

## Psychological Safety: Why It's Essential and How To Build It

In the past, “workplace safety” programs were typically narrowly defined to consider physical safety alone. But more recently the definition of workplace safety has come to include the vitally important concept of psychologically safe. [Psychological safety refers to an individual’s perception of the consequences of taking an interpersonal risk or a belief that a team is safe for risk taking in the face of being seen as ignorant, incompetent, negative, or disruptive.](#) From a mental health perspective, a psychologically safe workplace encourages employees to seek support when they experience mental or emotional distress -- now more important than ever, with 42% of U.S. (and Washington State) adults experiencing symptoms of depression or anxiety, and even higher rates for those in our country who are Black (48%), mixed race (48.9%), Latinx/Hispanic (46.3%), or 18-29 years of age (56.2%), according to the CDC’s [December Household Pulse Survey](#).

In addition, several [studies](#) have demonstrated other significant benefits of workplace psychological safety, including increased employee confidence, creativity, trust and productivity. For example, a 2017 Gallup [report](#) found that in organizations that increase psychological safety, employees are more engaged and more productive. In 2015, when [Google researched](#) the factors that “make a team effective,” researchers found that psychological safety was by far the most important quality that determined a team’s success, and that individuals on teams with higher psychological safety: 1) are less likely to leave Google; 2) are more likely to harness the power of diverse ideas from their teammates; 3) bring in more revenue, and 4) are rated as effective twice as often by leadership.

In your work as a team leader or manager, consider using these resources:

- In [her TEDx talk](#), organizational behavioral scientist [Amy Edmondson](#) offers three simple things individuals can do to foster team psychological safety: 1) Frame the work as a learning problem, not an execution problem; 2) Acknowledge your own fallibility; 3) Model curiosity and ask lots of questions.
- From [Google’s reWork site](#), use the tool, [Manager Actions for Psychological Safety](#) (see below) to think about how you model and reinforce psychological safety on your team. Based on research, this resource offers actionable tips to help create team environments where everyone can contribute.

And, for additional support to help you build psychological safety with your team, reach out to EAP at 1-877-313-4455 or [online](#).

## How to foster Psychological Safety on your team

### Demonstrate engagement

- Be present and focus on the conversation (e.g., close your laptop during meetings)
- Ask questions with the intention of learning from your teammates
- Offer input, be interactive, and show you're listening
- Respond verbally to show engagement ("That makes sense. Tell us more.")
- Be aware of your body language; make sure to lean towards or face the person speaking
- Make eye contact to show connection and active listening

### Show understanding

- Recap what's been said to confirm mutual understanding/alignment (e.g., "What I heard you say is..."); then acknowledge areas of agreement, disagreement, and be open to questions within the group
- Validate comments verbally ("I understand." "I see what you're saying.")
- Avoid placing blame ("Why did you do this?") and focus on solutions ("How can we work toward making sure this goes more smoothly next time?", "What can we do together to make a game plan for next time?")
- Think about your facial expressions- - are they unintentionally negative (a scowl or grimace)?
- Nod your head to demonstrate understanding during conversations/meetings

### Be inclusive in interpersonal settings

- Share information about your personal work style and preferences, encourage teammates to do the same
- Be available and approachable to teammates (e.g., make time for ad hoc 1:1 conversations, feedback sessions, career coaching)
- Clearly communicate the purpose of ad hoc meetings scheduled outside normal 1:1s/team meetings
- Express gratitude for contributions from the team
- Step in if team members talk negatively about another team member
- Have open body posture (e.g., face all team members, don't turn your back to part of the group)
- Build rapport (e.g., talk with your teammates about their lives outside of work)

### Be inclusive in decision-making

- Solicit input, opinions, and feedback from your teammates
- Don't interrupt or allow interruptions (e.g., step in when someone is interrupted and ensure his/her idea is heard)
- Explain the reasoning behind your decisions (live or via email, walk team through how you arrived at a decision)
- Acknowledge input from others (e.g., highlight when team members were contributors to a success or decision)

### Show confidence and conviction without appearing inflexible

- Manage team discussions (e.g., don't allow side conversations in team meetings, make sure conflict isn't personal)
- Use a voice that is clear and audible in a team setting
- Support and represent the team (e.g., share team's work with senior leadership, give credit to teammates)
- Invite the team to challenge your perspective and push back
- Model vulnerability; share your personal perspective on work and failures with your teammates
- Encourage teammates to take risks, and demonstrate risk-taking in your own work

### Sources

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- Edmondson (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. Administrative Science Quarterly June 1999.
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