulate team coaching intervention objectives within the context of business success measures. Of course, any team

coaching intervention by a certified ICF coach will establish these requirements and outline possible outcomes as part of contracting and the third ICF team competency of establishing and maintaining agreements.

Future Directions & Recommendations

First, in order to overcome the self-affirming bias and attribution errors that all individuals are prone to, individuals must have perceptions of decreased personal risk. Workers must be able to abandon most attempts at self-preservation and feel comfortable to err, ask for help, or seek opportunities to learn. This group-level sense of psychological safety needs to be experienced individually, from peers, leaders, and the organizational climate overall, as elucidated in the 2017 review by Frazier and colleagues.

Put into the context of teamwork, the team coach must support all directions of support, between peers, and coming from top down and bottom up between leaders and direct reports. Further, shown in the healthcare research, it must be safe to bring up errors, either by the individual themselves, or addressing errors by superiors (Edmondson, 2002). The team coach can support the positive outcomes of sharing personal errors, in pursuit of higher order performance, namely by the team, through the seventh competency of evoking awareness. More specifically, the team coach should facilitate greater awareness, learning, and integration of lessons from mistakes without personal risk or detriment.

As mentioned, the body of research at the individual and team level in psychological safety has been rich and varied, but sparse at the organization or culture level. The 7-factor assessment by Edmondson can be used by adapting it to the

organizational level, simply by changing out terms in the 7 questions. Therefore, it would be beneficial towards the furthering of research into psychological safety to expand the use of this tool into the organizational level, and into different industries, global markets, and over longer periods of time. Using the same format survey across all levels will support greater comparisons and empirical rigour.

As mentioned above, in order to seek performance gains through the mediator of psychological safety, the organization should put forth both explicitly stated policies towards creating an open, inclusive, and safe environment. Beyond policy, the organization should also reinforce having a growth and learning orientation that supports and rewards learners to share about errors, and share ideas in support of greater innovation for theirs, team and organizational performance.

Then, of course, this ideal must be enacted and embodied in the every day operations within teams at the organization. Edmondson's 2002 paper names several behaviours for leaders to showcase which support development of psychological safety. Namely, leaders should be accessible, acknowledge fallibility, uphold accountability for themselves and others, manage power dynamics mindfully, and establish and support learning culture and processes.

However, even as she has shared leadership behaviours to support psychological safety, Edmondson and Bransby point out in their 2023 review an opportunity for more research into how to establish and develop psychological safety. As the body of research further expands, some researchers have also made a call for investigation into cases where increasing levels of psychological safety might elicit negative or undesirable outcomes. For example, some early research has suggested

that higher group commitment and psychological safety may lead to unethical decisions which benefit the group or organization over other stakeholders (Pearsall & Ellis, 2011).

Conclusion

Psychological safety has become a well-known term in the workplace and in wider society overall, with a growing body of research spanning decades, but the concept is still maturing. In 2026, Amy Edmondson's work stands out as the pre-eminent and established sources of frameworks, surveys, and construct definitions. It will be interesting to see how this field develops in the future, specifically regarding a need for more organization-level research, longer term research, practical interventions and into possible adverse effects of the construct.

This paper puts forward the notion that in discovering greater performance outcomes in vocations related to human life and wellness, such as in cardiac surgery as Edmondson investigated, this research has established ethical obligations for leaders to seek greater team psychological safety for patient health outcomes.

In consideration of the real and important urgency and importance of improving team outcomes, this paper puts forward the recommendation for any leaders, in any organization, to take a real, genuine and objective look at the performance or dysfunction of their teams and assess whether improvements of psychological safety can facilitate greater team and organizational performance.

Many organizations utilize engagement and employee surveys. With the implementation of Edmondson's 7-factor survey, organizations can ensure they are aligned with current best practices for assessment and measurement of the construct. After measurement, an integral component to any team intervention, the organization

should consider whether there is opportunity for improvement. And accordingly, seek to initialize a plan for intervention.

In a changing, challenging and evolving world market, organizations, just as their teams, will need to implement innovative action plans to remain relevant, viable and successful in their business operations. In order to create, innovate and invent new products and services driving business success, it is the workers themselves at the source of such ingenuity required.

Of course, this paper puts forward the recommendation to hire an ICF certified ACTC coach to support an intervention to improve psychological safety in the workplace as a prerequisite to a team and organizational climate necessary to spur creative innovation, team effectiveness, and organizational performance.

References

- Alderfer, C. P. (1987). An intergroup perspective on organizational behavior. *Handbook of organizational behavior*. J. W. Lorsch. Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall.
- Baer M, Frese M. (2003). Innovation is not enough: Climates for initiative and psychological safety, process innovations, and firm performance. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 24, 45–68.
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/job.179>
- Beal, D. J., Cohen, R. R., Burke, M. J., & McLendon, C. L. (2003). Cohesion and performance in groups: A meta-analytic clarification of construct relations. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2003-09785-002>
- Bradley BH, Postlethwaite BE, Klotz AC, Hamdani MR, Brown KG. (2012). Reaping the benefits of task conflict in teams: The critical role of team psychological safety climate. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 97, 151–158.
<https://psycnet.apa.org/buy/2011-13409-001>
- Carmeli A, Gittell JH. (2009). High-quality relationships, psychological safety, and learning from failures in work organizations. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 30, 709–729. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/Job.565>
- Clark, Timothy R. (2020). *The Four Stages of Psychological Safety: Defining the Path to Inclusion and Innovation*. Berrett Koeler.
- Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*. Johnson Graduate School of Management, Cornell University.

https://web.mit.edu/curhan/www/docs/Articles/15341_Readings/Group_Performance/Edmondson%20Psychological%20safety.pdf

Edmondson, A. C. (2002). Managing the risk of learning: Psychological safety in work teams. Forthcoming in West, M. (Ed) *International Handbook of Organizational Teamwork*.

https://www.hbs.edu/ris/Publication%20Files/02-062_0b5726a8-443d-4629-9e75-736679b870fc.pdf

Edmondson, A. C., & Bransby, D. P. (2023). Psychological Safety Comes of Age: Observed Themes in an Established Literature. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*.

<https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-120920-055217>

Google re:Work - Guides: Understand team effectiveness. (2014). *Re:Work*.

<https://rework.withgoogle.com/intl/en/guides/understanding-team-effectiveness>

Hackman J.R., & Wageman R (2005). A theory of team coaching. *Academy of Management Review*.

<https://journals.aom.org/doi/epub/10.5465/amr.2005.16387885>

Newman, A., Donohue, R., & Eva, N. (2017). Psychological safety: A systematic review of the literature. *Human Resource Management Review*.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1053482217300013>

Pearsall, M. J., & Ellis, A. P. J. (2011). Thick as thieves: The effects of ethical orientation and psychological safety on unethical team behavior. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2010-25582-001>

Schein EH, Bennis WG. (1965). Personal and organizational change through group methods: The laboratory approach. New York, NY: Wiley

Team Coaching Competencies | ICF Standards Team Coaching. (2026). ICF.
<https://coachingfederation.org/credentialing/coaching-competencies/icf-team-coaching-competencies/>