

# High Performance via Psychological Safety

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MODERN AGILE



**Psychological safety** exists when you are not afraid to be yourself, to take risks, make mistakes, raise problems, ask questions and disagree with others.

*Joshua Kerievsky & Heidi Helfand*

No one can put in their best performance unless they feel secure. Se in Latin means "without" and cure means "fear or care." Drive Out Fear! We must be unafraid to express ideas and ask questions.

*W. Edwards Deming, Out Of The Crisis*

## Leaders can help foster team safety by:

- Framing the work as a learning problem, not an execution problem.
- Acknowledging their own fallibility and modeling vulnerability in front of the team.
- Being curious and asking lots of questions.
- Encouraging diverse points of view.

*Adapted from Amy Edmondson and Patrick Lencioni.*

## Lencioni's Five Dysfunctions of a Team

1. Absence of Trust - The fear of being vulnerable with team members prevents the building of trust within the team.
2. Fear of Conflict - The desire to preserve artificial harmony stifles the occurrence of productive ideological conflict.
3. Lack of Commitment - The lack of clarity of buy-in prevents team members from making decisions they will stick to.

4. Avoidance of Accountability - The need to avoid interpersonal discomfort prevents team members from holding one another accountable.
5. Inattention to Results - The pursuit of individual goals and personal status erodes the focus on collective success.

**Paul O'Neill's Three Questions** - Can everyone in your organization say yes, every day, to the following three questions:

1. I am treated everyday with dignity and respect by everyone I encounter without respect to my gender, my nationality, my race, my educational attainment, my rank or any other discriminating qualifiers.
2. I'm given the things that I need - training, education, tools, encouragement - so that I can make a contribution that gives meaning to my life.
3. Everyday I can say someone I care about and respect provides regular, meaningful, sincere recognition?

## Respond with Curiosity When Criticized

When told "That's a bad idea. It won't work!", respond with "I'm curious. What makes you think that?"

**Raise Respect** - If you know and care about each other, everything is easier.

1. Share hobbies, interests and skills in a group setting.
2. Share what you want to learn & what you can teach each other.
3. Create opportunities for finding common ground.

*Inspired by Lyssa Adkins, Coaching Agile Teams*

## Establishing Meeting Safety

- Encourage everyone to contribute.
- Listen to one another.
- Review/repeat people's points. "So what I'm hearing you say is ..."
- Avoid dominating or interrupting.
- Be caring, curious and non-judgemental. "I'm curious why might you think that?"

*Adapted from Charles Duhigg's book, Smarter, Better, Faster*

## Clarity of Purpose & Decision Making in Meetings

- With an agenda, make it clear if you are convening the group to:

- Share information that has already been decided.
- Seek input to inform a decision that you will make.
- Discuss how to solve problems with the group to decide by consensus.

*Sam Kaner, Community at Work*

**Check-In** - Attending a meeting when you're not 100% present (family situation, pain, exhaustion, etc.) happens. It's helpful to share your context so others may have empathy and not

misunderstand your mood or body language. Prior to starting the meeting, invite people to share (in a few words) how they're doing.

*Jim and Michele McCarthy - The Core Protocols*

**Safety Poll** - Take an anonymous poll of how safe people feel before a retrospective begins.

Ask them to use a rating scale of 1 to 5:

5. "Hey, no problem, I'll say anything."
4. "I'll say most anything, but a few things might be hard to say."
3. "I'll share some things, but keep a few things to myself."
2. "I'm not going to say much. Mostly, I'll let other people bring up issues."
1. "I'll smile, claim everything is great and agree with whatever the managers say."

Once collected, tally the votes on a flip chart. Then make a dramatic show of placing the votes in a secure container like a briefcase. This simple gesture speaks volumes about whether or not it's safe to speak up.

*Norm Kerth, Project Retrospectives*

**Feedback Preferences** - Make your feedback preferences known:

- "Give me brutal honesty please!"
- "Please say what you like first, then what you don't like."
- "This is an early draft, so please focus on general ideas, not typos or grammar."

**C.O.I.N.** - Structure for Difficult Conversations

C - Context - Where and when did the event occur? Ask your colleague what they remember.

O - Observation - Use neutral language to describe actions or behaviors that were witnessed, without evaluation or judgment.

Ask the other to describe what they observed.

I - Impact - Describe in a neutral way the impact the event had on you, other people, the work, the organization. Speak from "I" and be vulnerable rather than critical.

N - Next time - a request for change. Establish agreements and understandings about what will be different in the future.

*From CRR Global*

**Normalize Conflict. Plan for it. Share preferences.**

- When it gets difficult, what do we want it to be like as a team?
- When a teammate has a problem with me, I request that we talk about it as soon as possible.

*Center for Right Relationship (CRR) Global*

**Feed-forward** - Means sharing what you appreciate in each other and what you would like to see more of. Feed-forward, as opposed to feedback, helps people give constructive input in a way that accelerates and improves people's performance and development.

*Anne Rød and Marita Fridjhon, Creating Intelligent Teams*

**Requests vs Demands** - Use requests like "Would you be willing to..." instead of demands like "Will you...Can you...or Do this...".

*Inspired by Nonviolent Communication (NVC)*

**Levels of Listening** - Demonstrate that you "hear them":

- Level 1 - Preoccupied listening
- Level 2 - Focused on the other person
- Level 3 - Focus on body language, environment

*Coaches Training Institute (CTI)*

**All Voices Heard via I/P/G** - High engagement requires safety. But is everyone participating? Use Individual / Partner / Group by inviting individuals to record ideas, then share the ideas with a partner, and then share them with the group.

**Receiving Feedback** - Paraphrase or mirror back the feedback to show that you receive it non-defensively. Have an attitude of gratitude.

*Sam Kaner, Community at Work*

**Fist of Five** - To understand the degree of interest in a proposal. Ask people to use a rating scale of 5 to 0 finger(s):

5. "I wildly support this idea. Yes, Yes!"
4. "I like this idea, sounds good"
3. "I will support the idea. No strong feelings."
2. "I have some concerns, but will go along."
1. "I have serious reservations with this idea."
0. "No way, terrible choice!" Raising 0 fingers (your fist) is a way to block consensus.

**Decider Protocol** - A way for groups to quickly & visibly vote on a proposal and reach consensus:

- Thumbs up - "Yes! I fully support this proposal."
- Thumbs sideways - "I'll go along with the group because I can't think of anything better."
- Thumbs down - "No way! But here is an alternative proposal I could support..."

*Jim and Michele McCarthy - The Core Protocols*



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