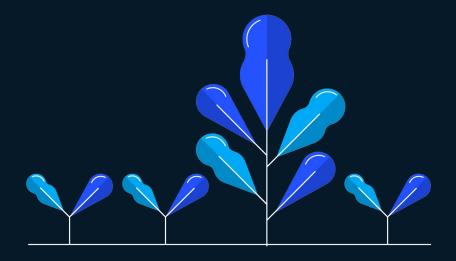McKinsey
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Developing Psychological Safety

Interactive workbook

What is psychological safety?

Psychological safety is a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking—that speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes will be welcomed and valued.

Psychological safety is NOT:

- Just being nice

- Job security

- A guarantee that all your ideas will be applauded

- A license to whine

- Freedom from conflict

- Permission to slack off

> "Psychological safety exists in teams when leaders have raised the costs of silence."
>
> – Amy Edmonson, Harvard Business School

Team behaviors that result from high psychological safety drive performance

Low psychological safety

- Shunning responsibility; blame, criticism

- Hiding errors

- Avoiding conflict

- Censoring; excessive image management

High psychological safety

- Taking responsibility

- Admitting errors

- Constructive conflict / healthy debate

- Authenticity, candor

- More "boundary spanning behavior" (increasingly important in the future of work)

- Learning behaviors

- Stronger creativity, problem solving

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The top leadership behaviors for psychological safety

Psychological safety empowers people to fully contribute their unique talents and perspectives. When this happens, team members can come together to do their best work and learn and perform better, all while reducing stress.
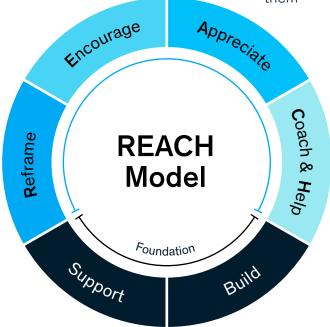
Building from a foundation of awareness and strong relationships, we can use the four actions of the REACH model to guide us.

Encourage all voices
Invite team input into decision-making, and create more dialogue

Appreciate contributions
Let team members know that you see, value, and support them

Reframe mistakes
Honor mistakes as providing essential feedback for success

Coach other team members to Help and support each other
Coach, role model, mentor, and set up support structures for the team

Support awareness
Build self-awareness and situational awareness to create resilient mindsets and help people make choices

Build strong relationships
Strengthen connections among team members, and make those connections more resilient

REACH Model

Encourage
Appreciate
Coach & Help
Build
Support
Reframe
Foundation

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Support awareness

Greater awareness ultimately yields more and better choices. We can use the APR technique during challenging situations to move from our default response to a choice that better serves us by reframing the situation.

Awareness

Become aware that you are in default and/or experiencing stressful emotions.

Ask yourself:

- What is the situation and why is it challenging?

- What is my default reaction?

- What types of mindsets are coming into play—what do I believe or assume?

- What physical symptoms am I experiencing (e.g., speaking quickly, feeling irritated, heart-racing)?

- Why is this important to me?

Pause

Interrupt and create space and time.

Pick one (or as many as you would like):

- Count to 10.

- Exhale deeply (six or more times).

- Activate another sense by sitting up straight or planting your feet on the ground.

- Ask a question.

- Extend gratitude.

- Get a drink of water or take a break.

- Sleep on it.

- Do not hit send on that email just yet.

- Name what's happening – say that you are frustrated or concerned and ask for a moment.

Reframe

Use specific questions to embed new mindsets and take an aware action.

Ask yourself:

- How would I like the situation to be and why? What is the greater purpose?

- Am I showing up as my best self in this moment?

- How do I see myself, others, and the situation? What other perspectives might also be true?

- What can I learn from this situation?

- What mindset am I holding right now? Which more helpful mindset might I step into instead?

- From this mindset, what (small) action can I experiment with?

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Build strong relationships

We can develop strong, energizing, and resilient relationships by practicing AVEC: attention, vulnerability, empathy, and compassion.

What each element looks like in practice

A	**Attention**	Turning toward the other person literally and figuratively and listening deeply without judgment, distraction, or the desire to respond.
V	**Vulnerability**	Being your authentic self, even if it feels outside of your comfort zone. Acknowledging the role you played in a situation or the assumptions you made, even if you are not proud of them. Sharing honestly how the actions of others affected you.
E	**Empathy**	Understanding and identifying with the emotions and perspectives that others, based on what they share with you.
C	**Compassion**	Demonstrating concern with an intent to be helpful. Checking in with individuals to see how they are doing and investing the time to respond in a meaningful way.

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Reframe mistakes

Mistakes—and in some cases actual failure—are a necessary part of learning. The more mistakes we make, the more data and feedback we collect, the more we learn, and the more likely we are to come up with groundbreaking ideas.

What if we could reframe mistakes from being shameful or reflective of our personal character to opportunities to grow and adapt?

What good looks like

- Acknowledge that mistakes happen.

- Avoid showing anger when they happen.

- Help team members correct mistakes.

What great looks like

- Share your own mistakes vulnerably and often.

- Remind team members frequently that our work is complex, and that we should expect mistakes.

- Reframe mistakes as steps in a longer journey—valuable data we can work with, and an opportunity to learn.

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Encourage all voices

A recent study found that the most important factor in creating psychological safety culture is "team voice"—the ability of team members to give input into how the team carries out its actions.

For example, a team has strong "team voice" if members frequently and openly share their ideas for potential innovation, their solutions to problems, and their views on risks and priorities.

What good looks like

- Every time there's a big decision, explicitly ask, "Are we ready to move forward?" and make sure everyone says "yes."

- Avoid using discrediting language when somebody shares (e.g., avoid saying thing like "yes, but … " or "There is a lot of context you don't know.").

What great looks like

- Actively avoid the "sunflower" effect, where others align with the view of the leader.

- Remind the team frequently of the power of having everyone share. Note that, in our complex world, leaders don't have all the answers, and that everyone has a unique and useful part of the answer.

- Invite participation in neutral, non-threatening ways (e.g., "What could be a viewpoint we are missing?") and pause long enough for people to speak up.

- Set up formal team mechanisms to encourage sharing of ideas (e.g., have a standing "devil's advocate meeting" to pressure-test plans and ideas).

- Fill silences with questions instead of comments.

- Explain why certain points of view were not incorporated into a final decision; share context and the decision-making process with the team transparently.

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Appreciate contributions

The more that team members feel their contributions are valued, the more likely they are to keep engaging. However, we also need to move beyond just celebrating achievements like a great idea or finished product, and also value the many actions that contribute to the team process.

This includes valuing our mistakes, and learning from them. It includes being willing to have difficult conversations, asking hard questions, and seeking help when we need it.

What good looks like

- Proactively and frequently acknowledge the good job that team members are doing.

- Say "thank you" when people speak up, or go above and beyond the norm.

What great looks like

- Make recognition part of your team's language and norms.

- Give special thanks to people who bring up uncomfortable, hard issues.

- Be specific about any action that you celebrate, and the impact it had on you.

- Acknowledge the points that others make during a meeting (e.g., "To build on Cara's point…).

Coach other team members to help and support each other

In addition to holding ourselves accountable for how we each contribute to a psychologically safe team, we should also encourage and coach others to do the same. Psychological safety is truly a team sport!

As we move from individual actions to having an ongoing and shared team conversation, we raise our expectations for one another, and create positive momentum.
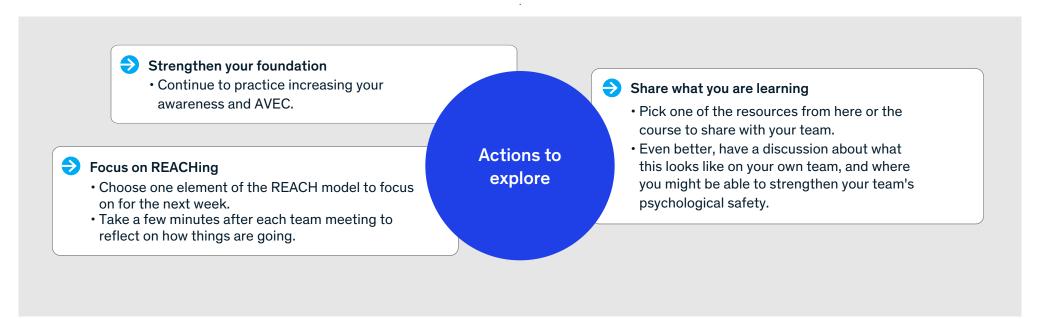
What good looks like

- Encourage peer recognition (e.g., set a team norm to write a 2 minute thank you note every day).

- Remind team members that it is everyone's role to enhance the experience of others on the team.

What great looks like

- Develop norms encouraging team members to give their views (e.g. everyone should withhold judgment during brainstorming and ideation).

- Coach team members to support each other (e.g., ask them to encourage each other to speak up).

- Steer team members away from behaviors that might limit psychological safety.

- Provide feedback and coaching to individual team members on their contributions to psychological safety.

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Try it ➔ Developing psychological safety

➔ Strengthen your foundation
- Continue to practice increasing your awareness and AVEC.

➔ Focus on REACHing
- Choose one element of the REACH model to focus on for the next week.
- Take a few minutes after each team meeting to reflect on how things are going.

Actions to explore

➔ Share what you are learning
- Pick one of the resources from here or the course to share with your team.
- Even better, have a discussion about what this looks like on your own team, and where you might be able to strengthen your team's psychological safety.

What will you do? *Pick an idea from the list above, or think of a different action you want to try.*

How did it go? *Once you've taken that action, reflect on the experience.*