

## Psychological Safety

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In 2019, I first heard the term psychological safety in passing without much opportunity to find out what it was. In 2021, I read my first feature article on the topic. It was then I recognized I was not alone. There were pockets of psychologically unsafe workplaces scattered throughout my organization. I felt empowered to speak about it using my platform to let employees know that a) it exists, and b) what to do about it. I personally experienced 14 months of a psychologically unsafe workplace. I tried to implement the techniques I will share with you to no avail. In the end, circumstances allowed my patience to be rewarded as the co-worker who created this hot zone resigned. Everyone is not as lucky as me.



This relatively new concept is not found in any safety manual. It is the belief that you won't be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes. It's a shared belief held by members of a team that others on the team will not embarrass, reject or punish you for speaking up. Tell me if any of these scenarios sound familiar?

1. During a routine or non-routine job task, an employee notices a co-worker about to do something unsafe. The employee is scared to speak up and stop work because, "they are already short-staffed and/or behind schedule."
2. After a safety training presentation, the trainer asks, "Are there any questions, comments or concerns?" The trainer waits 5-10 seconds in silence and carries on with the remainder of the training.
3. An employee experiences a near miss where a tool falls from the top of a ladder and almost hits him/her. The employee does not report it, because in the end the employee did not get hurt.
4. An employee sprains her knee getting out of a truck. She does not report the on-the-job injury. She goes to see her primary care physician instead.
5. An employee has a question about a task but doesn't ask his/her supervisor nor co-workers for fear of looking stupid in front of his/her peers.
6. During a safety investigation an employee is reluctant to share any information that can bring clarity or resolution based on his/her relationship to the injured employee they don't get along with.

We must acknowledge psychological safety affects a team climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves. From that definition you may withdraw values such as trust, security and communication. From the employee's point of view there are all kinds of narratives going on:

- *"Will I lose my job for speaking up?"*
- *"Will my co-workers humiliate me or reject my ideas?"*
- *"Will I be labelled a snitch?"*
- *"Will my boss be mad at me?"*

How do we overcome this?

Communication, communication and more communication followed by tangible action. We need to communicate with our employees how we function, how we process bad news and how we go about fixing the bad situation.

Nobody likes hearing bad news. Our default action may be to snarl, cuss, fuss or shout. Get that out of the way and settle down to taking care of the situation that brought on the bad news. Depending on our experience level we will have a rapid response. Other situations may require assistance from peers, superiors and subordinates. We all need help coping with the situation at some point. Focus on the situation NOT the individual.

Create a psychologically safe environment where employees can bring us bad news and, in some cases, solutions to the problems without us making the situation more emotional than it must be. This environment requires leadership to be always plugged into our employees' activities. It requires courage for us to admit we don't know everything.

The energy being expended by our employees to avoid conflict and protect their status could be best used in other areas of production, quality and safety. If we work towards removing this distraction and adding more transparency in our workplace, it allows everyone to focus on work and safety. Here are some tips to build psychological safety in your workplace:

- Show your team you're engaged.
  - o If people don't understand something, small words and big pictures always help. Go to where the work is being performed to gain a boots-on-the-ground understanding.
- Let your team see you understand.
  - o If people understand the process, they can speak the language and know what skill sets to apply to the tasks.
- Avoid blaming to build trust.
  - o This is a team effort. We must support our words with our actions. When we fail to do that, we must own it and make it right.
- Be self-aware, and demand the same from your team.
- Nip negativity in the bud.
  - o Air negativity out and agree the mission and teamwork needed to accomplish the mission is essential. "NO" should stand for "Next Opportunity."
- Include your team in decision making.
  - o When employees are empowered to have a choice and a voice in their destiny, they will move mountains effortlessly over time.

- Be open to feedback.
  - o Take the good with the bad. That is how growth occurs.
- Champion your team.
  - o Strap on your pompoms and acknowledge the great and wonderful things your team accomplishes to peers, superiors and beyond. If no one else says it, thank them personally for a job well done.

Here are some remedies for the six scenarios mentioned earlier:

**1. During a routine or non-routine job task, an employee notices a co-worker about to do something unsafe. The employee is scared to speak up and stop work because, "they are already short-staffed and/or behind schedule."**

- a. Counteract those thoughts with a safety statement, *"Please be safe out there. If you find yourself in a situation where there is an unsafe act or unsafe condition, STOP WORK and let your supervisor know about the situation."* Remind everyone they are to perform tasks as safely as possible first, so they can go home in the same condition they arrived with 10 fingers and 10 toes. The work will always be there. Our biggest assets are our human resources – our employees who get the job done. Without them, no work is accomplished. When your employees hear that kind of sincere concern, and you follow it up with actions like ride-alongside, job observations, joint inspections, etc., it allows them to focus on their personal safety and that of their co-workers.

**2. After a safety training presentation, the trainer asks, "Are there any questions, comments or concerns?" The trainer waits 5-10 seconds in silence and carries on with the remainder of the training.**

- a. As a trainer, you should strive to make your training interactive by asking questions of employees before, during and after. Connect the dots between the training to the jobs of the employees. This is valuable feedback that will help the trainer continuously improve their training presentation and the training experience for your employees.

**3. An employee experiences a near miss where a tool falls from the top of a ladder and almost hits him/her. The employee does not report it, because in the end the employee did not get hurt.**

- a. We must create the culture where employees are recognized for pointing out near misses and training on it. Near misses pointed out today can save lives and property tomorrow. Training and communicating on the existence of that particular near miss can bring awareness to other employees who didn't have personal exposure to it. From that moment on, the awareness of all employees has been increased to be on the lookout for this hazard. No single employee can make all the mistakes by themselves. Some lessons must be learned vicariously.

**4. An employee sprains her knee getting out of a truck. She does not report the on-the-job injury. She goes to see her primary care physician instead.**

- a. Communication and refresher training are safety multipliers. If an organization has a near perfect injury rate that is like zero to one injury every two years, you lack the experience and expertise on what to do when an injury occurs. That is good in one

aspect, but has made your injury reporting skills deficient. It is good to conduct refresher training on how to report on-the-job the injuries and the processes that support that function. Not only present the training, but walk employees through the process to access the policies to read, print or to refer to. We should pull back the curtain to explain why reporting and treatment are so critical to on-the-job injuries. We should never expect employees to memorize policies and procedures. Write them down and place them on a common platform, like a network drive or company intranet for easy access.

**5. An employee has a question about a task but doesn't ask his/her supervisor nor co-workers for fear of looking stupid in front of his/her peers.**

a. Create a culture where there are no stupid questions. No matter the question, always say "Great question!" and then answer it. Some questions, you may not have the answer to. Shrug your shoulders, admire the problem and ask your co-workers in HR or another department for assistance. Avoid providing an incorrect response – it adds to the confusion when confirmation is sought.

**6. During a safety investigation an employee is reluctant to share any information that can bring clarity or resolution based on his/her relationship to the injured employee they don't get along with.**

a. Start the investigation off with a disclaimer, "You are not in trouble." Watch as the employees' shoulders sag as they release their tension. Follow up with, "The purpose of this investigation is to find out what happened, why it happened and what we can do to prevent this incident/accident/injury from happening again to you or anyone else who performs this task. The lessons we gain from this will be used to train and help others avoid this incident/accident/injury."

The intent is to pivot your employees and your culture from a fear-based workplace to a trust-based environment. I understand not everyone will be as lucky as me. At the end of the day, hard choices will need to be made requiring courage. You will have to ask yourself some hard questions, like:

- a. Am I being heard and valued in this organization?
- b. Am I operating in a trust-based environment?
- c. Do I enjoy coming back to work every day?
- d. Am I stressed on a daily basis?
- e. Can I rely on support from my supervisor?

Your candid answers will determine your next moves.