

Psychological Safety and Organizational Culture



The term Psychological Safety was first explored by organizational researchers Schein and Bennis in the 1960s¹. It was then defined as a “group phenomenon that reduces interpersonal risk” and reducing “a person’s anxiety about being basically accepted and worthwhile”. Since this historic definition more recent research especially by William A. Khan in the 1990s² and by Amy C. Edmondson² has reinforced the importance of psychological safety.

WHY SHOULD PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY BE CONSIDERED?

If you are looking to create an organization where levels of collaboration are high, people are engaged and also personally satisfied, learn from experiences, solve problems in creative ways, are not afraid to speak up, and projects are completed with a high success rate then psychological safety is a key ingredient that needs to be added into the organization’s culture. It helps along all these factors and, did we mention that levels of stress and burnout are also lower if psychological safety is high?

CAN PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY BE MEASURED AND HOW CAN THIS BE DONE?

Psychological safety is a concept that can be gauged by asking questions such as “If a mistake in your team is made, is it held against you?”, “Are you able to bring up problems and tough issues?” “Do people on the team sometimes reject others, or their ideas for being different?” or “Is it safe to take a risk?”.

Let us take the Human Synergistics How Culture Works model (please follow this link if you are unfamiliar to gain some background information) as a framework to explore where psychological safety is at work. We want to first answer the question whether it is a climate factor that influences an organization’s culture, or whether it is synonymous with organizational culture, or whether it is an outcome of the culture of an organization. Following the definition of psychological safety as “being able to show and employ one’s self without fear of negative consequences on self-image, status or career” (Khan, 1990) we would place it in the outcome section as part of the psychological well-being of a person.

One of these outcome questions has been asked in Human Synergistics’ OCI® since the 1980s: “to what extent must you think differently in order to fit in” a measure of social fit as an individual outcome item. We ask some standard outcome questions on the levels of individuals, teams and the organization as a whole. Organizational factors tend to influence individuals as well as teams in the organization, how they collaborate, solve problems and get things done. In turn, these patterns also drive the organization in terms of the ability to adapt to changing client needs for example.

Our approach also allows us to provide you with a glimpse into the correlation between your culture and the outcomes of your organization. The behavioral styles of the blue Constructive cluster are positively correlated to the fact that people perceive it as safe to speak their minds at work (which is an aspect of psychological safety). This means that if we want people to contribute their thoughts openly, we need to encourage Constructive behavioral styles. In contrast, the correlation between the Passive/Defensive and Aggressive/Defensive Styles and the degree of psychological safety in an organization is negative. This means that the more dominant the Defensive Styles which are security oriented are in the culture of an organization, the less safe it is perceived by its members to speak their minds. The styles or behavioral patterns that drive psychological safety most profoundly are first and foremost Self-Actualizing behaviors, secondly Humanistic-Encouraging behavioral patterns and thirdly Affiliative behavioral patterns. In turn it is true that there needs to be a certain level of psychological safety to show Self-Actualizing behaviors, such as experimenting, being your unique self and voicing innovative ideas.

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The interpersonal Constructive styles (Humanistic-Encouraging and Affiliative) also promote healthy interpersonal behavioral patterns such as listening to one another and empowering each other which are again related to psychological safety.

Even though organizations want to raise the level of psychological safety, sometimes they do create patterns that disrupt it, mostly unwittingly. The most adverse styles for psychological safety are the Passive Styles - Conventional, Dependent and Avoidance. A few original items from the OCI® survey that can be identified as counterproductive are from the Conventional Style scale which was particularly strongly correlated to a negative effect on psychological safety in an organization such as “never challenge superiors”, “accept goals without questioning them” and “be a good-follower”. In the Aggressive/Defensive cluster we can also find some items that will have a very negative effect on the perception of being in a psychologically safe place such as “never make a mistake”, “win against others” or “criticize input/ideas of others”. To identify these behaviors will help organizations to understand both why psychological safety may not be as it should in their organization but also which behaviors need to be promoted to remedy the situation.

HOW CAN WE CREATE A CONSTRUCTIVE CULTURE AND THEREBY FACILITATE THE POSITIVE BEHAVIORAL PATTERNS?

Let's have a look again at our How Culture Works model [link] and the organizational climate factors which show how the organization is structured and how these structural factors are influencing the organization's culture. Let us assume the example “making a mistake in the team will be held against you.” This is closely linked to what we call aspects of feedback, appraisals and reinforcement systems which are climate factors that will lead to certain behavioral patterns. If you make a mistake or do not meet expectations how likely are you to experience some consequences. We also ask about positive reinforcement: If you exceed expectations what is the likelihood that someone will notice and you will be recognized for it? This climate aspect of the balance between negative and positive feedback has a very predictable influence on the culture that you can expect within the organization.

IN ESSENCE...

If you want to create a workplace that is psychologically safe, you need to create a Constructive culture in which Self-Actualizing and Constructive interpersonal behaviors are dominant. You need to be careful, however, that taking individual measures to provide more positive feedback for example can lead to a disappointment. To really see the change you desire in the outcomes it is essential to work on creating a more Constructive work environment in the form of a more Constructive culture that will change the perception of whether the workplace is psychologically safe. You need to look at all 31 outcome factors to understand where to put the lever. To change the outcomes, you need to understand the culture and to change the culture you need to understand the causal factors anchored in the climate.

¹Schein, Edgar H.; Bennis, Warren G. (1965). Personal and organizational change through group methods: the laboratory approach. New York: Wiley.

²Kahn, William A. (1990-12-01). „Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work“. *Academy of Management Journal*. 33 (4): 692–724.

³Edmondson, Amy (1 June 1999). „Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams“ (PDF). *Administrative Science Quarterly*. 44 (2): 350–383.