



PROFESSIONAL BUSINESS | MANAGEMENT

Leave ego at the door for a psychologically safe workplace



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March 5, 2021

3 mins read

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Psychological safety is critical for high performance, optimal teamwork and wellbeing. Amy Edmondson, a pioneer in this field, defines *psychological safety* as a climate where people feel safe to be themselves, express themselves, and take the interpersonal risks of learning. This means it is safe to learn, ask questions, present fresh ideas, and be open to new ways of doing things.

Research shows the significant benefits of psychological safety to high performing teamwork and workplace success. When humans feel safe, our nervous system relaxes, to the degree that our executive brain dominates, supporting our best thinking capacity. We are mentally and psychologically agile, more strategic, creative and see different perspectives.

Simply put, a psychologically safe workplace ensures we can think, relate and learn optimally.

The role of leaders in building psychological safety is undeniable. Psychological safety can be cultivated when leaders do the following:

1) Operate above the line

Modelling behaviour that is positive, kind, respectful and consistent, sets the tone for workplace culture. Whether it is the little things, like always acknowledging your colleagues when you see them, to maintaining an optimistic and positive approach even when you are under stress. If you find this hard to do, then learning better self-management would be an exceptional skill to develop.

2) Build trust

Trust lies at the heart of every healthy relationship, either personal or professional. Being trustworthy comes through consistency, being true to your word, a willingness to admit when you're wrong and take on feedback. What steps we each take to ensure we are trustworthy include self-awareness, being reflective and aware of how we show up in our collegial relationships.

3) Set the scene for learning

Leaders can build a learning framework around the work of your team. Set the scene that you are all learning and developing, so that when mistakes are made, it is framed as part of the natural order of the work environment. It means that mistakes or errors become opportunities to learn, essential for

growth and skill development. Errors are not an excuse to let the ego take over and shame or blame colleagues.

4) Model being a learner

While owning your expertise, skills and strengths is vital, psychologically safe leaders are open about their learning goals; showing that even leaders are beginners in some areas. This provides team members with excellent modelling of how to put aside concerns of the ego and recognise that everyone is a learner, regardless of their role, career stage or status. Be OK with asking advice or more information from experts and when others ask questions or own mistakes, recognise and value their willingness to learn.

5) Have the courage to address below the line behaviour

Having well-developed strategies for setting clear expectations about operating above the line, through constructive feedback and open conversations, is essential. If you find yourself avoiding tricky conversations or being defensive, then investing time in planning and practicing for these can be very helpful.

6) Be courageous through curiosity

John Dewey says we do not learn from experience, we learn from reflecting on our experiences. When we use curiosity rather than judgement or criticism, we help others learn. Reflective questions like ‘what worked well and what could be improved on?’, ‘what else could we have tried here?’ help us learn regardless of whether an experience is positive or negative.

7) Leaving the ego at the door

Building a learning culture requires the competitive, posturing role of the ego to be set aside. This is for everyone’s benefit and for the successful performance of the team. This can be one of the most central challenges for many leaders, especially those who were raised to believe that amplifying competition in teams is crucial for peak performance.

8) Helping team members learn from each other

Leaders need to facilitate their team to grow collectively. They need to help team members to learn from each other, to play to their strengths, and to accept their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Regularly enquiring about learning helps set the tone for a learning culture.

9) Express appreciation

If you're appreciative, then show it. If you're not, look for opportunities to be appreciative and show it. Poor workplace culture can be driven by focussing too much on negatives. A valuable component of cultivating goodwill is through being appreciative for team members' presence, contribution and support. Quick to criticise, slow to praise is not a leadership style by which we want to be known.

Research shows that psychological safety is critical for high performance, optimal teamwork and wellbeing. Psychological safety is recognised as being the most important factor in high-performing teams. Leaders can take these nine steps to build psychological safety.

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