



Most of the Advice About Psychological Safety at Work Isn't Helpful

In fact, telling managers that they are responsible for how people who work for them feel, will actually get in the way of creating psychological safety.

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Since the Harvard Business Review published Amy Edmondson's research², the idea that teams and organizations work better when people feel safe to speak up has received increasing attention by leaders wanting to create more agile, collaborative teams and workplaces. While this makes intuitive sense, most of the advice for how to do this has missed the mark. A great example of clichéd advice was recently offered by a well-respected, global leadership development company who opined that leaders should:

- 1) Make it a priority
- 2) Facilitate everyone speaking up
- 3) Establish norms for how failure is handled
- 4) Create space for new ideas
- 5) Embrace productive conflict

If you are hoping to change the behavior of bullies, or those entirely without any social-emotional competence, this might be a useful list. For the average well intentioned manager who wants to collaborate but finds it difficult to get people to fully engage, this will be of little value. If you want to know what is really required to create psychological safety at work, read on.

1) PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IS A QUALITY OF A RELATIONSHIP, NOT A CLIMATE, A CULTURE OR SOMETHING ONLY LEADERS CREATE

Whether or not I feel safe speaking up has something to do with my leader, but it has just as much to do with me. Fundamentally, psychological safety is about trust, and social psychologists have long described the paradoxical nature of trust – we have to act in a trusting way before we can know if someone is trustworthy. In other words, I first have to be willing to speak up before I can find out if it is safe to do so³.

People differ greatly in how much trust they bring to their interactions with others. It can range all the way from those who treat everyone as trustworthy until proven wrong (naïve?)

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²Detert, J. R., & Edmondson, A. C. (2007). Why Employees Are Afraid to Speak. *Harvard Business Review*, 85(5), 23–25. Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2), 350–383.

³Smith, K.K. & Berg, D.N. (1987). *Paradoxes of Group Life*. Jossey-Bass.

to those who treat everyone as untrustworthy until proven wrong (paranoid?). And so this leads to the first immutable law of psychological safety – what is required for someone to feel safe speaking up with their boss, or in other work settings, will be different for each person.

The second consequence is that any manager who wants to create psychological safety in their team or larger unit will have to engage with, and build a relationship with, every person they need to feel safe speaking up. Now it is true that people will make judgments about how safe it is (or isn't) by watching what happens when others speak up. If someone gets aggressively shut down expressing an opinion those who witness it will take note. It's also true that narratives emerge about how safe speaking up is that influence what people see and think. When people get together over the "water cooler" to discuss how they are making sense of the boss, a shared perception develops that influences what people then see or hear. So a leader who wants to create psychological safety needs to understand the experiences and narratives people are using to make sense of his or her actions.

The good news for the leader who despairs at having to work out his or her relationship with dozens of people is that they can use these same process to their advantage. Leaders can target who they will work to create psychologically safe relationships with and hope that will influence others to give them the benefit of the doubt. Who do you most need to be willing to speak up? Work on those relationships. Who are seen as the troublemakers or loose cannons, particularly those that have a following? Work on those relationships. Find opportunities to have people witness you listening to a contentious point of view, and be curious and respectful. People will take note.

If you manage too many people to be able to be able to build the individual relationships that will lead people to feel safe to tell you what they really think, and feel, and want, target a handful that are most likely to influence the rest and work on creating trusting relationships with them.

2) YOU CAN'T MAKE PEOPLE HAVE THE EXPERIENCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

In fact, you can't make people have any experience at all. You can't make me think or feel or want anything, only I can do that. I define experience as the moment to moment stream of observations, thoughts, feelings and wants in each of us⁴. Each of us creates our own experience, and different people can have extraordinarily different experiences participating in the same interaction. What is the chance that any two people, reading this sentence, are having the exact same observations, thoughts, feelings and wants as they read it? I'm sure you would agree it is extraordinarily low.

I was once talking to a group of banking executives about the implications for leading when you acknowledge that everyone is always having a different experience. One of the members left the group for a few minutes while the conversation changed to a discussion of how the CEO's recent "state of the union" weekly talks was being received by employees. The most vocal member opined they were not a particularly good idea and was worried they might even be increasing cynicism. When the member who had left returned the CEO said, "*Let's check out that different experience thing. Lester, what do you think the effect of the state of the union talks has been?*". He replied. "*They're fantastic. A real boost to morale!*". We nearly fell off our seats laughing. But there it is.

Recognizing that everyone is always having a different experience from you, and working with the implications of that, is the foundation for being able to create inclusive teams with high levels of psychological safety. As a leader, you can't make me think or feel or want anything, but you can make it uncomfortable for me to express those things. If you think it is your job to make me think, or feel, or want certain things, I will get that message, and it won't be safe for me to say what my real experience is if it's different from the "approved" experiences – and this includes my experience of psychological safety!

⁴See *The Experience cube*, in G.R. Bushe (2009). *Clear Leadership*. Davies-Black.

To create a psychologically safe environment you have to expect that everyone will be experiencing things differently from you, and be curious about what people's experience really is. Sometimes that will make you uncomfortable – but it's not them who are making you uncomfortable – it's you who makes you uncomfortable. You are responsible for your own experience. If you make others responsible for your discomfort, they will get that message and will learn what not to say around you.

It's important to differentiate behaviors from experience. People are responsible for what they say and do. For example, it's not OK to use the N-word, even though everyone hearing it will have a different experience. **We can identify and regulate what people say and do, but we can't control what people experience and trying to is what creates an unsafe relationship among well intentioned people.**

Some people and legal regimes want to make leaders responsible for their employee's experience. That is actually crazy making, which I will explain further below. As a leader, you are responsible for what you say and do, and for your results, but not for other's experience of you.

The people who work for you are responsible for what they say and do, and for their results, but not for your experience of them.

3) A RELATIONSHIP OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IS NOT ABOUT BEING ABLE TO SAY WHATEVER IS ON YOUR MIND

For decades writers on leadership and teamwork have counselled that being "open and honest" leads to better interpersonal relations and team performance. The problem with this phrase, open and honest, is that many people hear it as permission to say whatever is top of mind, this appearing to be the core of "authenticity". However, if you watch what takes place when someone screws up their courage to say "what I really think", usually what comes next is a judgment. Usually, it takes courage to say because it's a negative judgment. Perhaps it is a negative judgment about a person's character (you're lazy) or competence (you don't know what you are doing), or what a person has done (that was a terrible job), or the plan (that plan won't work), or how things are going (we are doing an

awful job). These sorts of statements are never very effective or useful because they are framed in a way that implies "my experience is the truth". Whether there is any objective validity to those statements won't matter because everyone is having a different experience. Anytime a person talks about their experience as if it's the truth they invite argument, which can reduce the sense of psychological safety.

Creating a relationship of psychological safety requires some skills in how to talk about different experiences by all the parties in the relationship. These skills are required by the leader, but if the followers don't have them as well it puts the leader in the position of benign parent who has to put up with having people's judgments flung at them, and each other, and grounding out the defensiveness that naturally creates.

The key here is learning how to be skillfully transparent, not open and honest. That involves the following:

Knowing the difference between facts and your perceptions and opinions, and learning how to express the latter as just your experience, not the truth. After decades of teaching managers I've come to realize that most people have a difficult time separating the facts from what they call "observations" but are actually perceptions and stories they create from what someone actually said or did. For example, I'll point at someone in a lecture staring intently at me and say *"I observe Susan is listening closely to what I'm saying. Is that an observation?"* And most people will agree it is, when it is actually a story I have made up. The fact is Susan is looking at me while I talk but I have no idea what is going on in her head or whether she is listening at all.

The next step is to learn how to describe your experience, not your judgments. So instead of being open and honest and saying something like *"you don't respect me"*, it's much more skillfully transparent to say *"when you roll your eyes and interrupt me when I'm talking it makes me wonder if you respect me."* The first invites a defensive retort while the second is much more likely to open up a conversation.

It's important to consider what of all the things you are currently thinking, feeling and wanting are actually pertinent and important for the other person to hear. This again is an invitation to create psychological safety by not saying whatever is top of mind, but to give some thought to what will be helpful to say and how to say it helpfully.

Let me be clear, I am all for people being honest with each other and I think honesty is a crucial part of a psychologically safe relationship. One of the things that will happen when a leader is not honest with followers, telling people what s/he thinks they want to hear, is that people will pick up the incongruence between what they are saying to different people and their non-verbal behavior. That kind of incongruence leads to confusion and distrust, which gets in the way of psychological safety. My point is that there are better and worse ways to be honest, and that someone who thinks their experience is the truth is likely to create psychologically unsafe relationships

4) CREATING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IS A TWO-WAY (OR MANY-WAY) STREET

The psychological safety people experience at work is influenced as much by co-workers as by leaders and so everyone is responsible for creating the kind of relationships that make the work place psychologically safe. This means creating psychologically safe relations at work requires a focus on the team, not just the leader. Are team members able to be skillfully transparent when they speak up to each other? Do peers across departments feel safe to bring up issues with each other?

When I get potential clients who are interested in this problem they often couch it as people needing feedback skills, as needing to become more comfortable giving their peers feedback. I don't think this is helpful. Implicit in much of what goes on under the label of feedback is that you are responsible for my experience, and I want you to change so I can have a better experience. No one really wants that responsibility and if I take it on, it makes it less safe to say what I really think, feel and want.

What is required instead, is for everyone to understand the sense-making processes that go on in everyday life ⁵ and how to avoid becoming victims of them. When people have unsatisfying interactions, they are compelled to make sense of them. Why did that person act that way? What do they think of me? How are they feeling? Instead of asking the person, most people develop their own explanations and then act on those as if they are the truth. This is the source of a great deal of psychological non-safety. A key problem here, is that the stories we make up to explain other people's actions tend to be worse than the reality. Our brains are apparently wired for caution ⁶ and when faced with ambiguous information tend to imagine the worst. Future acts of sense-making are based on past acts of sense-making or things don't make sense, and so what begins as an unsatisfying interaction spirals into a "conflicted" relationship that can last years.

Instead of feedback, what peers need to do regularly is skillfully describe their own experience and be curious and respectful of the other's experience. **When people who need to work together have this kind of "learning conversation", where the focus is just to understand each other's experience, 4 out of 5 conflicts at work go away, and much greater psychological safety comes into the relationship.**⁷

These are the kinds of conversations leaders need to have with the people they want to create psychologically safe relations with. It's understandable that most of the focus is on leadership and making leaders responsible for it. There is an assumption that with power comes capacity, but we can forget that leaders are people too and they face their own challenges to feeling psychologically safe. With the added responsibilities and expectations placed on leaders by those above and those below them, leaders may feel more unsafe than anyone! Often it is stress and anxiety that underlies the acting out and reactive behaviors we associate with bad bosses.

What's the impact on the leader who enters a room and all conversation stops? How psychologically safe do leaders feel when they see the incongruence between the nice things people say to their face and what they hear through the rumor mill?

⁵Weick, K. (1995). *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Sage

⁶Rock, D. (2008) SCARF: A brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others. *NeuroLeadership Journal*, 1:1, 1-9.

⁷G.R. Bushe (2009). *Clear Leadership: Sustaining Real Collaboration and Partnership at Work*. Davies-Black

It's not enough to teach leaders the understanding and relational skills that will lead to psychological safety. Followers have to be taught them as well so they will be willing to check out the stories they are making up about their leaders, and be willing to tell their leaders the truth of their experience. Followers have a central role in creating their leaders, and especially their experience of the leaders they work for. We all co-construct our relationships.

5) TO BE ABLE TO RELIABLY CREATE RELATIONSHIPS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY REQUIRES YOU TO WORK ON YOUR SELF-DIFFERENTIATION

I mentioned earlier that making me responsible for your experience is crazy making. This is one of the central insights of Bowen Family Systems theory. Making children responsible for a parent's experience can dramatically impact their mental health⁸. But there is a common method of managing anxiety in relationships that many of us learn in our families and it goes like this: I will look after your experience, and you will look after mine. I won't say or do anything that might make you uncomfortable and you will do the same. This can seem like being polite, sensitive, cooperative. However, it can actually be what makes it psychologically unsafe around leaders who are well intentioned, want to create teamwork, and an open climate.

What happens in this state of "psychological fusion" is that I unconsciously make you responsible for my experience. When someone says or does something that makes a leader who is psychologically fused with their followers uncomfortable or anxious, they try to change the follower's experience without realizing that's what they are doing. They display no curiosity about the follower's experience, and so the follower gets the clear message this is not OK to bring up it; better to keep it to yourself.

Here are some examples of how that might look at work:

The follower goes to the leader to express concern about a presentation they have to give. Instead of the

leader trying to understand what their concerns are they give them a pep talk, tell them they have nothing to worry about and it will all be fine.

The follower expresses reservations about a new plan or strategy. Instead of the leader being curious about the nature of these reservations, they explain why the new plan or strategy will work and might even note that for it to work everyone has to "buy the vision".

The follower describes something they want at work and the leader doesn't get curious about why the person wants it or what might be behind the ask, and instead explains why that would not be a good thing for the person.

The follower expresses regret at something they said or did and the leader tells them they should not regret it, don't feel bad, and perhaps goes on to point out how it was a good thing.

What happened in each of these cases was that instead of getting curious about the follower's experience, and letting them have their experience, and perhaps helping them to explore their experience to resolution, the leader unconsciously reacted to the discomfort or anxiety they felt as the person spoke up. They explained why the follower should think, feel, and/or want something different. They tried to change their experience before they understood it.

Having watched hundreds of these interactions take place over the years I can tell you that very few people are ever successful at changing another person's experience through force of persuasion. Instead, what happens is that the person closes down, and learns that when they are having that kind of experience it's best to keep it to themselves.

The thing is, at first, most people will not recognize these sorts of actions as creating a psychologically unsafe relationship. They won't realize that what they are actually trying to do is get rid of their own uncomfortable feelings. Instead, they will think they are being sensitive, positive, helpful, providing a guiding hand. In some circumstance they might even be

⁸ Bowen, M. (1985) *Family Therapy in Clinical Practice*. Jason Aronson.

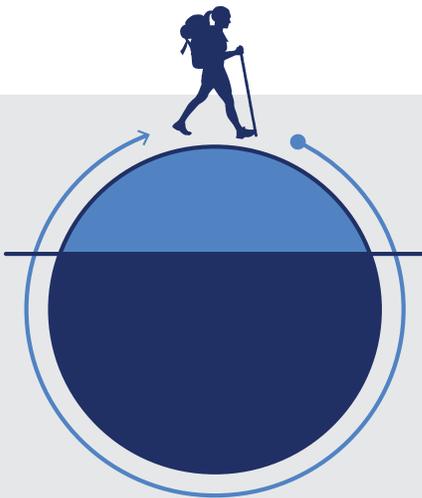
getting the message that they are responsible for other people's experience, and ought to be trying to change them! Understanding the nature of fusion and what it does to work relationships allows you to understand why research shows that managers who try to manage and fix others' experience decrease the level of trust not only toward them, but amongst all members of their teams⁹.

To be able to create psychologically safe relationships, where people can be truly authentic with each other, requires learning to “de-fuse” from others, stop taking responsibility for other people's experience, and “self-differentiate”. Differentiation is the ability to be separate from, and connected to, at the same time. There are many levels to this but the one most relevant to creating relationships of psychological safety is the ability to be separate from and connected to other people at the same time.

In practice that means knowing what my experience is separate from you – what I am observing, thinking, feeling and wanting, while at the same time curious about what you are observing, thinking, feeling and wanting without being emotion-

ally hijacked. Such “healthy psychological boundaries” make it possible for a leader to allow for the variety of experiences in any work group to be expressed and heard while staying focused on the needs and responsibilities the team has. To be a collaborative leader is not about always looking for consensus. It is about facilitating a group to bring out its collective wisdom and then making the best decision one can. This is less about a skill and more a way of being, and takes those interested in leadership development out of the realm of horizontal development, and into what's recently be called vertical development¹⁰.

For almost two decades, leaders who've been through the Clear Leadership program have learned these and other key lessons that make them exceptionally capable of creating outstanding teams with high levels of belonging, inclusivity, and performance. With our combination of *Clear Leadership* for leaders, *Clear Partnership* for their followers, and the lifelong membership with over 1,000 like-minded professionals in the *Clear Leadership Network* to support their ongoing journey, many experience a transformation in their ability to create psychologically safe relationships at work .



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⁹ Chan, N. (1999). *Effects of differentiated leadership on trust in the workplace*. Master's Thesis, Simon Fraser University.

¹⁰ <https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/developing-talent-youre-probably-missing-vertical-development/>