

BOOSTING TEAM SUCCESS: THE POWER OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

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ABSTRACT

In high-performing teams, success is rarely a product of technical skill alone. Increasing evidence highlights the critical role of psychological safety, wisdom sharing, and empowerment in fostering effective, creative, and resilient teams. This lecture explores how creating an environment of psychological safety can elevate team performance by encouraging open communication, shared learning, and individual contribution. The session provides practical insights for leaders and team members to cultivate psychological safety, nurture wisdom sharing, and empower every member to thrive.

INTRODUCTION

Team performance depends not only on technical competencies but also on the social and psychological dynamics within the group. Psychological safety, a concept popularised by Amy Edmondson, refers to a shared belief that the team environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking¹. In such environments, individuals feel comfortable speaking up, sharing ideas, and admitting mistakes without fear of embarrassment or punishment. This lecture highlights how psychological safety, when combined with intentional wisdom sharing and empowerment, drives creativity, engagement, and success within teams.

FACTORS INFLUENCING TEAM DYNAMICS

For many years, high-profile organisations have researched what makes a high-performing team and the factors that influence team dynamics. Among these, psychological safety, effective communication, and trust emerge as fundamental components.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

In 2012, Google launched *Project Aristotle*, a research initiative that aimed to identify the key factors behind effective teams. The study found that the critical differentiator between high- and low-performing teams is psychological safety². Psychological safety describes a culture of respect, trust, and openness where individuals feel safe to speak up, raise concerns, and share ideas without fear of negative consequences¹. This positive environment fosters curiosity, improves learning and retention, enhances resilience, and reduces cognitive workload¹.

At the organisational level, psychological safety has been linked to increased innovation, improved learning from mistakes, higher quality, greater employee engagement, and overall profitability^{1,2}. It also underpins other essential team characteristics identified by Google, including trust, structure and clarity, meaningful work, and perceived impact². However, psychological safety must be balanced with motivation and accountability to support high performance¹.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE DO NOT HAVE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY?

When psychological safety is absent, individuals are less likely to speak up, challenge assumptions, or report concerns, even when they recognise problems. This silence can lead to poor decision-making, avoidable errors, and, in extreme cases, loss of life or significant organisational failure. Throughout history investigations into high profile disasters have demonstrated the importance of psychological safety:

Healthcare: The Bristol Royal Infirmary Scandal (UK, 1984–1995)³

The inquiry into avoidable deaths of children undergoing heart surgery at Bristol Royal Infirmary revealed a culture where staff were afraid to raise concerns about poor surgical outcomes and leadership

decisions. Junior staff felt unable to challenge senior clinicians, leading to persistent safety issues that were not addressed³. The case highlighted how a lack of psychological safety contributed to systemic failures in patient care.

Aviation: Tenerife Airport Disaster (1977)⁴

The deadliest aviation accident in history occurred when two Boeing 747s collided on the runway in Tenerife, killing 583 people. Investigations suggested that hierarchical cockpit culture and lack of psychological safety prevented the flight crew from questioning the captain's decision to take off without proper clearance⁴. This tragedy directly influenced the development of Crew Resource Management (CRM) training, aimed at improving communication and psychological safety in aviation teams.

Corporate: NASA Challenger and Columbia Disasters⁵

The space shuttle Challenger (1986) and Columbia (2003) disasters both exposed organisational cultures where engineers and technical staff were reluctant to voice concerns due to fear of dismissal or being ignored by senior management. In both cases, critical safety warnings were downplayed or overlooked, contributing to the loss of both shuttles and the lives of all crew members⁵. These tragedies illustrate how psychological safety is essential for identifying and acting on risks in high-stakes environments.

LEADING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Leaders play a critical role in cultivating and sustaining psychological safety within teams. When leaders model openness, curiosity, and vulnerability, they create an environment where team members feel safe to speak up, admit mistakes, and share concerns^{1,6}. Key leadership behaviours that promote psychological safety include acknowledging personal fallibility, framing work as a learning opportunity rather than a test of competence, and responding appreciatively to team input^{1,6}. Leaders who intentionally invite participation and ensure all voices are heard foster inclusion, shared ownership, and stronger team effectiveness⁶. Consistent, courageous leadership that addresses negative behaviours and reinforces respectful dialogue is essential to maintaining psychological safety. Teams with psychologically safe environments are more likely to engage in open communication, collaborate effectively, and demonstrate higher levels of innovation and performance^{1,6}.

BUILDING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY: THE ROLE OF EVERY TEAM MEMBER

While leaders have a significant influence on psychological safety, every member of a team contributes to creating and maintaining this environment. Team members can help foster psychological safety by demonstrating respect, actively listening to others, and encouraging different perspectives. Simple actions such as acknowledging mistakes, asking questions, and showing appreciation for contributions help normalise vulnerability and promote open dialogue¹. Being mindful of how feedback is given, avoiding dismissive language, and addressing negative behaviours constructively further supports a safe, inclusive team culture⁶. Importantly, psychological safety thrives when individuals recognise that building trust and openness is a shared responsibility, not solely dependent on formal leadership. When all team members take ownership of creating a respectful, supportive environment, teams are more likely to collaborate effectively, solve problems creatively, and reach higher levels of performance^{1,7}.

COMMUNICATION

Effective communication is the cornerstone of successful team dynamics. Clear, open, and respectful communication facilitates better understanding, collaboration, and the exchange of ideas among team members. Without it, misunderstandings and reduced performance are likely to occur.¹

TRUST

Trust is essential for enabling open idea sharing and creativity within teams. To foster trust, all team members should:

- Invest in building positive relationships
- Demonstrate expertise and sound judgement when required
- Be consistent in their approach to work
- Model positive behaviours and honour commitments

Stephen Covey, in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, introduces the concept of an *Emotional Bank Account* to represent the level of trust within a relationship⁸. Just like a financial bank account, emotional deposits and withdrawals occur based on our interactions.

Covey identifies six ways to make emotional deposits:

- Understanding the individual
- Paying attention to small details
- Keeping commitments
- Clarifying expectations
- Demonstrating personal integrity
- Offering sincere apologies when withdrawals occur

Research also shows that simply knowing and using each other's first names significantly boosts trust, engagement, and team performance. One study found that knowing teammates by name increased the likelihood of speaking up from 45% to 85%.⁹

High levels of mutual trust, team engagement, and conflict resolution abilities are critical for high performance. In such teams, individuals prioritise team goals over personal ones, relying on trust in their teammates to succeed collectively.²

WISDOM SHARING AND EMPOWERMENT

Wisdom sharing refers to the intentional exchange of knowledge, experience, and insight within teams. Encouraging wisdom sharing enhances learning, prevents repeated mistakes, and builds a foundation for innovation¹.

Collective intelligence refers to the enhanced capacity of a group to solve problems, make decisions, and innovate by effectively combining the knowledge, skills, and experiences of all its members¹⁰. High-performing teams intentionally draw upon this collective resource, creating an environment where diverse perspectives and insights can be shared openly. Psychological safety plays a critical role in enabling collective intelligence, as it encourages individuals to contribute ideas, admit uncertainties, and challenge assumptions without fear of judgement or criticism¹. The greater the diversity and inclusivity within a team, the richer its collective intelligence becomes^{10,11}. Teams that nurture this dynamic are better equipped to learn from mistakes, respond to challenges, and generate creative solutions, leading to higher performance, adaptability, and long-term success^{1,10,11}.

Empowerment involves providing individuals with the autonomy, resources, and psychological support to take initiative and contribute meaningfully. Empowered teams are more engaged, resilient, and better equipped to solve complex problems.

CONCLUSION

The most effective teams are those where every member feels safe to contribute, share wisdom, and take initiative. Psychological safety, trust, communication, and empowerment form the foundation for creativity, problem-solving, and high performance. By cultivating these elements, organisations can unlock the full potential of their teams.

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