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PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

THE FOUNDATION TO EVOLVE

Session
Summary

WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Psychological safety is the belief that you will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes. It is the foundation of trust, learning, innovation and ethical performance.

In an organisation with psychological safety:

- People speak candidly without fear of blame or career damage.
- Teams discuss risks early rather than manage crises later.
- Leaders invite and model vulnerability.

Why this matters:

- Boeing 737 MAX – engineers who saw critical flaws stayed silent, fearing job loss; the cost: 346 lives and billions in losses.
- Wells Fargo – pressure to meet unrealistic targets led to unethical behaviour and \$185 million in fines.

Only 50 % of employees in a Deloitte study say their manager creates psychological safety.

The Business Impact of Low Safety

- **Innovation drag:** Teams share fewer ideas, avoid challenge, and hide mistakes – slowing improvement and adaptability.
- **Disengagement & attrition:** Fear suppresses contribution, driving presenteeism, absenteeism, and turnover.
- **Operational risk:** When people don't speak up, errors, compliance breaches, and reputational damage increase.
- **Lost performance ROI:** Firms that neglect psychological safety forfeit measurable returns – research shows >6 % productivity and innovation gains where it's strong.
- **Cultural erosion:** Declining openness and authenticity signal a weakening culture and future talent risk.



THE BUSINESS IMPACT OF HIGH PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

When psychological safety is high

- Teams make faster decisions because they can debate issues openly.
- Diverse thinking is harnessed for innovation rather than suppressed for harmony.
- Organisations become more resilient under pressure and adapt better to change.

Evidence

- In Amy Edmondson's research, team psychological safety predicted 63 % of variance in team learning behaviour (Harvard Business School).
- Google's internal study ranked psychological safety as the #1 predictor of team effectiveness—above expertise, tenure or structure.
- Organisations investing in psychological safety see returns exceeding 6–20 % on performance and risk-reduction initiatives (IIRSM 2024).

The bottom line



Psychological safety is a business performance lever, not a 'soft' cultural ideal

Psychological safety underpins decision quality, innovation and risk management by ensuring that vital information, ideas and concerns move freely through the organisation.

In professional-services environments—where judgement, collaboration and reputation are everything—psychological safety protects value, accelerates performance, and sustains trust under pressure.

Teams with high psychological safety achieve lower turnover, higher innovation, and stronger revenue growth.

(Google Project Aristotle)

THE FOUR STAGES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

The Four Stages of Psychological Safety progress from **Inclusion** to **Learner**, **Contributor** and **Challenger** safety – each building deeper confidence to engage, grow and challenge.

Underpinning every stage are two essential conditions: **respect** and **permission**.

Respect is the assurance that you are valued as a person.

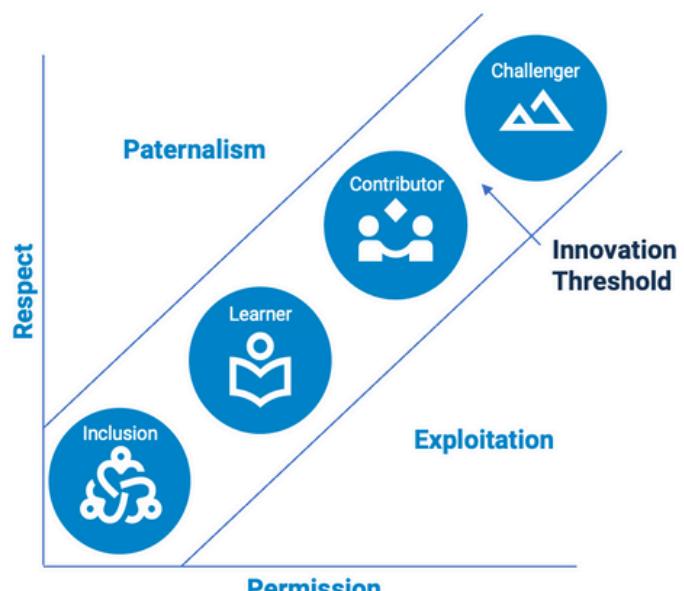
Permission is the freedom to participate, question and contribute.

- When **respect exists without permission**, the culture becomes paternalistic – people are treated kindly but not trusted to think or act independently (“we care about you, but stay in your lane”).
- When **permission exists without respect**, the culture slips into exploitation – people are encouraged to give ideas or effort but feel undervalued or taken advantage of (“speak up, but your voice doesn’t really matter”).

True psychological safety requires both.

Each stage of the model raises the balance of respect and permission – from belonging (Inclusion) to learning, contributing and finally challenging – creating a climate where individuals feel both valued and empowered to make a difference.

The four stages of psychological safety - Source: Timothy R Clarke



BUILDING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY



Inclusion Safety

“Am I accepted?”

People feel respected and included for who they are.

- **Behaviours:** listen actively; communicate respectfully, demonstrate empathy and understanding, foster a sense of belonging, show appreciation, avoid having favourites.
- **Impact:** Builds belonging and reduces interpersonal anxiety—a prerequisite for collaboration.



Learner Safety

“Is it safe to grow?”

People feel able to ask questions, experiment and make mistakes without fear of blame.

- **Behaviours:** encourage curiosity; share your own learning; normalise mistakes, give and receive feedback, provide opportunities for learning, model learning behaviour, frame problems before you solve them.
- **Impact:** Drives continuous improvement, agility and innovation.



Contributor Safety

“Can I add value?”

People feel empowered to use their skills and judgment.

Behaviours: celebrate and value diversity, acknowledge contributions, empower others, encourage initiative, celebrate small wins, shift from tell to ask.

Impact: Boosts ownership, accountability and engagement.



Challenger Safety

“Can I question the status quo?”

People can voice dissent, surface risks or propose new ideas—even when uncomfortable.

Behaviours: Facilitate contributive debates, be open to challenge, weight in last, encourage disruptive ideas, respond constructively to bad news.

Impact: Unlocks innovation and ethical courage—the ability to “speak truth to power.”

Key principle:
Each stage builds upon the last.
Skipping stages creates fear and resistance.

FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION

Think of psychological safety as progressive maturity, not a fixed state.

1. Assess where your team is today.

- Do people feel accepted?
- Do they admit mistakes and ask for help?
- Do they take ownership and initiative?
- Do they challenge assumptions openly?

2. Commit to “Move Up One Stage”

Choose a small, specific behaviour that raises the safety level in your sphere of influence.

Examples:

- **Inclusion → Learner:** Ask “What am I missing?” at the end of meetings.
- **Learner → Contributor:** Invite someone quieter to present an idea.
- **Contributor → Challenger:** Model curiosity by asking, “What’s the risk of doing nothing?”

3. Model and reinforce.

- Thank people for candour and challenge.
- De-risk mistakes by discussing what was learned, not who to blame.
- Share your own learning goals to normalise growth.

In Summary

Every comment you make either raises or lowers psychological safety—be deliberate which it is.

Create the conditions where people feel safe enough to contribute and challenge.

Three lasting habits for leaders:

1. Listen to understand, not to reply.
2. Frame work as learning, not execution—especially under uncertainty.
3. Respond with curiosity when challenged; thank the challenger.



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