Leadership

What People Get Wrong About Psychological Safety

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From the Magazine (May–June 2025)

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Summary. Psychological safety—a shared belief among team members that it's OK to speak up with candor—has become a popular concept. However, as its popularity has grown, so too have misconceptions about it. Such misunderstandings can lead to... **more**

Psychological safety, which means having an environment where people feel safe to

As researchers with considerable expertise in this area, we celebrate organizations' recognition that their ability to increase quality, spur innovation, and boost performance depends on their employees' input. Indeed, the research evidence that psychological safety improves performance is extensive and robust. However, as the popularity of psychological safety has grown, so too have misconceptions about it. As a result, many executives and consultants, even those who are ardent supporters of psychological safety, have become frustrated by distorted or incorrect ideas and expectations surrounding it that get in the way of progress. For instance, leaders have told us about constructive debates that were stymied when participants whose ideas received pushback labeled the process psychologically unsafe. This kind of misinterpretation of the term can harm organizations. And if it persists, it can undermine the very purpose of psychological safety: to enhance learning and performance.

Leaders who truly understand what psychological safety is—and isn't—communicate the concept to their teams clearly, stop incorrect assumptions before they gain destructive force, and keep people focused on the value to be gained from candor. We've written this article to aid leaders in that effort. We describe six misconceptions, explaining why each gets in the way and how to counter it, and then offer a blueprint for building the kind of

Nicole, a consultant in the Netherlands, recently told us that she kept hearing clients say things like “We have a psychologically safe team; we know this because we never argue.” As an expert in psychological safety, she recognized this as a red flag. Indeed, thinking that psychological safety is about being nice or feeling comfortable is one of the most common misconceptions. We see it in companies and schools alike. For instance, a graduate student we know asked to shift from in-person to virtual attendance because she found participating in a large class uncomfortable. The accommodation, she said, was important for her psychological safety.

Here’s the problem: Nice in this context is code for “Don’t say what you really think (unless it happens to be nice).” It’s essentially the opposite of candor. Of course, if you think your colleague’s presentation was brilliant and compelling, say so! It will unquestionably be appreciated and foster a positive climate. But if the presentation fell short, it’s important that you say so as clearly and constructively as possible. For organizations to succeed today, their people must be continually learning, and that process is often uncomfortable.

Safety and comfort are not synonymous. Safety is the condition of being protected from danger, harm, or injury. Comfort is a state of ease and freedom from pain. Wanting to be nice, people avoid being honest and, whether they realize it or not, collude in producing ignorance and mediocrity. Because without candid feedback and open sharing of information—bad and good—coordination, quality, and learning on a team or a project suffer. Teams that don’t surface hard truths perform worse than those

serious foreign policy decision. That process contributed to his administration's impressive performance during the Cuban Missile Crisis, in 1962. (See "What You Don't Know About Making Decisions," HBR, September 2001.) Studies of less dramatic work environments show a similar contrast: When people withhold their ideas, questions, and doubts, their team's risk of making mistakes and experiencing failure increases.

We find it helpful to think of psychological safety as a shared sense of *permission for candor.* It's a belief that it's OK to take the interpersonal risks that come with asking questions, admitting mistakes, and disagreeing with a colleague. When psychological safety exists, people believe that sharing hard truths is expected. It allows good debates to happen when they're needed. But it doesn't mean that participants find debates comfortable.

To be clear, we are not advocating for insensitivity. Psychological safety is entirely consistent with kindness, but let's distinguish between being nice and being kind. Nice is the easy way out of a difficult conversation. Kind is being respectful, caring, and honest.

[Misconception 2]

Psychological Safety Means Getting Your Way

Less common but equally problematic is the misconception people have that psychological safety means their views should prevail. A healthcare executive told us that a staff member had complained, "You didn't support my idea in that meeting, and

prevent a defect in a product. It's helpful to think of psychological safety not as a gift for one participant but rather as an environment for the whole team.

Leaders don't need to agree with everyone's input. And they shouldn't tolerate problematic behavior. Sanctions for bullying, harassment, disrespect, and unethical conduct are vital to ensuring a positive learning environment.

[Misconception 3]

Psychological Safety Means Job Security

Shocked by Google's announcement in January 2023 that it was laying off 12,000 employees, multiple workers posted on social media sites that the action was counter to their company's commitment to psychological safety. In a town hall meeting, one Google employee expressed this sentiment out loud.

But psychological safety doesn't mean freedom *from* layoffs. It's freedom *to* be constructively candid. Ironically, the employee demonstrated that psychological safety did exist at Google when he stood up and criticized the company to its senior leaders. He believed he could speak up without risking his career or generating negative reactions from colleagues. He didn't save his views for whispered hallway conversations. (Full disclosure: Both authors have performed paid work for companies named in this article—Amy for Google and Microsoft; Michaela for Google.)

two as being on a spectrum, with psychological safety on one end and accountability for performance on the other. But that's wrong.

Psychological safety and accountability are distinct dimensions. To decide which is more important is to impose a false dichotomy. When both are low, performance and morale clearly suffer. And yes, it is possible to have high levels of psychological safety and low performance standards, though that is certainly not a recipe for excellence. In any uncertain environment, superb performance requires a commitment to both high standards *and* psychological safety. That is because psychological safety enables learning—it helps surface information and knowledge vital for competing in a changing world. (See "The Competitive Imperative of Learning," HBR, July–August 2008.) Nonetheless, extensive research shows that not learning in groups is common. People hide information to save face or to be agreeable or both. And teams fall easily into groupthink—where members don't want to disrupt what they erroneously assume is a consensus.

[**Misconception 5**]

Psychological Safety Is a Policy

In April 2024 the Rhode Island state senate passed Bill 2473A, the Workplace Psychological Safety Act, which sought to create psychologically safe work environments. It enabled employees to sue their employer for damages if it didn't. (As of this writing, the bill hasn't progressed beyond the state senate.) This piece of legislature reflects the common but misguided belief that

In fact, it's more likely to result in leaders being kept in the dark about what's really going on.

Psychological safety, rather than being created by a policy, is built in a group, interaction by interaction. It takes intention and effort to create a climate of candor. It's particularly helpful when leaders consciously use three tools:

Messaging. Leaders should make statements that highlight the challenges of the situation the organization faces.

Modeling. They must also be role models for asking good questions, listening intently, and acknowledging that it's OK not to know all the answers.

Mentoring. Leaders need to give people feedback on their impact —on how well they invite and respond to others' input—and work to minimize the negative consequences anyone on the team suffers from speaking up.

Developing new skills is harder than adopting a new policy. But it can be done. Many companies invest in materials and programs to help their employees acquire skills for fostering psychological safety. Relatedly, many employee surveys include a psychological safety measure by asking people how much they agree or disagree with statements such as, "If you make a mistake in this team, it's not held against you" and "It is safe to take a risk on this team." Ideally, the data collected is used as fodder for conversations about how to keep improving the work environment.

an organization's culture. Hierarchy is deeply ingrained in our psyche. People instinctively care what leaders think; they feel their future may depend on making a positive impression on them. But ultimately, psychological safety is built by everyone—at all levels of the company.

In organization after organization that we have studied, psychological safety varies substantially across groups—even when the organization has a strong corporate culture overall. Some groups have healthy learning environments, and others are crippled by interpersonal fear. (For example, one CFO we know didn't speak up with concerns about a planned merger because he was reluctant to be "the skunk at the picnic." He deeply regretted his silence later when the merger failed—at great cost to the company.) The variance tells us that psychological safety is local.

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Yes, it's both powerful and helpful when senior executives in a company strike a sincere tone of humility and curiosity, conveying that they understand their dependence on others' input. But it's possible to create a motivated, psychologically safe, high-performing team anywhere. Start by focusing on your own team.

learning climate. (See "How the Best Teams Keep Good Ideas Alive," HBR.org, May 18, 2022.)

A Road Map for the Journey Ahead

Equipped with an accurate understanding of what psychological safety truly is, you can employ a few simple practices to help build and reinforce it.

Double down on work goals and why they matter. Putting the focus where it belongs—on the critical goals of the team or organization and the reasons they're important—gets people on the same page. Keep in mind that psychological safety is not the end goal; it's merely an enabler of success. Start by asking questions such as, "What do customers (internal or external) need from us? What will it take to deliver that?" Ironically, talking less about psychological safety and more about the goal and the context and why everyone's input matters is the first step in building psychological safety.

Anouk, a consultant, understood this when she helped leaders of a midsize tech company shift their focus from creating psychological safety (the job for which she was hired) to becoming an effective leadership team in a demanding market. Once they made that shift, psychological safety (measured by an online survey) improved. When they had been focused on psychological safety, they had felt they were supposed to be "really nice to one another," which got in the way of having candid conversations.

Calling attention to what your team is trying to achieve may seem pretty basic. It is. But it's also psychologically powerful. An

Initially she thought, *Don't we all already know the mission?* Then she noticed how his simple reminder made it easier to take intellectual risks, try new things, and overcome the frequent setbacks that came with mastering research and case-method teaching.

Good leaders build psychological safety by talking about the challenges their organization faces or the goals they want it to achieve. When Cindy Rose took over as president of Microsoft Western Europe, in 2020, she found a team in need of a refresh. Wisely choosing to shift the culture through engaging in the work in a new way, she leaned in to CEO Satya Nadella's mission "to empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more." She encouraged her team to become obsessed with listening to customers and delivering products they loved and needed. One team member said Rose had a way of "elevating team ambitions" by focusing "on impact versus activity." With an explicit focus on solving customer problems, the team members could appreciate the need for fast, honest reporting of information from the field, sharing new ideas, and seeking help from one another. In short, they felt empowered to speak up—to have more honest and direct conversations.

Improve the quality of team conversations. Once everyone is on the same page about goals or purpose, the real work can start. Whether spoken, written, synchronous, or asynchronous, conversations are how a lot of work gets done. They're how team members coordinate, make decisions, provide performance feedback, shift course, and celebrate a job well done. It is not a stretch to say that the quality of our conversations determines the

psychological safety. They foster mutual understanding and progress—and create a learning environment as a by-product. They do not necessarily take longer than low-quality conversations. In fact, many low-quality discussions are indirect, repetitive, and frustratingly inefficient. One marker of quality is making progress while using time well.

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Unfortunately, many work conversations—whether for coordination, decision-making, or mentoring—fall short of the mark. Relevant information isn't shared, advocacy and updates drive out inquiry and exploration, and progress is limited. Changing this pattern takes skill and practice, but the effort is worth it: People will walk away from conversations feeling energized—more informed, more aligned, more aware of what needs to be done, and better equipped to do their jobs. People will also discover through direct experience that their fears of negative repercussions for candor were unfounded.

Leaders need to be the architects of high-quality conversations. Here are two examples: At one global retailer not known for psychological safety, a senior operations executive decided to focus on improving the culture of his own team. He set up specific

its culture. At another company a leader was concerned that his team was “too polite.” And so with Anouk’s help, he set up a “gloves off” meeting to practice speaking with candor. He wanted, in his words, “no holding back; everybody is to speak their truth without fear of consequence.” In both examples the leaders explicitly asked their teams to have a new kind of conversation. Doing so helped both teams make progress on their operational goals. This is how psychological safety is built, interaction by interaction.

We have created a simple and practical framework for assessing the quality of a work conversation. (See the exhibit “Is Your Team Having a High-Quality Conversation?”) People can readily assess —while a conversation is underway—a group’s performance along three dimensions: the degree to which people are listening and sharing, the presence of both advocacy and inquiry, and the degree of progress made. If they pay attention to the dynamics taking place, they can correct course as needed. For instance, if you are (or others seem to be) holding back relevant ideas or concerns or feel disengaged, consider pausing to reset. If inquiry is limited, it’s time to insert a good question, such as, “What are we missing? What are you hearing from customers? Who has a different view? If this decision backfired, what would turn out to be the reason?” Finally, if the team doesn’t seem to be making progress, ask if others think it’s struggling too and then work together to get back on track. High-quality conversation is a team sport; it helps when all are willing to do their part to help the team perform.

Attribute	PEOPLE ARE CONTRIBUTING AND LISTENING
Self-assessment questions	• Are people sharing information and opinions candidly? • To what extent do people seem to be holding back and saying only safe things?
What to watch for	**Positive:** Everyone appears engaged in the substance of the discussion. **Negative:** One person or a few people dominate the conversation.
Attribute	ADVOCACY AND INQUIRY ARE BOTH PRESENT
Self-assessment questions	• What's the balance between advocacy (to promote certain ideas) and inquiry (to understand them)? • Are people asking genuine questions that prompt others to respond with their ideas and concerns?
What to watch for	**Positive:** Good questions are frequent and expand understanding. **Negative:** People get stuck trying to prove their original points, regardless of new information.
Attribute	MUTUAL LEARNING AND PROGRESS ARE HAPPENING
Self-assessment questions	• Do I feel that I am gaining understanding of the topic as the conversation goes on? • Does the team seem closer to making a good decision?
What to watch for	**Positive:** The conversation is disciplined, systematic, and data-driven. **Negative:** The conversation goes around in circles.

Institute structures for sharing reflections and tracking progress. Psychological safety is reinforced by structures and

We studied PepsiCo UK a few years ago when it adopted new team practices, including a commitment to discussing work results, insights, and learnings at the end of each week. These progress reports avoided “the big reveal” trap, where people wait until they believe the work is good enough to be shared only to discover that what was produced didn’t fit colleagues’ expectations or assumptions. Sharing incomplete and imperfect output reduced wasted effort—and allowed better coordination and progress.

Rose at Microsoft instituted a weekly “office hours” virtual meeting for people to drop in and discuss whatever was on their minds. She also launched after-action reviews in which the team dug in to discover lessons following a disappointing business result or client interaction. These sessions were playfully dubbed “failure parties.” Inspired by them, the leader of one of the country business units put up a “failure wall” to encourage people to share and learn from stories about taking intelligent risks that didn’t pan out. Structured rituals for reflection like these helped psychological safety deepen and spread.

Sometimes reflection processes cross teams. A sales leader at an insurance company was frustrated with the interactions between his people and the compliance team, so he reached out to its leader to suggest reviewing how they could support each other. The two designed a new process that included regular meetings between the leaders to keep the teams aligned and asking team members to reach out to one another directly instead of going through the leaders. The result, according to the sales leader, was that “life got easier for everyone.” Work was completed faster, and overtime was reduced.

as a passing management fad. Yet a deeper understanding of the concept suggests that the need for psychological safety is here to stay. Creating it may not be easy, and practicing it may not be comfortable. But the pace of change and the level of uncertainty in the business environment make frank, data-driven conversations more valuable than ever.

Timely input, candid feedback, and robust debate are as vital for ensuring innovation as for preventing strategic blunders. Leaders who create the kinds of teams that practice these ways of interacting will be poised to outperform those who do not. Ultimately, psychological safety is about changing the expectations for how we work together to successfully navigate the storms ahead.

A version of this article appeared in the May–June 2025 issue of *Harvard Business Review.*

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