

Erosion of Psychological safety at workplace: Strategic interventions to address the issue.

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ABSTRACT: *The present day workforce which comprises of Gen X, Y and Z at various levels, have a shared requirement in terms of workplace safety and psychological safety and they consider it to be of utmost importance. Outcomes of an unsafe environment in terms of failing, relearning, questioning and sharing is explicitly indicated through burnout, depression and high attrition rates. It is imperative that a culture of safe environment has to be developed at the top level and should be nurtured at the bottom most level of any organization.*

This conceptual paper analyses the need to have psychological safety at workplace, the root cause for a psychologically unsafe environment, the strategies and measures which organizations can develop to abate the issue and foster a conducive environment for the overall development of individuals while creating a safe space to learn and grow. This paper could further lead to an empirical study to be conducted in various industries and can be tested for various industry specific factors as well as common factors affecting psychological safety at workplace.

KEY WORDS: *Psychological safety, failure, organizational trust, learning, safety violation*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Scenario 1: Ramesh Kamat is a young engineer specialized in the field of electronics and communication and has joined an IT company as a Project Associate. With a few years of experience in a similar field, he was able to adapt well to the work culture in the new organization. Ten months into the organization, Ramesh started taking leaves frequently on the pretext of illness. This was a backlash of an incident that happened at his company.

As a project associate Ramesh had to check into the system specifications of the product and give primary approval. That was further vetted by senior engineers and the project head. Ramesh identified a glitch in the specifications which would be detrimental if not rectified and replaced with corrected specs. He diligently put this across in his feedback and escalated the issue to the Project head. The vendor of that project was a big company and their investment being huge, Ramesh's company did not want to ruffle the feathers by asking them to modify the specifications. Ramesh was called to a meeting and asked to change the report and give a clean chit. Also, one statement of the Project head was disturbing to Ramesh. "You are new to this company Ramesh, you must remember that there are more experienced engineers here. We definitely know what is good in the interest of the company". Ramesh was in shock and felt humiliated.

Scenario 2: Rajesh Nair is a Global Supply Chain Manager(IT) who joined a large globalised MNC after having successfully completed his Masters from a reputed top tier university. With a few years of experience in Operations within the same organisation, Rajesh was confident of succeeding in his new role. In contrast to the communication made to him during the hiring and much against the expectations set, his job was not commensurate with his education and experience. While he continued to fulfil the tasks, Nair provided ideas on improvement to optimize operations within the team which was met with rebuke and statements such as "Do you even know how this team functions? We cannot just change things at the whim of one individual"

Persistent lack of any change in the environment drove Nair to stop caring about the impact of his work; he stopped contributing to strategic opportunities since his ideas were not considered of value. Nair progressively reduced the effort and time towards his work, leading to more rebuke and punitive measures such as micro-management and strong verbal/written reprimands. Where did things go wrong?

Incidents similar to the above mentioned scenarios are rampant in the corporate world. Be it the manufacturing sector or the IT industry, common violations in the guise of simple issues underscore the

importance of psychological safety in the workplace. It's not just a "nice-to-have"; it's essential for fostering trust, collaboration, and innovation within teams and organizations. The role of leadership is to create a positive environment where an employee feels empowered to speak up, take risks and contribute their optimal.

1.1 Discussion: Psychological Safety at the Workplace

The present day dynamic industry is characterized by a highly competitive environment and demanding work conditions. As a result, ensuring the psychological well-being of employees has become an essential aspect of maintaining a productive and healthy workforce. This article aims to explore the concept of psychological safety at the workplace discuss common violations that undermine it, examine the consequences of such fallouts, and provide leadership strategies for preventing its erosion.

The foundation of research on Psychological safety dates way back to the early 60's when Schein & Bennis among various other earlier studies, conducted preliminary research on organizational change. They defined Psychological safety as a construct related to the capability of an individual to feel secure and free to ideate and express to bring in change. (Schein & Bennis's, 1965). Psychological safety is generally defined as an atmosphere where one can freely express themselves without having any concerns about embarrassment or retribution (Amy C Edmondson, 2014)

Gallo defines 'Psychological safety' as "A shared belief held by members of a team that it's OK to take risks, to express their ideas and concerns, to speak up with questions, and to admit mistakes — all without fear of negative consequences." (Gallo, 2023). Extensive empirical studies have been conducted in this field in different cultural contexts. It is understood that the positive outcome of psychological safety is enabling performance; better organizational learning; and productive communication (Amy & Zhike, 2014). A safe working environment is one wherein an employee can openly discuss, suggest, correct, or ideate without being judged, reprimanded, or humiliated. A safe space is one where the intent of the leaders and team should be "Do no harm" (Tammy Maclaustad, 2023)

In psychologically safe work environments there exists open communication, trust, and mutual respect among team members and between employees and leaders. It has an environment that fosters a high calibre of innovation while accepting mistakes as "learning experiences" rather than negatively curbing creative exploration by punishing failure or perceived failure. Every individual should feel comfortable expressing diverse perspectives, challenging existing norms, and taking risks without the fear of being ridiculed, marginalized, or any negative repercussions.

The two scenarios discussed at the beginning explain how isolated incidents like that can be adversarial to the clear definition of Psychological safety at workplace. Teams are essentially the eco-space where the culture of safety has to be established. This transcends only from the organization culture which builds this into the system at every level. The four pillars of Psychological safety at workplace and especially in teams are

1.2 Why should a workplace be psychologically safe?

Though hybrid work and flexi work has become a norm today, psychological safety permeates all modes of functioning and organizations have to create an atmosphere of trust and positivity for individuals to work without fear. All processes and policy should integrate the essence of psychological safety in order to ensure that it is followed. It must be woven into the threads of organization culture and the outcomes could be:

Builds Trust and Mutual Respect: Ensuring that employees have a psychologically safe workplace informs them that their contributions and words are valued consistently. It imbues confidence that the rules of the land will not be changed arbitrarily based on individual nuances or whims. "Given that assurance, followers become more willing to stick their necks out, make an extra effort, and put themselves on the line to help their leaders achieve goals." (O'Toole & Bennis, 2009)

Optimal Decision Making: Employees feel more valued and are comfortable voicing contradicting opinions that allows for a holistic decision making process. This gives an opportunity for all ideas, consent and dissent to be productively tabled and addressed to ensure complete buy-in from all stakeholders.

Organizational Transparency: Creating a Psychologically safe environment ensures that all tiers of management/leadership are kept accountable to the goals of the organization. This facilitates employees to call out incorrect behaviour, irrespective of the organizational level of the offender or the nature of the offense. Heightened accountability at higher levels increases ownership at lower rungs of the organisation, directly improving performance and efficiency.

Continuous Learning: An environment where employees can freely discuss unpalatable information or contradictory opinions forces constant learning to adapt and address conceptually difficult situations on a regular basis. This facilitates knowledge sharing that can contribute to efficient problem solving processes. As an unnamed manager was quoted "The only messenger I would shoot is the one who comes in late"

1.3 Primary contributors to Violation of Psychological Safety

Lack of trust and respect: When there is a lack of trust and respect within a team or organization, psychological safety is compromised. This can occur due to hierarchical structures, favoritism, discrimination, or the absence of transparent and fair processes. When employees perceive unfair treatment or feel undervalued, it creates an environment of fear and inhibits their willingness to speak up or contribute their ideas.

Fear of retaliation: If employees believe that speaking up or challenging ideas may lead to negative consequences, such as retribution or career setbacks, they are less likely to feel psychologically safe. This fear can result from a history of punitive actions or a culture that does not support dissenting viewpoints. When individuals fear the repercussions of voicing their concerns, they may opt for silence or conformity instead.

Unclear expectations: When expectations regarding behaviour, performance, or decision-making are unclear or constantly changing, individuals may feel anxious and uncertain about taking risks or expressing their thoughts openly. Ambiguity in roles and responsibilities can create an environment of confusion and reluctance to voice opinions or contribute ideas.

Micro aggressions and bullying: Subtle forms of aggression, such as micro aggressions, exclusion, or bullying, can significantly undermine psychological safety. These behaviours create hostile environments that discourage open communication and collaboration. When employees experience or witness such behaviours, it erodes their sense of safety and inhibits their willingness to share their perspectives or take risks.

Lack of acknowledgment: Failing to acknowledge employees' contributions can contribute to a lack of psychological safety and can be construed as a form of humiliation. Employees may hesitate to take risks or share ideas if they feel that their efforts will not be recognized or appreciated. Without adequate feedback and recognition, individuals may feel undervalued and reluctant to speak up or contribute to the collective effort.

1.4 Consequences of Psychological Safety Violations

Decreased creativity and innovation: When psychological safety is compromised, employees are less likely to share new ideas or engage in creative problem-solving. Fear of criticism or ridicule stifles innovation, leading to missed opportunities for growth and improvement. When employees do not feel safe to express their ideas, organizations miss out on diverse perspectives and potential breakthroughs.

Reduced collaboration and teamwork: In an unsafe environment, collaboration suffers as individuals are reluctant to contribute their expertise or engage in healthy debates. This lack of collaboration hampers teamwork, lowers morale, and impedes collective goal achievement. When individuals feel apprehensive about sharing their thoughts or engaging in open dialogue, it becomes challenging to foster a collaborative work culture.

Diminished employee engagement and satisfaction: When employees do not feel psychologically safe, they may disengage from their work, leading to decreased productivity, job satisfaction, and commitment to the organization. This, in turn, can result in higher turnover rates and difficulties in attracting and retaining top talent. When employees feel unsupported or unwelcome, their motivation and dedication suffer, negatively impacting overall organizational performance.

Impaired mental health and well-being: Violations of psychological safety can have detrimental effects on individuals' mental health, leading to increased stress, anxiety, and burnout. This not only affects employees' well-being but also impacts their performance and overall organizational climate. When individuals are constantly worried about negative consequences or facing a hostile work environment, their mental health and overall quality of life suffer.

Perceived Failure/Imposter Syndrome: In unsafe environments, with unclear expectations and a lack of feedback, it is easy for an individual to consider their contributions a failure or un-impactful to the organization's goals and direction. In such cases, an individual may develop a more severe case of Imposter Syndrome where they start questioning their worth and slide into an apathetic mindset.

II. Strategies for preventing the erosion of psychological safety

As Kahn states, people bring not just their self to the organization, but are attached physically and emotionally and that is reflected in the level of value addition on their roles, (Kahn, 1990). Organizations have to identify this involvement and give due respect to the same. For an individual to contribute fully, he/she must be provided with the right organization culture, proper leadership and a conducive atmosphere to grow. Some strategies which can be a game changer to provide a psychologically safe place for employees to work are as follows:

Cultivate a culture of trust and respect: Organizations should prioritize building a culture based on trust, respect, and fairness. This includes fostering open communication, valuing diverse perspectives, and promoting ethical and inclusive behaviours at all levels. Leaders and managers should model these behaviours and encourage employees to express their opinions and concerns without fear of reprisal.

Lead by example: Leaders play a crucial role in creating and maintaining psychological safety. They should demonstrate vulnerability, actively listen to employees, and encourage open dialogue. Leaders who openly admit mistakes, encourage learning from failures and appreciate different perspectives create an environment where individuals feel safe to take risks and share their ideas.

Establish clear expectations and guidelines: Providing clear guidelines and expectations regarding behaviour, performance, and decision-making can help mitigate uncertainties and reduce anxiety. When individuals understand what is expected of them, they are more likely to feel confident in expressing their thoughts and taking calculated risks.

Foster a feedback-rich environment: Regular and constructive feedback is essential for psychological safety. Encourage feedback at all levels, emphasizing its importance for growth and improvement. Managers should provide timely feedback to employees, recognizing their contributions and addressing areas for improvement. Feedback should be specific, actionable, and delivered in a supportive manner.

Invest in training and development: Organizations should invest in training programs that promote empathy, active listening, conflict resolution, and emotional intelligence. These skills can help employees and leaders create an atmosphere of psychological safety, where everyone feels valued, heard, and respected.

III. Conclusion

While there is a growing awareness of the importance of psychological safety, several challenges persist in every sector. Stigma surrounding mental health issues, cultural barriers, and resource constraints can hinder the implementation of comprehensive policies. However, the increasing emphasis on employee well-being also presents an opportunity for organizations to differentiate themselves in a competitive job market and attract top talent. The recognition of the significance of psychological safety is a positive step towards creating healthier, more productive work environments. Through the implementation of policies and initiatives that prioritize employee well-being, companies have the potential to not only enhance their bottom line but also contribute to a more inclusive and compassionate work culture. This paper can further lead to testing the psychological safety level in various industries and organizations by developing a tool to measure the same.

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