



# Psychological Safety

## Why it Matters

*BY PRIYA KAUL*

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## Psychological safety is becoming an increasingly popular term, referenced in numerous white papers and other literature about talent and team management.

It is not, however, a new concept. It was introduced in 1965 by E.H. Schein and W.G. Bennis in *Personal and Organizational Change Through Group Methods: The Laboratory Approach* (Wiley). Amy Edmondson, in more recent times, has become almost synonymous with psychological safety as a result of her 1999 study that looked at the relationship between psychological safety and high-performing teams. Google's Project Aristotle, the results of which were highlighted by the *New York Times* in 2016, also identified the composition of psychological safety.

Simply put, psychological safety describes an environment that makes someone feel comfortable voicing their ideas without any fear of retribution. The concept could be challenging if not carefully interpreted. But to increase psychological safety in a team, we cannot discount the value of a small degree of discomfort and challenge needed to push boundaries toward breakthroughs, innovation, and growth.

### **THE REVIVAL OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY**

So, why is psychological safety suddenly taking center stage?

When whispers of an illness that produced shortness of breath, flu-like symptoms, and death made their way to WHO and CDC in December 2019 and we found ourselves in a global pandemic in early 2020, the world stood still, forcing all of us to pause and recalibrate both life and work.

As the pandemic started to recede, many of us quickly realized what giant technical organizations had found in the early 2000s when hiring. These companies had already been leveraging technology to hire the best talent across the world. When the pandemic hit, their employees were used to working in

geographically dispersed teams. And companies found that one of the benefits of hybrid work practices was increased revenue. The pandemic further brought into focus technology-driven virtual and hybrid work practices and approaches. This was now a reality most industries had to accept.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we collectively experienced challenges such as the Great Resignation, stretched roles, a paucity of relevant talent for newly defined roles, and increased employee psychological concerns. All of this led to an increased focus on how companies retain and engage talent, and how to pivot to constant and rapid change. As we were rapidly restructuring and reimagining our work, organizations all over the world started shaping teams differently. As we navigate this business climate, psychological safety becomes crucial to enhance employee engagement and team productivity. A 2017 Gallup report indicated that productivity increased by 12% when organizations increased psychological safety, as that enhanced employee engagement.

### **TODAY'S NEED FOR WORKPLACE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY**

In all the interviews I have conducted since mid-2021, whether it was for the position of an intern, manager, or consultant, a question that loomed on the interviewee's mind concerned the purpose and value of the role, work, and/or organization. A workforce that values different things than previous workforces seems to be paving the way forward, looking beyond salary and benefits to contributions, purpose, respect, and value at work. There appears to be a shift in what people are looking for and a shift in what employee engagement actually looks like. There are many reasons why psychological safety is important to employee engagement. For one, psychologically safe teams are seen as inclusive—not only the inclusion of self but

the inclusion of ideas. People feel valued when their ideas are treated with respect and they have a voice. Some ways to keep team members engaged are to include their ideas, experiences, diversity of academic thought, and approach. Inclusion promotes value and fosters psychological safety.

As we read literature on increasing inclusion by encouraging ideas, it brings into focus vulnerability. Sharing thoughts and ideas is not always a comfortable experience for all people on a team. Increasing individual self-efficacy is one way of reducing vulnerability. Social persuasion, which is encouragement or discouragement from another individual, is seen as important in the self-efficacy theory described by Stanford University's Albert Bandura. According to this theory, self-efficacy is increased when employees are more confident, as a result of being offered positive encouragement in voicing their initiatives or even concerns.

Studies also reveal that psychologically safe spaces are shown to promote proactive behaviors in people working in organizations. One 2020 study by Şeyhmus Aksoy and Nihal Mamatoğlu, Mediator Role of Professional Self-Efficacy Belief Between Psychological Safety and Self-Reported Personal Initiative, found that psychological safety was seen to be positively correlated with self-reported personal initiative.

As leaders, we have an opportunity to be intentional about increasing psychological safety in our teams and organizations. Studies stress the importance of supportive environments where people can voice their ideas, thoughts, and questions respectfully. Empowering teams by increasing self-efficacy may encourage more proactive problem solving and innovative solutions particularly crucial in a business climate of uncertainty and rapid change.

Finally, it is vital that psychological safety does not remain a checkbox or buzzword and that we create a more intentional, purpose-driven team environment for talent to stay engaged.

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