



Leadership and Managing
People



4 Steps to Boost Psychological Safety at Your Workplace

Lessons from one company's approach. **by Amy C. Edmondson
and Per Hugander**

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These days, mentions of psychological safety in the business press are extraordinarily common, and its importance seems to be recognized across industries ranging from healthcare to tech to [financial services](#). A popular topic before the pandemic, psychological safety has become that much more so due to its relevance to [agility](#), [diversity and inclusion](#), and [remote working](#). But with this ubiquity comes misunderstanding. One crucial misconception among business leaders

is that psychological safety will be present in any reasonably healthy work environment, like freedom from harassment or a commitment to keeping workers injury-free are. In fact, psychologically safe work environments are rare.

Creating psychological safety — the confidence that candor and vulnerability are welcome — in a workplace is truly challenging and takes an unusual degree of commitment and skill. The reason for this is simple: It's natural for people to hold back ideas, be reluctant to ask questions, and shy away from disagreeing with the boss. Given this tendency, the free exchange of ideas, concerns, and questions is routinely hindered — far more often than most managers realize. To reverse it takes focus and effort; it's a process of helping people develop new beliefs and behaviors, and none of it is easy or natural.

We're not saying that it can't be done. Quite the contrary — we have plenty of evidence that it can, and we view psychological safety as immensely valuable in any business that faces uncertainty or has a need for innovation. But it must be approached with the level of commitment and ambition it requires. Fortunately, we've seen that the effort pays off. At SEB, where Per was head of leadership and organizational development, an executive who worked with him on a [four-month program](#) to improve strategic progress by building psychological safety and dialogue skills told us, “The results came quicker than we expected, and they came in the shape of quicker decisions, better decisions. You slow down to speed up. Strategic problems that had been around for a while, we were able to solve them relatively quickly. Internally and with external stakeholders.”

What explains this success? We identified four essential elements based on Amy's academic study of Per's work at SEB, where he put into practice his decade of experimentation with different techniques that

help management teams practice perspective taking and strategic focus while building a capacity for candor and vulnerability. Our approach to working with management teams applies equally to any team in which candid dialogue could play a role in its success. The substance of the decisions may differ, but the approach to skill development in the context of real work remains the same.

Focus on performance

First, emphasize what most executives want: performance. Building a psychologically safe work environment starts with shifting the narrative of the intervention from culture change or interpersonal skills in order to make the case that the quality and candor of conversation matters for results. This is not an abstract claim: Achieving performance in knowledge-intensive work relies on integrating the ideas and expertise of multiple people, which requires a willingness to speak candidly in a timely manner.

In contrast, it's harder to create change when the goal is stated as "helping people feel safe" or "becoming better listeners." Those things matter, but they're means, not ends. Senior executives buy into the importance of psychological safety when they appreciate its role in solving complex problems.

Still, insight alone doesn't produce behavior change. Experiencing a different way of operating helps. Per sees this as a two-step process. First, help an individual team experience progress on some of its most important challenges by practicing new interpersonal skills in regularly scheduled, safe sessions. Second, help participants who experience making progress on tough issues spread it to other teams, starting with the ones they lead. Encourage them to share stories that portray how candor, vulnerability, and perspective-taking enabled successful

outcomes. As more people start to practice these skills as part of their work, evidence of its effectiveness will grow.

Train both individuals and teams

Per's experience as a basketball player and coach revealed that winning teams undergo two kinds of training: individual skills (drilling, shooting) and team practice (complex games that involve real-time coordination using these skills, along with decisions about when to pass, shoot, or dribble). The same is true for management teams. Individual executives must learn and practice the skills of perspective taking and inquiry that facilitate candid sharing of ideas and concerns. But these skills take hold when teams practice them together, especially as a means to getting the “real work” done. This means participating in generative dialogues — conversations where multiple perspectives are integrated to generate novel solutions for how to move forward — about complex topics, structured and facilitated in a way that allows the team to assess their effectiveness as they go. For example, Per often uses weekly hour-long group sessions to teach people individual skills, punctuated by longer dialogue sessions where they practice their new skills together about once a month.

Incorporate visualization

Visualization is used in various settings ranging from athletes seeking to break a world record to therapists helping individuals alter troubling behaviors. Similarly, in the weekly sessions Per led at SEB, participants were asked to visualize recent situations where they had been successful at perspective taking, speaking candidly, or creating an atmosphere where others were able to engage fully. After sharing these experiences, they were asked to visualize an upcoming situation and carefully walk through how they might act to create the right atmosphere for navigating complex topics or decisions. Visualization techniques emphasize detail; the idea is that by envisioning and writing down

specific, tangible descriptions, people are better able to internalize new skills and practices. Although it's difficult for executives to come up with examples at first, it gets easier over time because they become better at noticing positive examples and more deliberate in their practice of new behaviors.

Normalize vulnerability related to work

It's normal to experience mild anxiety as a consequence of feeling vulnerable. Research on [anxiety training](#) shows that practicing small acts of vulnerability reduces that anxiety. Analogously, Amy has [worked with executives](#) to help them discover that being open (hence, vulnerable) did not result in harm, allowing them to keep increasing the magnitude of the interpersonal risks they felt able to take.

At SEB, Per asked executive teams to identify an important complex topic on which they had been unable to make progress, and facilitated a dialogue that used perspective taking and candor, thereby developing their skills and making progress at the same time. Before engaging in this exercise, he “warmed up” the team to interpersonal risk-taking by presenting safe, low-impact challenges for discussion. This is important — if participants hold back important yet sensitive or uncomfortable information, the dialogue won't produce results.

Focusing on performance, working at both the individual and group level, using visualization, normalizing vulnerability, and (above all) using real problems to develop skills while making progress on thorny issues comprise a powerful approach to altering the climate and capabilities of any team. We admit that this is hard work, but it's what makes it a valuable competitive advantage. Especially in tumultuous times, managers and their teams increasingly depend on candor, speed, and creativity to make progress. Building capabilities related to psychological safety and perspective taking cannot be considered

“basic” but is increasingly a vital part of achieving excellence in challenging business contexts.

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