Psychological Safety

One characteristic of high-performing teams is their high level of psychological safety in the workplace. Better psychological safety leads to greater innovation and more individual and group success. In this factsheet, we introduce psychological safety, its importance in your workplace, and how you can begin to implement it today.

What it is:

Psychological safety is the understanding that you won't be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes. As states by Julia Rzovsky in her Google Aristotle Project report (2013), 'there is no point hiring a talented and diverse team if they do not feel safe to speak up and contribute their full experience and creativity'. (1, 8)

Key Writers:

Dr Amy Edmondson, The Fearless Organisation, 2018
Dr Edmondson studied the performance of hospital clinical teams and assessed the level of psychological safety with the number of mistakes made. However, her research did not reveal the results that she was expecting. Instead, the results showed that the teams with better outcomes totalled more mistakes than teams with worse outcomes. Dr Edmondson theorised that the better teams in this study were more likely to confront errors and report them, while the worse teams were more likely to hide their mistakes. The clinical teams that boasted better outcomes discussed the mistakes they made without the fear of being judged or punished, working together to avoid the same mistakes in the future. The open discussion of errors and mistakes is an essential element of psychological safety in the workplace. (6)

Dr Edmondson states that psychological safety is paramount for a successful workspace. A team can reach higher performance with three simple changes in behaviour. (6)

1. Frame the work as a learning problem, approach each situation as a collaborator and ask open questions such as "how can we achieve a mutually desirable outcome?".
2. Model curiosity in your team. Create a space for constant learning by asking questions to your team to extract their ideas and concerns.
3. Acknowledge your fallibility as a manager. You can't and don't know everything, so encourage your team's contributions! In doing so, you will increase motivation in your workforce and boost innovation.
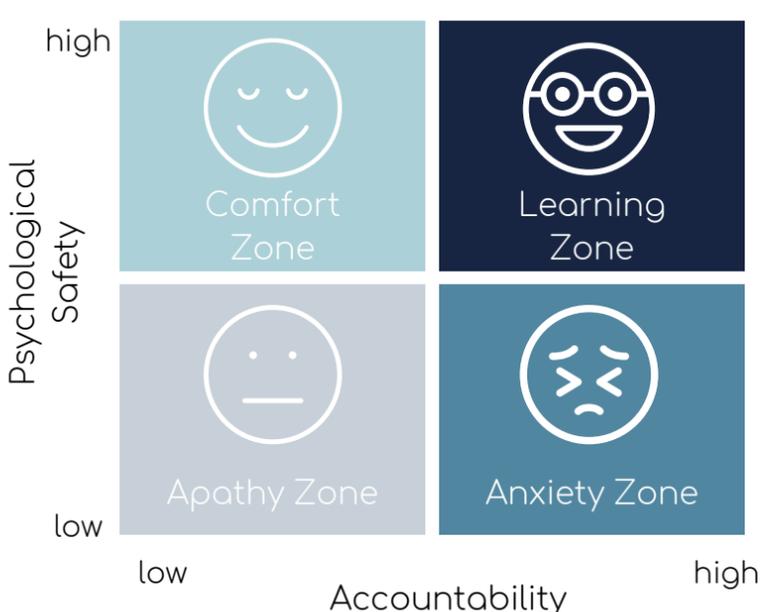
The graph opposite shows us that when developing psychological safety in the workplace we must not defer accountability. In fact when we maintain accountability and develop psychological safety we reach what Dr. Edmondson describes as the 'Learning Zone'. Here we can develop individually and as a team!

high

Psychological Safety

Comfort Zone

Learning Zone

Apathy Zone

Anxiety Zone

low

low   high
Accountability

When we say psychological safety, we DO NOT mean:
- Just being nice
- Accepting or applauding all ideas
- Avoiding any conflict
- A loss of accountability
- Individual employee optimizations (we work better as a team)

Google Aristotle Project led by Julia Rzovsky, 2013

According to the Google Aristotle Project led by Julia Rzovsky in 2013, high performing teams showed a higher prevalence of Impact, Meaning, Structure and Clarity, and Dependability in the workplace. Psychological safety was the most important along with these others in order to maintain a high performing team.

- The author described that teams with more equal opportunities for expression and communication of ideas would show an overall higher team intelligence scoring than those without.

"We must know that we can be free enough, sometimes, to share things that scare us without fear of recriminations" (8)

Key Benefits to Psychological Safety

- Increased likelihood of successful innovation
- Increased ability to learn from mistakes
- Decreased risk of security, health and safety or non-compliance accidents
- Increased employee engagement (2)

How to Create Psychological Safety - Five Steps for Managers:

(Reference: Amy Edmondson. 'What Psychological Safety Looks Like in a Hybrid Workplace', 3)

Set the scene

Begin open discussion within your team. As a manager, you hold the responsibility for creating an open and non-judgmental discussion.

Lead the way.

You cannot expect your employees to be honest and accountable for their mistakes or issues they note without first demonstrating it yourself. Be honest and open about your own challenges and how you're thinking about managing them.

Take baby steps

Your employees won't be ready to share their most personal or risky issues right away. First, you need to build trust. Start with smaller issues, manage them together, then move on slowly to bigger issues. Ideally, start with smaller disclosures yourself and build your employees' confidence in you and the safe workplace you're working towards.

Share positive examples

Your employees may not have the same access to information on Psychological Safety as you do. Make sure that you pass on the information you get and share examples of this good practice. (But try not to pressure employees to conform, the goal is to give them the evidence they need to buy-in voluntarily)

Be a watchdog

Building Psychological Safety will take time to build in your workplace, it is important to be vigilant. Trust is difficult and takes time to build, but could take only a moment to destroy.

Questions to Ask Yourself

From Timothy Clarke's The Four Stages of Psychological Safety. (5)

- Inclusion Safety: How do you make others feel included?
- Learner Safety: How do you make others feel safe and motivated to learn?
- Contributor Safety: How do you make others feel safe enough to contribute and make a difference?
- Challenger Safety: How do you make others feel safe enough to challenge the status quo, innovate, and improve things?

The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety
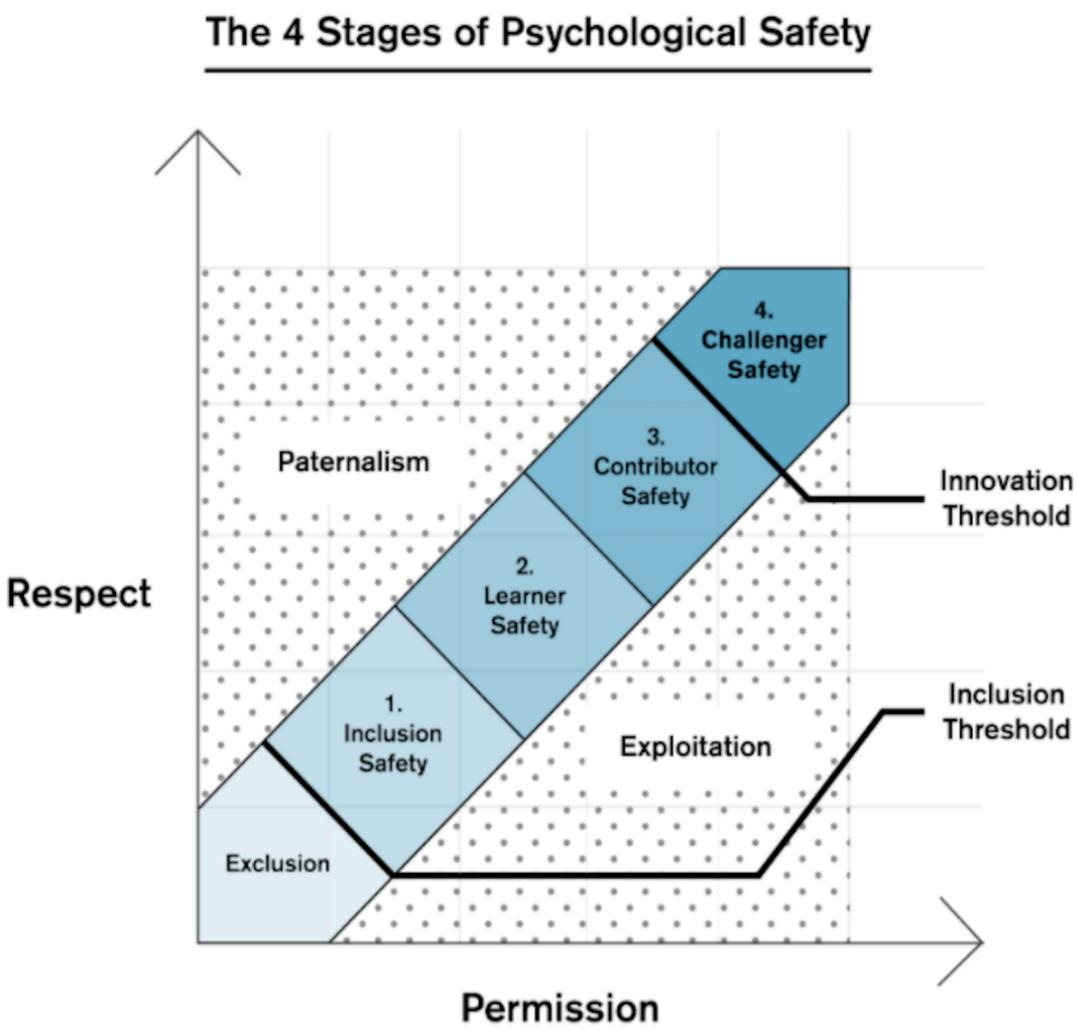
How do we Maintain it?

It can be useful to set a benchmark for how you and the team feel they are doing and to use this as a discussion as to how to improve.
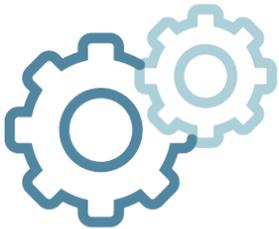
Regularly measure your team's psychological safety to understand how you are changing over time. Track your progress and keep an eye on any pitfalls you may have.

The 'Psychological Safety Questionnaire' from HiveMIND can be found on our resources page.

What next?

If you would like to know more about this topic and how it can help you and your team, or you would like to see more practical resources you can use, please contact Hive-Logic or sign up to receive more information.

Further Reading

(1) High-Performing Teams Need Psychological Safety. Here's How to Create It (2) History, Concepts, Evidence and Application | Psychological Safety (3) What Psychological Safety Looks Like in a Hybrid Workplace (4) What Is Psychological Safety at Work? | CCL (5) The Four stages of psychological safety - Timothy Clarke, 2020 (6) Building a psychologically safe workplace | Amy Edmondson | TEDxHGSE (7) Why Psychological Safety Is the Key to High Performing Teams (8) What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team - The New York Times

Hive-Logic

Hive-Mind: Keeping your workplace healthy