



Building Psychological Safety at Work

COMMONWEALTH MANAGERS' ASSOCIATION

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What is Psychological Safety?

- ▶ A shared belief that the environment is conducive to interpersonal risks: asking for help, making a mistake, criticizing a project.
- ▶ It is not:
 - ▶ being nice or soft
 - ▶ being comfortable
 - ▶ guaranteed applause
 - ▶ permission to whine or slack off

Why is it Important?

- ▶ **High-performing teams** – People share information openly, which improves decision-making.
- ▶ **Innovation** – New ideas surface more easily when people aren't afraid of being judged.
- ▶ **Learning and adaptability** – Mistakes are discussed, not hidden, which speeds up improvement.
- ▶ **Engagement and retention** – Employees feel respected and valued, making them more likely to stay and contribute.
- ▶ **Better communication and fewer errors** – Particularly important in fields like healthcare, social services, government, and training.

What the Data Says

- ▶ Project Aristotle was a 2012–2016 Google study of 180+ teams that identified psychological safety as the #1 driver of team success.
- ▶ Just 3 out of 10 employees strongly agreed that their opinions count at work. 2025 Gallup engagement survey data,



Today's Workforce

Employees Need Four Things:

- ▶ Willingness to help
- ▶ Inclusion and diversity
- ▶ Attitude to risk and failure
- ▶ Open conversation

So,
What's the
Difference?

Psychological Safety

Trust

Mattering

Diversity and Inclusion

Partner: How do you Handle...

- ▶ Questions?
- ▶ Disagreement?
- ▶ Mistakes?
- ▶ New ideas?

Assessing level of Psychological Safety

WITHOUT:

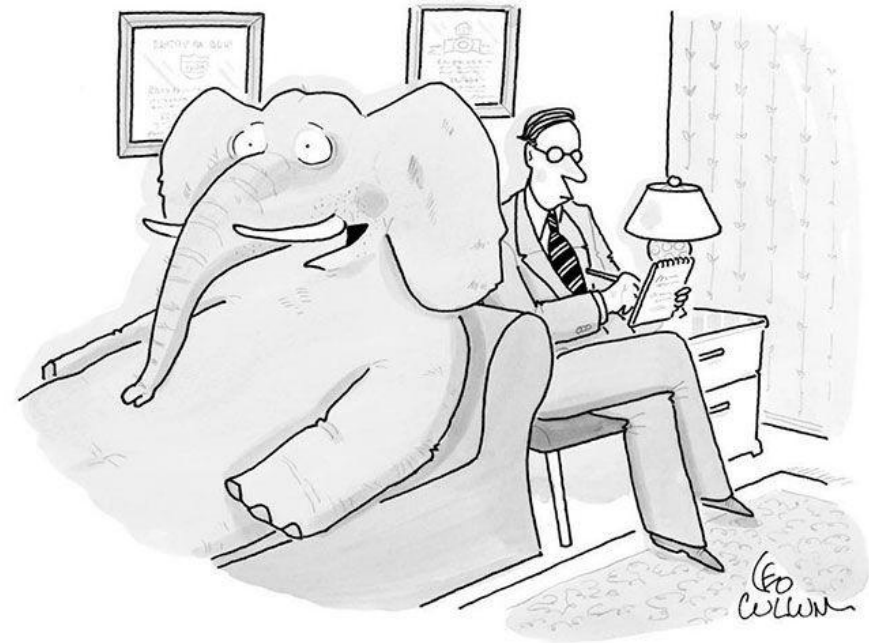
- ▶ Silence or minimal participation
- ▶ Only a few voices dominate
- ▶ Tension, guarded body language
- ▶ Blame, defensiveness, or fear
- ▶ Side conversations after meetings
- ▶ Problems hidden, not discussed

WITH:

- ▶ Open, respectful conversation
- ▶ Questions and ideas shared freely
- ▶ Everyone contributes
- ▶ Calm, engaged body language
- ▶ Issues surfaced early
- ▶ Collaboration and curiosity

Barriers to Psychological Safety

- Culture (e.g., strict hierarchy)
- Fear of judgment
- Power imbalance
- Negative past experiences
- Disrespectful communication
- Time pressure
- Fear of mistakes
- Unclear expectations
- Lack of inclusion
- Inconsistent leadership



“I’m right there in the room, and no one even acknowledges me.”

Leader Behaviors that Matter

- ▶ Self Aware
- ▶ Approachable
- ▶ Trustworthy
- ▶ Growth Mindset
- ▶ Inclusive
- ▶ Courage
- ▶ Influence

What Can Leaders Do?

- ▶ Invite input intentionally (“Who sees it differently?”)
- ▶ Respond with curiosity, not defensiveness
- ▶ Thank people for raising risks or mistakes
- ▶ Model fallibility (“I might be missing something...”)
- ▶ Set clear norms for communication and participation
- ▶ Close the loop so people know their input mattered

What Can Peers Do?

- Speak up and ask questions
- Listen without interrupting; be attentive
- Include quieter teammates
- Appreciate others for raising concerns
- Admit mistakes and share learning

Creating Psychological Safety in a Hybrid Environment

▶ **In-Room Behaviors**

- Start with quick check-ins
- Invite remote voices early
- Avoid side conversations
- Keep body language open and attentive
- Summarize in-room comments for remote participants

▶ **Remote-Friendly Behaviors**

- Use chat, polls, and shared docs for equal input
- Ensure clear audio/video access
- Call on quieter remote voices intentionally
- Share decisions transparently after meetings
- Follow through consistently to build trust

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Creating **Psychological Safety** in the
Workplace for Learning,
Innovation, and Growth

Resources