

 AS3

How to develop
**PSYCHOLOGICAL
SAFETY**

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Psychological safety - everyone's business

Psychological safety is crucial in organisations that combine expertise from different fields and where cooperation between different people is part of everyday work.

In a psychologically safe environment, employees feel comfortable presenting new ideas and trying out new approaches, which enhances the capacity for innovation and accelerates the response to changes in the operating environment. Psychological safety promotes challenging existing practices and raising issues, thus improving problem solving and leading to better decisions. When employees feel that their contribution is valued and their voices are heard, their well-being, commitment and motivation grow. In addition to this, the organisation's competitiveness is also strengthened through continuous learning and improvement as mistakes can be learned from openly and without fear.

At AS3, psychological safety is a central theme. Through our work, we want to promote a future where more and more people have a meaningful job and where individuals, organisations, and the society as a whole thrive amid the transformations and changes in working life. In this e-book we will share some useful viewpoints and tools that can significantly improve an organisation's psychological safety and, thereby, create a successful and agile organisation where everyone can shine.

Please note as you read that the term 'manager' in this book refers to any person serving in a supervisory role, regardless of their title.

Enjoy your reading!

The AS3 team

What does
psychological
safety mean
and why is it
important?

“ *Psychological safety is the belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes, and that the teams are safe for interpersonal risk taking.* ”

Amy C. Edmondson
Professor, Harvard Business School

Psychological safety

means that employees feel safe to express their opinions and take risks without fear of being ridiculed, humiliated or subjected to other negative treatment from team members. It is a feeling that one can talk about things directly in a constructive way.

In a psychologically safe team

it is common for members to challenge each other and feel comfortable enough to disagree on things. They don't try to hide their errors, disagreements or conflicts. On the contrary, they address them early - and constructively - together.

In teams with a high level of psychological safety

people are more likely to share information openly, try out new ideas and give each other feedback.

The level of psychological safety in a team

is revealed the moment someone has to choose between keeping quiet or speaking up. Should they point out an error they notice in a plan being worked on? Or should they remain silent fearing the reaction of others if they happen to be wrong?

Psychological safety is dynamic

and depends a lot on who you are working together with. This is why changing project teams can have a significant impact on how an individual experiences psychological safety on a daily basis.

General misconceptions

It doesn't mean that it is nice all the time

Psychological safety is more about creating opportunities for a free exchange of ideas and productive disagreements. In a psychologically safe environment, not everything will feel nice all the time: learning and talking about mistakes can feel unpleasant. On the other hand, in a psychologically safe environment even difficult things can be discussed while respecting and genuinely listening to others. Conflicts in the workplace are inevitable - psychological safety enables the people in conflict to talk about their concerns constructively.

It's not about personality traits

Psychological safety has more to do with the work atmosphere. A psychologically safe work atmosphere affects employees with different kinds of personalities in more or less the same way.

It's not a synonym for trust

Trust has to do with relationships between co-workers. Psychological safety has to do with how an individual expects others to respond to their actions. Because the sense of safety is experienced in group interactions, it is therefore more than just the sum of individual relationships in the group.

Psychological safety does not automatically guarantee a high level of performance

Psychological safety lays the foundation for a more genuine working environment in which people are able to challenge prevailing conditions and work in cooperation, thus leading to greater efficiency. However, psychological safety alone does not guarantee a high level of performance. Clearly defined, meaningful goals and their monitoring get the team to move in the same direction. Psychological safety eliminates barriers that can prevent people from achieving these goals together.

It's not about being nice

It's not about personality traits

It's not a synonym for trust

Psychological safety does not mean lowering performance standards

Benefits

Modern organisations operate in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world. In this kind of environment, organisations that listen to every person's ideas, curiosity and understanding of what is happening in the operating environment and in the organisation are the ones that succeed.

From a success standpoint, psychological safety is crucial in organisations which combine expertise from different fields and where cooperation between different people is part of everyday work. Without the right kind of operational culture, this kind of organisation will not be able to achieve an adequate level of innovation and agility - thus putting it at risk of falling behind its competitors.

Employee

- Increased commitment
- Improved mental health
- Higher job satisfaction

Team

- Greater creativity and innovation
- More sharing of information
- Willingness to talk about problems and improve processes
- Readiness to handle conflicts
- Less conflict

Organisation

- Higher productivity
- Increased error reporting and fewer mistakes
- Lower employee turnover

“

In most organizations nearly everyone is doing a second job no one is paying them for – namely, covering weaknesses, trying to appear their best, and managing others' impressions of them. Imagine recapturing this energy for the good of the organization and its employees.

Robert Kegan & Lisa Laskow Lahey

”

How to
strengthen
psychological
safety?

Active input is necessary

Psychological safety doesn't just happen. Everyone is responsible for its development and it requires a conscious effort from each and every team member and a particular contribution from managers.

Strengthening psychological safety should not be outsourced solely to management. It is also necessary to understand more deeply what promotes - and, above all, what suppresses - psychological safety.

As people, we constantly try to influence how others see us or their opinions of us. We want others to have a positive impression of us, and we try to meet their expectations. At the same time, we unconsciously strive to act in a way that doesn't hurt others or put them in a negative light. All it takes is one person to make a sarcastic comment, roll their eyes or laugh mockingly and we will pull back into our shells and avoid taking any risks.

Active input requires courage: "I'm taking a risk by saying that I don't really understand what they're talking about. They might think I'm dumb."

“

Hiring top experts and talent for an organisation without psychological safety is like putting them in a mental straitjacket. This is how (large) investments in talented staff don't produce the anticipated results.

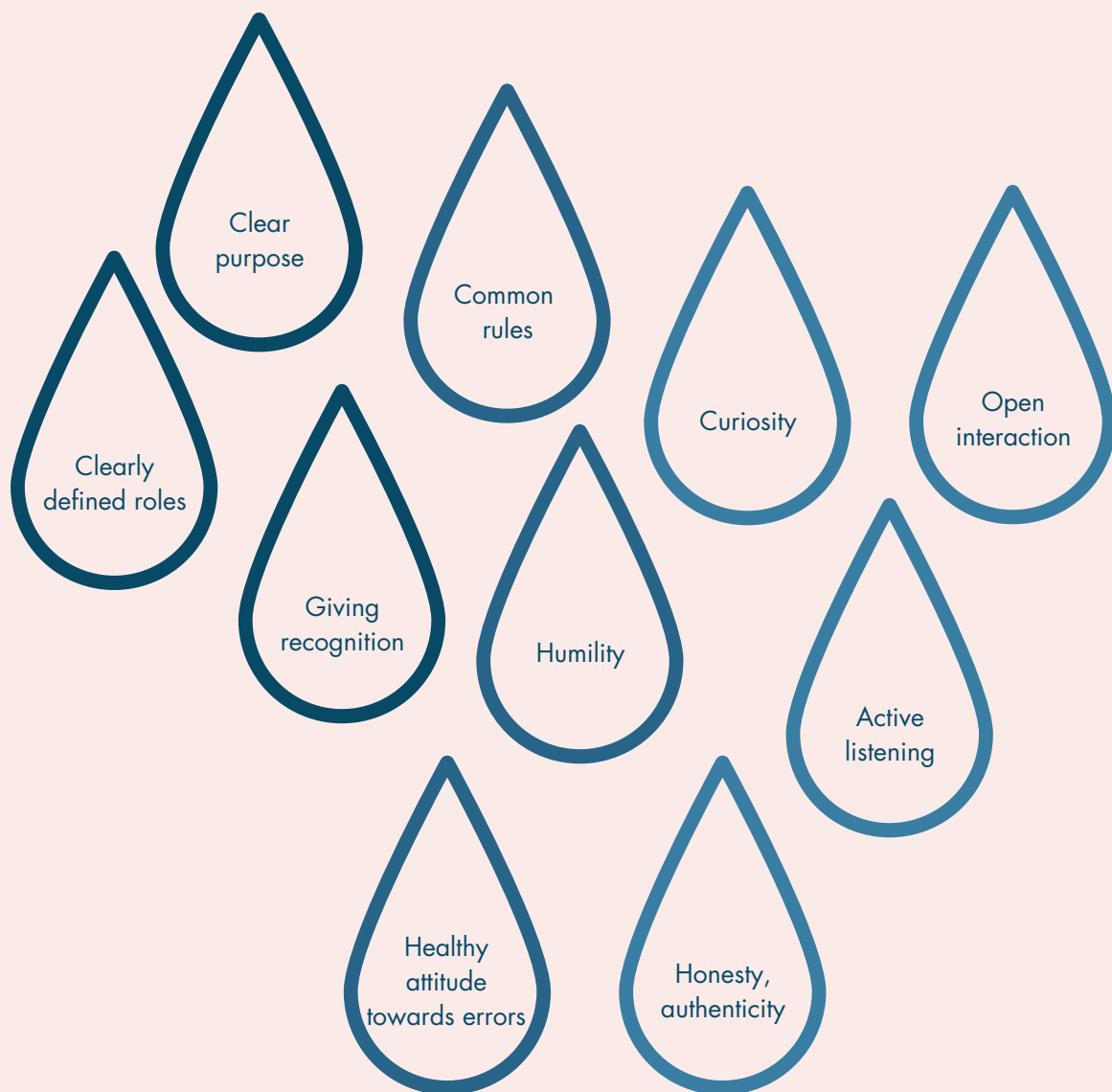
Amy C. Edmondson
Professor, Harvard Business School

”

Ingredients

Psychological safety is a shared responsibility and it's not something created overnight. It is more of a marathon than a sprint. It is important to take one step at a time and not think about how much further you have to go because that may hinder action rather than encourage it.

If there is a high level of psychological safety, you can continue riding the crest of the wave like surfers and further strengthen it. If there is a low level of psychological safety, it will require actively challenging the ways of working and a strong focus on the ingredients needed to develop it.



Key tasks of the manager

1

CREATE THE CONDITIONS

- Lead by example. Psychological safety is strengthened when employees see you being open about your mistakes and insecurities.
- Define clear roles and responsibilities, and agree on common ground rules for handling mistakes and insecurity, as well as the team's interdependence.
- Emphasise the shared purpose of the team, clarify what it means, why it is meaningful and what in it is important to each individual.

Result: A clear purpose and shared expectations for cooperation promote a culture in which people can openly express their thoughts.

2

INVITE PEOPLE TO PARTICIPATE

- Actively ask your employees to share their views and suggestions, both in meetings and in everyday work.
- Be humble, ask good, curious questions and listen: "What do you notice that I might have overlooked?" Talk about uncertainties.
- Create systems and structures that encourage all employees to participate.

Result: Active involvement lowers the normally high threshold for participation.

3

RESPOND CONSTRUCTIVELY

- Express appreciation: "Thank you for mentioning that..."
- Destigmatize mistakes: "It's good to learn from each other's mistakes so we can grow together as a team. Thank you for sharing!"
- Address clear violations of the rules/values.
- Demonstrate that employees can expect appropriate and consistent leadership when mistakes are brought up or ground rules are broken.

Result: By responding appropriately, you will ensure future participation. Getting people to talk is just the first step. The real test is how the manager responds.

Create the conditions in the organisation

Provide managers at all levels of the organisation with opportunities to develop their leadership skills in fostering psychological safety. When we talk about psychological safety, the manager either leads the way or is in the way.

Facilitate workshops on psychological safety and offer training in communication and conflict resolution to enhance your employees' social and interpersonal skills.

Launch initiatives that promote inclusion. This way you will ensure that all voices are heard and respected, regardless of the person's background or identity. Create forums, communication channels or internal networks, where people can share their ideas and feedback on the organisation's processes and culture.

Train managers and employees in how to give constructive feedback. Set common rules for how and when feedback is to be given.

Set up mentoring programmes and prioritise cooperation so that employees can get to know each other.

Establish clearly defined procedures for managing conflicts and harassment situations so that employees can count on these being handled fairly and quickly.

Ensure (anonymous) feedback channels through which employees can share their challenges, concerns and ideas without fearing negative consequences.

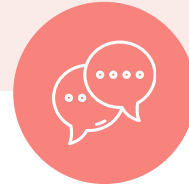
Remember: Building psychological safety is a continuous process that requires commitment from all levels of the organisation. Regularly assess the effectiveness of initiatives and keep an open mind.

Working towards a healthy error culture



Look at mistakes as opportunities for learning

Identify together what you can learn from mistakes. Establish clear guidelines for dealing with mistakes, so that everyone understands what to do when mistakes inevitably occur.



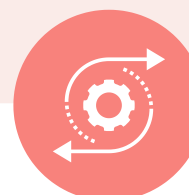
Create opportunities to discuss mistakes

Ensure that there are opportunities to share experiences and to regularly discuss mistakes using positive language. Not in a blaming or victimising way but with the aim of understanding what happened and how similar situations can be prevented in the future. Organise, for example, informal meetings, such as 'Error Friday' and a #mistake-chat-channel.



Organise reflection sessions

In these sessions the team can give feedback on projects, challenging assignments, or particularly busy periods at work: What went well? What could be done differently next time?



Conduct proactive assessments

Imagine that you are in the future looking back at a project that wasn't successful. Discuss why it failed and make the necessary changes.

Language creates reality

Pay attention to how you as a team discuss tasks and projects, as well as mistakes, challenges and disagreements that inevitably arise.

Psychological safety is a culture where we reward vulnerability. Lead by example and share your own failures, insecurities and doubts, and help create a safe space where everyone can participate and share their views.

Remember that this is not about blaming or finding someone to blame, but instead, it's about identifying learning opportunities and doing things better next time.

Does it feel natural for you to say... ?

- *"My mistake, that was a bad idea."*
- *"What can we learn from this together?" (Instead of asking "who did this?")*
- *"On Friday, I made a human error."*
- *"I'm sure I have missed something. I want to hear what you others think."*
- *"This is just my view as a manager. What do you see that I don't?"*
- *"I planned this a bit too quickly and I actually have to change the plan - I'm sorry about that. Now I would like to tell..."*
- *"I'm not convinced that this is the best solution. I would like to explain why..."*
- *"What originally got us to choose this approach for the project?"*

Proactive assessment

Briefly describe the project or task

What were we trying to achieve?

Why did it fail?

Choose the 5 main reasons for failing:

How can we avoid them?

Psychological safety in meetings

10 tips for the manager

1. Don't sit at the end of the table - share power visibly in a new way.
2. Let someone else lead the meeting and break the hierarchy.
3. Give the participants a moment to structure their thoughts on their own and then give everyone a chance to speak.
4. Respect silence and allow some room for reflection and thought during the meeting.
5. Genuinely listen and stop to reflect on your own view before defending it. Avoid censoring your team.
6. Be interested when your employee challenges the status quo. Express your appreciation openly.
7. Show enthusiasm during discussions.
8. Be mindful of strong personalities and ensure that everyone's perspectives are heard.
9. Listen and wait patiently - send a clear message that each individual is important.
10. Give targeted praise and recognition right away.

Four stages
and four
barriers

**to psychological
safety**

Four stages of psychological safety

1: The members feel that they belong to the team, they are comfortable in the group, and they feel wanted and appreciated.

2: The members feel safe to ask questions and learn together. They can try out new things, make (and admit) mistakes and ask for help.

3: The members bring up their own ideas without any fear of belittlement or ridicule.

4: The members can challenge each other's (including the manager's) thoughts and propose even significant changes to ideas, plans, or ways of working.

At what stage are the members of your team currently?

1



I feel that I am part of the team

2



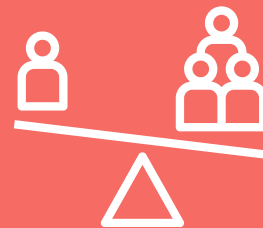
I feel that I am part of a safe learning environment

3



I feel safe to participate

4



I feel safe to challenge things

Four biggest barriers

01

Strong desire for comfort

Indifference toward promoting psychological safety.

Lazy nods, shrugs and silence when you ask for feedback.

This can particularly occur if we don't maintain high performance standards alongside our work on psychological safety



02

Focusing only on successes

We don't pause to reflect on things that didn't go well enough, and we don't learn sufficiently from our mistakes.

If we set aside time to reflect on things that didn't go according to plans, we learn to feel safe in these situations.



03

Motivation based only on financial results

If we are motivated solely by the business outcomes brought by psychological safety, its core purpose is pushed into the background.

We should keep the primary goal in mind: To create a workplace where everyone can be themselves and give their best.



04

Authoritarian leadership style

Excessive self-confidence in management and a culture of "I'll tell you what to do" does not encourage feedback or employee participation.

Psychological safety requires leading by example. This demonstrates an understanding of how to involve, motivate and bring out the best in employees.



Determine the
**psychological
safety level of
the team**

Psychological safety questionnaire

How would you rate the psychological safety of your team? What do you base your rating on? Studies show that managers systematically overestimate the level of their team's psychological safety.

You can use the following statements together with the employees to get everyone's perspectives. Ask them to share their views on the statements below, for example, through an anonymous questionnaire and use the results to discuss the topics in a team and/or one-on-one meetings.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. When one of us makes a mistake at work, we don't use it against each other.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
2. We are good at discussing difficult topics and solving problems together.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
3. We don't reject others because they are different from us.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
4. We appreciate it when someone does something new, takes a risk or tries something different.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
5. It's easy for me to ask for help and accept it.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
6. No one consciously acts in a way that belittles my efforts and contributions.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7. I feel that my skills and talents are appreciated and put to use.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Self-assessment for **the manager**

What actions can you take to promote psychological safety in your workplace?

To a low extent

To some extent

To a high extent

Create the conditions

As a manager, how much do I talk about mistakes in the right way?
(For example, by emphasising small mistakes as opportunities for growth or highlighting that it can be difficult to get things right the first time when trying something new).

How much do I clarify why our department's work is important, what the benefits of our work output are, and for whom?

Am I addressing what is at stake for our team?

Invite people to participate

Do I express clearly enough that, as a manager, I don't believe I know all the answers?

How much do I ask open-ended questions for which I genuinely hope for and expect answers?

How much do I switch between closed questions and open-ended questions?

Do I create situations where my employees can have open discussions about their ideas and concerns?

Respond constructively

How much do I listen attentively and let others know that I value what they have to say?

How much do I praise or thank my employees when they ask for advice?

How much do I ensure that people find it easy to come to me with bad news?

How much do I handle violations of psychological safety in my department in a way that positively influences future behaviour?

Source: Karen Christina Spuur: *Ledelse på tværs - skab synergi og slip potentialet løs mellem generationer*

Psychological safety checklist



Psychological safety means believing that one won't be punished or humiliated when talking about their mistakes, doubts, questions, differing opinions and ideas.



As people, we don't automatically say what we are thinking. Creating psychological safety in an organisation requires conscious focus on the topic.



Psychological safety is a shared responsibility, but managers and HR play a key role.



Focus attention on the sharing of experiences and regularly create opportunities to discuss mistakes using positive language.



Managers can enhance psychological safety by admitting their own mistakes and insecurities, creating space for open discussion on psychological safety, inviting people to participate and responding constructively.



Managers systematically overestimate the level of their team's psychological safety.



Strengthen the development of psychological safety by training managers and the entire staff, as well as through everyday practise.



Changing project teams can influence how an individual experiences psychological safety in their daily work.

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AS3 is a Nordic organisation with locations in Denmark,
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