

Important considerations for creating a psychologically safe workplace



Why psychological safety matters

Psychological safety means one is able to show up and be one's self without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status or career. A psychologically safe workplace:

- Enables better performance
- Helps employees feel safe in offering ideas, admitting mistakes, asking for help and providing feedback
- Encourages employees to speak up at work, identify issues or opportunities for improvement and enhance upward communication
- Supports general employee health, safety and wellbeing

In addition to being physically safe, employees must feel safe to be safe, at home and in the workplace. They must be able to do the following without fear of discrimination, consequences or retaliation:

- Report a workplace hazard
- Admit they don't know something
- Make an error
- Go to a supervisor about a colleague's behavior
- Go to HR about a supervisor's behavior
- Take an afternoon off at the last minute if something happens in their family
- Share they're experiencing mental distress
- Report unresolved conflict, bullying, harassment or illegal discrimination
- Share a point of view that dissents from the "norm" or is considered controversial

When this is the case, a workplace is considered psychologically safe. This is particularly relevant as organizations are focusing more heavily on diversity, equity and inclusion, as well as mental health.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)

Diversity is the presence of differences within a given setting. At work, this can mean differences in race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, age and socioeconomic class.

Equity is the process of ensuring programs and systems are impartial, fair and provide equal possible outcomes for every individual. It is about deconstructing the systems that do not treat people the way they should and would want to be treated.

Inclusion is the practice of ensuring people feel a sense of belonging in the workplace. This means every employee feels comfortable and supported by the organization when it comes to being their authentic selves.

Diversity can stimulate learning if the organizational context supports open communication. Psychological safety enables team diversity to be better leveraged, opening up access to diverse skill sets, experience, knowledge and backgrounds in ways that might not be possible if team members were unwilling to speak up and listen carefully.

However, having a diverse workforce does not guarantee a feeling of inclusion. Psychological safety can make inclusion a reality. Inclusion is more likely to be truly experienced when a workplace is engaged in psychological safety, as diverse perspectives are more likely to be heard. Lastly, it is difficult to feel a sense of belonging when one feels psychologically unsafe.

Mental Health

Research shows when psychological wellbeing is diminished for prolonged periods of time, employees are prone to forms of distress likely to negatively impact their mental health and impair their ability to perform to their full potential. Given the amount of stigma around disclosing mental distress or mental illness, a workplace that is not psychologically safe – where one is concerned about their job if they disclose – means that employee mental health is not being prioritized. Workplace factors (stress, uncertainty, feeling unsafe, job ambiguity, etc.) can contribute to mental distress. Not being able to address these items is a symptom of a psychologically unsafe workplace.

What can I do?

As an EHS professional, the mental and psychological wellbeing of the workforce is certainly something to pay attention to. When people feel stressed, unsafe, distracted, scared, worried, anxious or tired, this impacts their actions at work. All of these states can change behavior and awareness, including causing stress or mental distress, fatigue and more. These conditions can also decrease performance capacity, productivity and alertness.

Actions you can take include:

Advocating for change with leadership

When employees feel psychologically unsafe, they may refrain from reporting safety hazards or avoid voicing concerns about workplace safety for fear of retaliation, which is a real safety concern. Think about who you can start a conversation with about psychological safety, and [share this member webinar](#) with them.

Learn the signs

What does it look like when someone is experiencing the impacts of a psychologically unsafe workplace? It can manifest in many ways, including:

- Feeling physically and mentally drained
- Having difficulty making decisions or staying focused on topics
- Becoming easily frustrated on a more frequent basis
- Arguing more with coworkers
- Reporting feeling tired, sad, numb, lonely or worried
- Reporting experiencing changes in appetite or sleep patterns

Know how to support

It is always important to support colleagues who are experiencing a difficult time, though it is not your responsibility to diagnose or put yourself in a situation where you feel unsafe. Some actions you can take include:

- Learn about relevant workplace policies and programs, such as how to access Employee Assistance Programs or other resources, and share information as needed
- Access workplace resources for training on deescalating a situation and communication techniques

On addressing DEI in the workplace

Addressing DEI in the workplace is an ongoing process. Education and communication are essential to growth.

- Understand and combat microaggressions – indirect, subtle or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group
 - “Micro,” as referred here, involves personal interactions – recognizing and addressing these are one way individuals can make a difference
 - While thinly veiled, these can have a lasting impact, such as racial battle fatigue or physical, mental and/or emotional stress responses on your colleagues
- Learn and understand your workplace policies, programs and processes related to discrimination and harassment, including racial discrimination. Understand how to help colleagues access these services, and offer support if possible.

