



Building ‘Psychological Safety’ within teams

Recent research into team dynamics (by everyone from Google to Harvard) has confirmed, once again, that ‘psychological safety’ is a powerful enabler of team performance.

Psychological safety is a shared confidence and belief that it’s safe for individuals to speak up, contribute openly, to be themselves and to take psychological risks without fear of ridicule.

Why does it matter at work?

Far from being just some vague ‘touchy-feely’ concept, these insights can pragmatically underpin improved human performance at work.

It’s also an important factor for maintaining mental wellness in the workplace. Employers and leaders naturally have a responsibility to keep their people physically and mentally safe at work.

Creating psychological safety within teams helps to alleviate workplace stress and to enhance mental wellness by improving our working relationships and reducing unnecessary clashes.

Research into psychological safety has been anchored in myriad fields from emerging neuroscience into how the limbic system and the social brain react to stress, to the observed behavioural clusters that each of us prefers at work.

What are the benefits of building psychological safety at work?

Amongst the benefits of achieving genuine psychological safety at work are...

- Enhanced collective team intelligence.
- Boosted engagement from team members.
- Improved likelihood of innovations being successful.
- Enhanced ability to learn from mistakes.
- Less stress from unnecessary interpersonal clashes

What helps to create it?

Factors that assist in the creation of psychological safety at work are...

- Leaders embrace a participative style to involve team members in goal setting, problem solving and at least some decision-making.
- Leaders becoming champions of behavioural awareness for themselves and for their people.
- Team members develop clear awareness of their own roles and contributions.
- Cohesive and balanced relationships that go beyond job titles alone.

A leader who sets the tone with a participatory style helps to enable what psychologists often call 'conversational turn taking'. When well managed this affords team members respected 'air time' in discussions. It also encourages open and honest contributions.

Social systems within the human brain sub-consciously perceive and react to the levels of self expression afforded to us by others. Leaders may still need to retain final decision-making calls, but affording people healthy levels of self-expression is important in creating psychological safety.

Too much self-expression without any structure can become anarchic and too little can be repressive and wasteful of true team potential. However, obtaining that 'just right' level can greatly enhance team intelligence.

Furthermore, team members need to clearly understand their own preferred behavioural roles within the team. People contribute more comfortably when they and others openly identify their natural and preferred contributions.

Awareness of our natural 'allowable weaknesses' and how they manifest in the team goes hand in hand with this insight.

The opportunity to develop cohesive and balanced working relationships between people based on this awareness of natural preferences should be the aim for any good team.

Understanding the allowable weaknesses of others can also help us to head off unnecessary personality issues and misunderstood motives that creep into our interactions at work.

A healthy level of what's known as 'theory of mind' being present within the members of the team can also enhance understanding.

Theory of mind can be defined as "an ability to attribute mental states – beliefs, intents, desires, knowledge etc.—to oneself and others and to understand that others have beliefs, desires, intentions, and perspectives that are different from one's own".¹

Being able to 'put oneself into another's shoes', empathy in other words, is a strongly related concept to theory of mind. People bring into the team differing capacities for interpersonal empathy.

Not all have the same capacity to read the behavioural signals of others, and their own for that matter, but it certainly benefits all when meaningfully undertaken within a team.

For those of you who are now dreading an outbreak of the 'touchy-feelies', be assured that you can actually do this pragmatically and with real work very much in mind.

Individual behavioural profiles, team reports and working relationship reports are a great first step, provided they are handled and explained in a way that suits the culture of the team.

How does Belbin accelerate the process?

A Belbin Self Perception Inventory with Observers added (for 360 degree feedback) generates an easy to follow behavioural report. This captures not only how we see ourselves within the context of a team, but importantly also how others in the team see us.

The Academy of Management Journal recently stated "psychological safety is defined by how team members think they are viewed by others in the group."
2 Once again, theory of mind and the ability to see how people are operating and feeling.

Belbin's use of Observers to add the valuable 360 degree feedback on behavior underpins deeper insight.

Using only ipsative / self-assessment formats to measure behavior often has limited value. It can confirm only how we may see our behavior impacting the team, as opposed to how others may actually be seeing us contribute.

Belbin's use of a simple and non-threatening language also gives very constructive feedback for our 'Team Role' preferences, as opposed to just our functional skills or job title.

Exploring and then following through on this insight enables positive behavior change and development to occur within a team.

Speaking up at team meetings can then be judged less harshly when all team members have explored the behavioural strengths and weaknesses evident within their team.

When mental energy is not being wasted in fear of the potentially adverse consequences of speaking up, it's easier for people to make their best contributions.

Feeling accepted and respected for our contributions to a team is a big factor for building psychological safety, and the social systems of the human brain actually crave it as part of our brain's inbuilt strategies for survival.

People are better motivated to genuinely contribute to the success of their team when they feel safe and valued.

“Psychological safety is a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking.”³

The contributions and weaknesses of others may press our hot buttons occasionally, but when we better understand where it's coming from and why it's deserving of our respect, we can work to manage our emotional reactivity based on that insight.

In fact the people who may trigger our emotional reactivity the most, and perhaps tell us the things that we don't want to hear, are quite often those who bring an equally valuable contribution to the team that just differs from ours. If we understand and embrace this, they may also be very useful at offsetting our own weaknesses if we develop the relationship.

Behavioural understanding within the team helps us to facilitate taking psychological risks with one another.

It's vital to keep in mind that insight alone is never a 'magic bullet'.

Like anything of worth, it will still require leaders and team members to maintain awareness and discipline ongoing and to follow-through with positive actions.

The process also needs to be carefully personalized as behavioural awareness is never a 'one size fits all' approach.

For some busy and street-smart teams the process is best distilled into a quickly digestible and pragmatic formula, whilst others will wish to explore the deeper intellectual dimensions. All teams have their own chemistry.

We have seen it work both ways.

If leaders and teams are prepared to do the actual follow-through work, people will better express their natural contributions with others more openly and confidently.

Enhanced psychological safety within teams is the result.

Here's a simple 5 Step formula

Step 1 - Team members complete a Belbin profile.

Step 2 - Explain the Belbin Model to the team in the way that best suits their culture (use a Belbin training DVD, some of the many free 'How To' Guides or engage an experienced Belbin facilitator of the right style for your team, we'll be delighted to help).

Step 3 - Use the simple and free Belbin handouts to explore the "Do's and Don'ts" of working with different people and other aspects of the model.

Step 4 - As a team, and subsequently in "Working Relationship" pairs, explore Belbin Team Reports and Working Relationship Reports to openly discuss just how individual and team strengths and weaknesses manifest at work. How can we enhance the way we work together? Free 'How To Guides' are also available for interpreting these reports.

Step 5 - Commit to meaningful follow-through and regular progress reviews / milestones. Explore how we are actually progressing with levels of behavioural awareness within the team.

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