

## Transcript of the Deeper Dive on Team Psychological Safety

Hi there! In this installment of “Deeper Dive,” we will explore team psychological safety in a little more detail.

Psychological safety is knowing you won’t be punished or humiliated for speaking up on ideas, concerns, questions or mistakes (Edmondson 1999). A shared sense of team psychological safety is critical to an effective learning system. And learning is the core aim of a PIR.

This sounds great, but we don’t have that sense of safety in every workplace and every situation. One reason is that when we go to work, we generally want to look intelligent, positive, and helpful. An effective way to achieve this is simply to keep quiet. We can’t look stupid if we don’t ask questions. We can’t look inept if we don’t admit mistakes. And we can’t step on anyone’s toes if we don’t offer ideas.

Psychologists call this impression management, and it works! The issue with impression management is that every time we suppress an idea or stifle a question, we rob ourselves and each other of small moments of learning.

Amy Edmondson illuminated why this is important when researching whether better hospital teams make fewer medication errors (Edmondson 2004). To her surprise, she discovered that better teams tallied **more** mistakes. But when she explored beyond the surface-level numbers, Professor Edmondson discovered that good teams weren’t making more mistakes than bad teams; good teams were just more willing to discuss them. High-functioning teams have a climate of openness that allows them to report and improve from incidents.

A closely related idea is just culture.

Sidney Dekker (2018) describes a just culture as a culture of trust, learning, and accountability. The purpose of a just culture is to give

people the confidence to report issues, knowing that the organisation will respond fairly. A just culture also enables the organisation to learn from incidents.

As Dekker (2012) explains, not having a just culture can harm people's morale and job satisfaction. It can make people less willing to do that little bit extra or to step outside their role.

The concepts of just culture and safety borrow heavily from workspaces in Medical and Aerospace fields where low psychological safety can lead to deaths. These are extreme examples, but even in IT and software organisations, we must find ways to make it safe for colleagues to ask questions, admit mistakes, and offer ideas for improvement.

Sometimes, this type of culture is called "blameless" or "blame-free."

However, there are some reasons why "blameless" could be a poor word for this approach. The main reason is that it implies a lack of accountability. And that's not true. Blame-free and accountability-free are two completely separate things. Blaming people can actually lead to a reduction in accountability. It can decrease people's willingness to share stories from which the organisation can learn and improve.

Virginia Sharpe distinguished between two different senses of accountability—"a backward-looking sense and a forward-looking sense" (Sharpe 2003, p.8).

Really, what we are describing here is forward-looking accountability.

Forward-looking accountability means that we have the experts of this particular area of complexity in a room together; let's make that a safe space for colleagues to talk about what happened, good and bad, and to put these experts in a position to teach others.

Just culture and team psychological safety don't just appear out of thin air; they need time to grow and germinate. If you are at the beginning of this journey, then a good starting point is to start framing your work as

being a learning activity. Embracing the complexity of the system and how much is unknown, means we need all the small moments of learning that accrue from an atmosphere of openness and honesty.

Thanks for listening!

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## References

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