

SUMMARY ARTICLE

Am I Safe? Exploring The Need for Psychological Safety in the Singapore Public Service and How Leaders Can Promote it.

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Introduction

Psychological safety is a concept that has received much academic and mainstream attention, due to its positive links with team performance and innovation. In this complex, ever-changing, and uncertain environment, the Public Service must be able to leverage on the benefits of psychological safety to remain responsive and adaptive. This article looks at the concept of psychological safety, the impact it has on employees, and how that in turn affects team and organisational performance. Finally, some suggestions are provided on how leaders can create psychological safety in their teams.



What is psychological safety?

According to Amy Edmondson, a ground-breaking expert on psychological safety, psychological safety at work describes people's beliefs about how others will respond, and what are the consequences when they put themselves on the line by engaging in interpersonally risky behaviour such as asking questions, seeking feedback, reporting mistakes, and proposing new ideas.

In today's dynamic and complex environment, the benefits of having psychological safety in teams are not simply "good-to-haves", but are essential for individual, team, and organisational success.

How does psychological safety affect teams?

When there is psychological safety in a team, individuals are more certain that their team members would not respond negatively, or there would not be consequences on their self-image, status, or career when they engage in constructive but interpersonally risky behaviours. Individuals tend to "speak up more", sharing more information and knowledge, asking for help, admitting mistakes, suggesting improvements, and initiating the development of new products and services.

Having psychological safety does not imply that team members have close relationships in a cosy environment that is free from conflict. In a psychologically safe environment, conflict occurs in a constructive manner, where team members feel safe to disagree, spend less time regulating interpersonal relations, are less focused on self-censorship and self-protection, and have productive problem-solving discussions that enable the team to achieve shared goals and team learning.

When psychological safety does not exist, team members believe that conflict creates too much risk, and anything that creates conflict should be avoided. It becomes challenging for individuals to express thoughts that are against the majority of the team. Even when individuals are motivated to speak up, the risk to their self-image, status, and career inhibits their ability to do so. In such circumstances, the desire for harmony and conformity may be strong, they may not speak up, and this can easily result in irrational or sub-optimal decisions.

What happens when there is psychological safety?

Psychological safety plays a crucial role in

- 1 encouraging employees' voice,
- 2 catalysing organisational learning, and
- 3 innovation. Without it, ideas go unshared, lessons go unlearnt, and opportunities are missed.



Voice behaviours

Voice behaviours describe people's expression of constructive opinions, concerns, or ideas, more commonly known as 'speaking up'. Psychological safety encourages voice behaviours that are aimed at improvement, such as when employees make suggestions about new ways of working, as well as voice behaviours aimed at reducing harm, such as raising concerns about matters that could be detrimental to the organisation.

In the knowledge economy, issues are complex and require diverse expertise, and as a result upward communication is vital. In the Public Service, officers need to feel safe to challenge the status quo, identify problems or opportunities for improvement, and offer ideas to improve organisational well-being. In the absence of psychological safety, employees are silent, which can have devastating effects. Organisational learning is inhibited, organisational innovation stagnates, and organisational effectiveness suffers. Corporate misconduct and safety hazards go unnoticed, disasters occur, and consequences can be fatal.

Within a team, leaders do not always possess the necessary or correct information to make the appropriate decisions, and must depend on the team. Team members' willingness to speak up and share information, thoughts, and ideas is therefore critical to the team's learning and success.



Organisational learning

Organisational learning allows organisations to remain responsive and adaptive in the face of disruption and change. Psychological safety catalyses organisational learning by encouraging helpful behaviours such as information-sharing, collaboration, and feedback-seeking. Learning in organisations includes activities such as seeking out new information, speaking up to test assumptions, taking time to seek new ways to improve work processes, and sharing and combining knowledge.

When people are confronted by their lack of knowledge, tackle something unknown, or make mistakes, they may feel vulnerable. Additionally, admitting errors or asking for help may make people feel interpersonally threatened and resort to defensiveness, and this inhibits learning. A psychologically safe environment, however, allows people to speak up about their mistakes, test their assumptions, and seek help because the barriers to learning, such as fear, uncertainty, and defensiveness, have been removed. In this way, learning behaviours are catalysed, translating to learning for the entire organisation.



Innovation

One of the most important factors in encouraging innovation is creating a climate where innovative ideas can be developed and implemented, where employees feel safe to take interpersonal risks, get involved with organisational transformations, openly discuss problems, suggest new ideas, and be proactive with those ideas. In teams where innovation is key and exploration is vital, psychological safety provides opportunities and protection to pursue risky and novel initiatives. This leads to new ideas, better production and improvements to service, better implementation of innovative ideas, and finally, more effective performance. On its own, psychological safety is a necessary but insufficient condition to create high levels of innovation, but it does so by enabling vital behaviours to occur, such as learning, voicing, and collaboration.

How can leaders create psychological safety?

It is not an easy task for a leader to create psychological safety, having to hold the tension between creating safety and maintaining performance. However, the team leader has a significant impact on perceptions of psychological safety, and it is important for them to act as a catalyst to achieve psychological safety. Furthermore, since safety fluctuates over time, leaders need to continually work to maintain it in their teams.

Here are some actionable steps that leaders can take to create psychological safety:

1 Pay attention to psychological safety

Keep psychological safety in mind when you are working in your team; does there appear to be warning signs that the team may not be as safe as you think? Observations and casually asking team members on their thoughts on the status of the team can also be useful. Another approach could be using a measure of psychological safety.

Leadership status can also affect leaders' perception of safety, where supervisors tend to feel more safety compared to their team members' and followers. Measurement can help you obtain a more accurate idea of the level of safety within your team.

2 Be Accessible

Make yourself available and approachable, reduce the perceived barriers between you and your team members. This helps encourage questions and discussions.

- When a leader communicates that they have 'an open door policy', it signals to employees that their thoughts and problems are welcome for discussion. However, when a leader is inaccessible, it gives employees the impression that discussion is not welcomed. However, stating that you have 'an open door policy' may be insufficient if it is passive. Leaders must proactively seek out, converse, and invite input from their team to truly enact 'an open door policy'.



3 Encourage everyone to give their input

Ask your team members for their input. Team members will feel like their input is welcomed, that they are able to voice their opinions and in turn help them feel more psychologically safe.

- Invite questions and feedback, with non-defensive responses.
- The whole point of having a team is to bring different experiences and perspectives to the group – so ask for their input and listen with curiosity rather than with a critical ear.
- Everyone should participate in discussions. If someone is not joining in, ask for their input. If one individual is dominating a meeting, privately ask them to help in encouraging everyone to participate.
- Create a shared document where team members can add topics to the agenda for discussion in the next meeting. This allows everyone a chance to bring up issues for the whole team's attention.

4 Encourage everyone to contribute

You can't solve all the team's problems. Give the team the space to tackle problems and issues themselves.

- This goes beyond just getting your team members input, this is about having them take an active and participative role in the team.
- Make everyone a leader with responsibility in the team - everyone plays a role in the success of the team.
- Create roles for everyone on the team (e.g., moderating discussions, taking notes, creating action items).
- Create a practice of participation and also have team take ownership over the tasks.
- Establish processes and allow team members to drive them.



5 View conflict as a collaborator not an adversary

Good things can come out of conflict – you hear alternative viewpoints and it prevents ‘group think’.

- Task conflict is okay, avoid relationship conflict.
- Alternative views are welcome, but not sacred. Allow for respectful debate and discussion.
- Team members have to show civility in the face of alternative views.
- Attending to what others contribute and responding with consideration not only reduces anxiety but encourages creative thinking.
- One throw away remark can disintegrate the established psychological safety, ground rules may help. Contract with team regarding rules for conversations – to allow respectful debate.

6 Model openness and fallibility

Team members are likely to mimic the behaviour of their leader. Model vulnerability and fallibility, this can reduce the counterproductive barriers created by difference of status between the leader and team members.

- Team members who hear their leader admit to the group that they made a mistake are likely to remember this the next time they make mistakes and feel more comfortable bringing this up.
- Let nothing be sacred. We all have blind spots. Encourage team members to give you honest feedback about your performance
- Admit when you don’t have all the answers, but commit to finding out more. Gaps can only be filled in once they have been identified.
- Publicly own the mistakes of the past. The path of progress is paved with humility and resolve.



7 Replace blame with curiosity

When things go wrong and mistakes are made rather than seeking to blame individuals, instead use it as a learning opportunity.

- Blameless post-mortems/after-action review: explore what happened, what went wrong, and how we can improve in the future.
- Maintain the blameless mind-set – coach team to use ‘we’ language. You are one team. Fail together, succeed together.
- However, the type of mistake a team member makes is important. There is a difference between well intentioned mistakes and blameworthy acts. Not all mistakes are acceptable.
 - Blameworthy acts:
 - Reckless behaviour
 - Disrespectful behaviour
 - Knowingly violating standards
 - Failure to learn overtime

8 Make room for failure

Make sure the team knows that failure is part of the learning process. When trying something new, you can do all the right things but still face failure.

- Create processes to allow experimentation (such as pilot programmes) to mitigate risk while innovating.
- “Learn-how” activities—experimental activities such as pilot projects, dry runs, and problem-solving cycles.
- When people know there are processes in place to act as a ‘safety-net’ to minimise risk, they will feel more comfortable taking appropriate risks to improve products and the organisation.

9 Reward innovative thinking and ideas

Even if it doesn’t succeed, celebrate those out of the box ideas and initiatives, even if the pilot fails.

- Attempts at innovation, whether they succeed or fail, should be acknowledged and celebrated. This helps encourages people to share their innovation ideas and be less likely to let fear of failure be a barrier to innovation.

Conclusion

The interest in psychological safety in the media and academia is not a passing fad but an essential factor in the success of organisations and the public service. It is not a 'good to have' factor but something that can create a climate that allows employees to take interpersonal risk without the fear of ridicule or backlash. Without its presence in working teams throughout the public service, unique information would not be shared, issues would not be highlighted, risks would not be taken, learning would not occur, and at its worst, a lack of psychological safety could even have fatal consequences.

The Singapore public service strives to be one that is continually adaptive and innovative, that harnesses changing technologies to ensure its continued success into SG100 and beyond. To achieve this, the public service cannot rest on its laurels and simply maintain the status quo. We need public officers that are able to step out of their comfort zone, take risks, and continually learn and adapt, but this is not possible if they believe that these behaviours are not safe. To create this culture that can nurture the public service of the future, we need leaders to step up and be the catalyst for change. By taking actionable steps, such as being accessible, modelling vulnerability, encouraging everyone to contribute and give their input, leaders can create the climates that help their teams and organisations remain adaptive and resilient in the face of the ever changing and complex environment we must operate in.





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