



Leading with psychological safety

Reflection guide

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Overview

After participating in this session, you will be able to:

1. Identify why psychological safety matters for team and organizational success.
2. Recognize the characteristics of psychological safety and assess their presence/absence on your team.
3. Apply 3 fundamental leadership behaviours that promote psychological safety.
4. Foster a team culture that promotes open communication, growth and collaboration.

Key takeaways

Use this section to record the key ideas you learn during the session.



Main points:



Learning insights:



Growth areas: What areas do I need to improve on?

Activity 1: Reflection questionnaire

Discussion: These questions can help you observe and gain insight into the sense of psychological safety within your team. For each statement, rate the degree to which you agree based on your current team experience and that will help you to identify areas where you need to be more proactive or address challenges.

Scoring Scale:

- 1 = Strongly disagree
- 2 = Disagree
- 3 = Neither agree nor disagree
- 4 = Agree
- 5 = Strongly agree

1. Team members actively participant and openly share their ideas and opinions during team meetings.

2. If a team member makes a mistake, colleagues are supportive, empathetic, and slow to criticize or respond punitively.

3. Team members are quick to ask for help or clarification when additional support is needed.

4. Team members routinely suggest new or innovative ideas that can lead to improvement.

5. Team members are willing to bring up problems and “tough issues” even when it is uncomfortable.

6. All team members, regardless of their role or background, are treated with respect and their contributions are respected.

7. Team members are open and receptive to feedback from peers and leaders.

8. Team members do not show signs of possible disengagement such as withdrawal from group activities, frequent absences, or lack of enthusiasm.

9. Conflicts and disagreements within team members are resolved constructively.

Scoring guideline:

Score	Observation
1,2 or 3	This item is a potential area for team growth that will require leader role modeling to develop within the team
4 or 5	This item may be team strength that promotes psychological safety.

Activity 2: Framing work as a learning problem

Reflection activity

How can you be proactive about framing work as a learning experiment as part of your team culture?

What could you say to your team when:

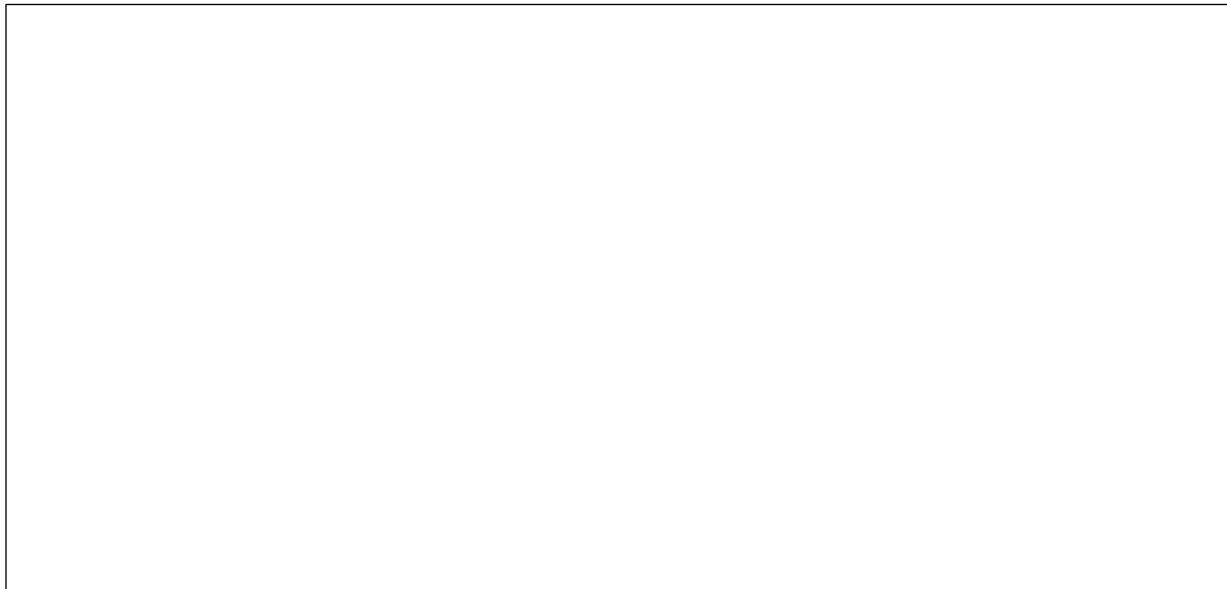
1. Discussing setbacks at a team meeting
2. Team member shares a mistake that they made

Activity 3

Identify actions you can take to increase psychological safety in common workplace situations.

Scenario 1: Your team failed to complete an important project on time. You do not fully understand the reason but are aware that a variety of difficulties occurred including internal miscommunication, missed checkpoints, and frequent errors that were not detected in a timely manner. This resulted in reputational impact to the team as it caused serious delays which impacted other teams and their deliverables. Although the team seems to be aware of having made mistakes, they are anxious and reluctant to share the full story with you.

How will you start the conversation? What will you say and do?



Scenario 2: You, as the leader, need to communicate some challenging organizational changes to your team (budget cuts, restructuring, layoffs etc.) Your team will likely see changes in leadership, reporting structure, and/or staffing levels. Some roles may be redefined, and there is the possibility that some team members could be moved to a different department. These changes are creating uncertainty and anxiety across the organization. You expect to be asked some tough questions and would like to communicate in an honest and transparent manner, but unfortunately many of the details are not yet known.

How will you start the conversation? What will you say and do?

Debrief questions:

1. What is one thing a leader could say or do that would help promote psychological safety?
2. What was the most challenging part of thinking through these scenarios?

Activity 4: Taking your learning back to work

This is a group discussion activity to summarize the session.

What is your takeaway from today's session?

1. A strategy you plan to implement:

2. A question you want to explore with your team:

3. One thing you will remember:

Ongoing learning resources

Definition of psychological safety

Amy Edmondson defines psychological safety as, “A shared belief by individuals in a work environment that it is safe to take interpersonal risks, including speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes without fear of negative consequences.”

Fundamentals of psychological safety

The 3 key behaviours leaders can demonstrate to create psychological safety are:

1. Frame work as a learning problem where everything is an experiment.
2. Acknowledge when you don't know an answer or make a mistake.
3. Role model curiosity by asking more questions.

Team exercises to boost psychological safety & foster dynamic communication

1. Check-in round

Conduct a check-in round. Ask, “What has your attention?” or “What kind of day have you had so far today?” Each participant, one at a time, provides their answer. There is no dialogue, just listening. The leader/facilitator shares last.

Purpose: To understand what is impacting everyone, their state of mind and so on. This creates a safe space in which people are listened to. It provides a moment for self- and mutual awareness and invites everyone to reflect, come present and pay more attention.

2. Conversational turn-taking

In most organizations 80% of the conversation is dominated by 20% of the participants. Conversational turn-taking is a structured dialogue technique where participants speak one at a time in alternating turns, ensuring equal participation and voice for all team members. Leaders get to talk last to avoid intimidating or influencing others.

The leader should:

1. Introduces the activity and its importance
2. Set a clear topic or question for discussion
3. Establish a speaking order (e.g., clockwise around the room)
4. Each person speaks uninterrupted during their turn
5. No one speaks twice until everyone has spoken once
6. Senior executives or leaders speak last

3. 1 – 2 – 4 – All

The 1-2-4-All technique is a structured conversation technique that gradually expands from individual reflection to full group discussion, fostering psychological safety and encouraging diverse input. It is useful for brainstorming, problem-solving, and feedback sessions because it helps reduce the intimidation of speaking in front of larger groups.

How to:

- Participants work first on their own to identify problems, solutions or new ideas
- In pairs, participants share their ideas for 2 minutes, then discuss for 2-3 minutes

- Pairs join to form groups of four, share and build on ideas for 4 minutes
- Whole group (All): Each team shares key thoughts with the entire group
- Consolidate: Rank issues or vote on ideas as appropriate

4. Uncovering the stinky fish

The Stinky Fish activity is a visual tool that uses the metaphor of a "stinky fish" to represent unaddressed issues that worsen over time. It helps teams' surface and discuss concerns that are typically avoided. It helps to shine a light on hidden anxieties and fears and creates space for difficult conversations by bringing unspoken issues into focus. The idea is to help share and discuss all of the issues and not just the easy ones, helping to foster greater trust and openness.

How to:

- Introduce the stinky fish metaphor and its meaning. Clarify that the purpose is not a venting session, but rather to uncover silent problems so that the team can solve them.
- Use a whiteboard that is visually divided into quadrants, with the following labels on each quadrant for participants to fill in and/or write on a sticky note and post in the appropriate quadrant:
 1. What are your uncertainties? (the unknowns the cause people to feel out of control)
 2. What is making you feel afraid or anxious?
 3. What is a silent problem that everyone is thinking but no one is saying?
 4. What are past issues or emotions that we cannot get over?

Allow individual time for writing concerns on post it notes.

Begin sharing rounds:

- One by one allow participants to share their comments.
- Let participants choose which issue to share first.
- Discuss commonalities, tensions, and contradictions.
- Allow participants to vote on the issues they want to prioritize and address. Ideally, they would be given three votes using colored stickers, voting on (a) the issue that is hurting the team the most, (b) the issue that is the easiest to fix, and c) the issue that if resolved will help the team the most.

Activities adapted from: Fearless culture, 9 exercises to promote psychological safety in your organization. Link: <https://www.fearlessculture.design/blog-posts/exercises-to-promote-psychological-safety-in-your-organization>

Read more:

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- Kahn, William (1990). *Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work.* Academy of Management Journal, vol 33, No. 4, 692-724.
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