

# The Complete Guide to Psychological Safety





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# Introduction

## Are you approaching culture by **design**, or by default?

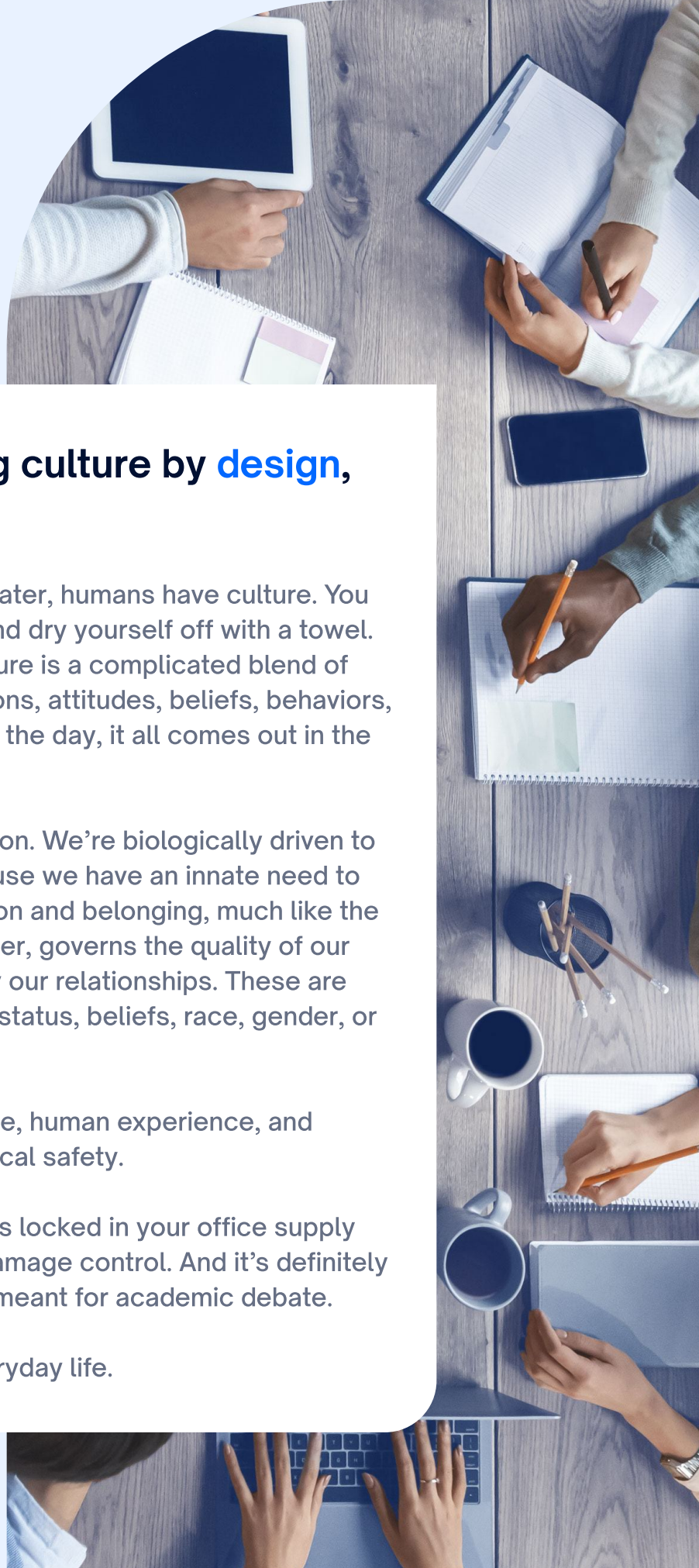
The same way that fish have water, humans have culture. You can't just step out of culture and dry yourself off with a towel. You're in it, and it's in you. Culture is a complicated blend of values, assumptions, perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and customs. But at the end of the day, it all comes out in the way we interact.

We, as humans, crave interaction. We're biologically driven to connect with each other because we have an innate need to belong. The need for connection and belonging, much like the need for food, shelter, and water, governs the quality of our interactions, and consequently our relationships. These are needs that exist regardless of status, beliefs, race, gender, or religion.

At the heart of all of this: culture, human experience, and interaction, we find psychological safety.

No, it's not a concept that stays locked in your office supply closet and pulled out during damage control. And it's definitely not just a theoretical concept meant for academic debate.

It's an integral part of your everyday life.





# So what is **psychological safety**, really?

We'll explain the concept in a couple of different ways throughout this guide. But this is the introduction, so we can't tell you everything right away.

All you need to know right now is that, at its core, we can think about psychological safety as a culture of rewarded vulnerability. But it also has four progressive stages that make its definition practical and actionable. Teams progress through these stages as they intentionally reward the acts of vulnerability of their colleagues.

Stage 1: Inclusion Safety



Stage 2: Learner Safety



Stage 3: Contributor Safety



Stage 4: Challenger Safety



Psychological safety is the key to mending broken interactions and creating cultures of rewarded vulnerability in every social setting. Yes, we use the workplace as our primary example in this book, but that's because the primary benefits of psychological safety have unique workplace dividends.

When you respect your teams' innate humanity and give them permission to engage across psychological safety's four stages, you create sanctuaries of inclusion and incubators of innovation. People will feel safe to be their authentic selves and create value exponentially.

If you're a leader of any kind, if you influence others with your daily interactions (surprise, that's everyone), or if you just want to learn how to be a better human, then you should start with a foundation of psychological safety. You should learn how to model and reward vulnerability across The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety™ and influence the cultures you participate in for good.

Keep reading and we'll get there **together**.



---

# **The History of Psychological Safety**



1844

**Soren Kierkegaard** identifies creativity as both a generative and destructive force that produces anxiety in the person who engages in the process.

1942

**Joseph Schumpeter** identifies a pattern of creative destruction where continuous innovation mutates and destroys the status quo in the process.

1943

**Abraham Maslow** identifies “belongingness needs,” stating that, “if both the physiological and the safety needs are fairly well gratified, then there will emerge the love and affection and belongingness needs.”

1947

**Herbert Simon** suggests that fully functioning organizations need “attitudes of friendliness and cooperation.”

1954

**Carl Rogers** uncovers the concept of unconditional positive regard, contributing to the theory that inclusion starts with acknowledgment and appreciation of the humanity in each one of us.

1960

**Douglas McGregor** refers to nonphysical “security needs” in his research.

1964

**Edgar H. Schein and Warren G. Bennis** use the term “psychological safety” and state what we’ve known for centuries: People don’t want to be punished for what makes them human.

1990

**William Kahn** suggests that in order for employees to feel engaged at work they need to feel safe to express themselves authentically.

1999

**Amy Edmondson** adds to the definition of psychological safety and identifies it as a shared experience, and that means it’s a shared responsibility.

2014

**Google** conducts its “Project Aristotle” and identifies psychological safety as the defining characteristic of its most high-performing teams.

2020

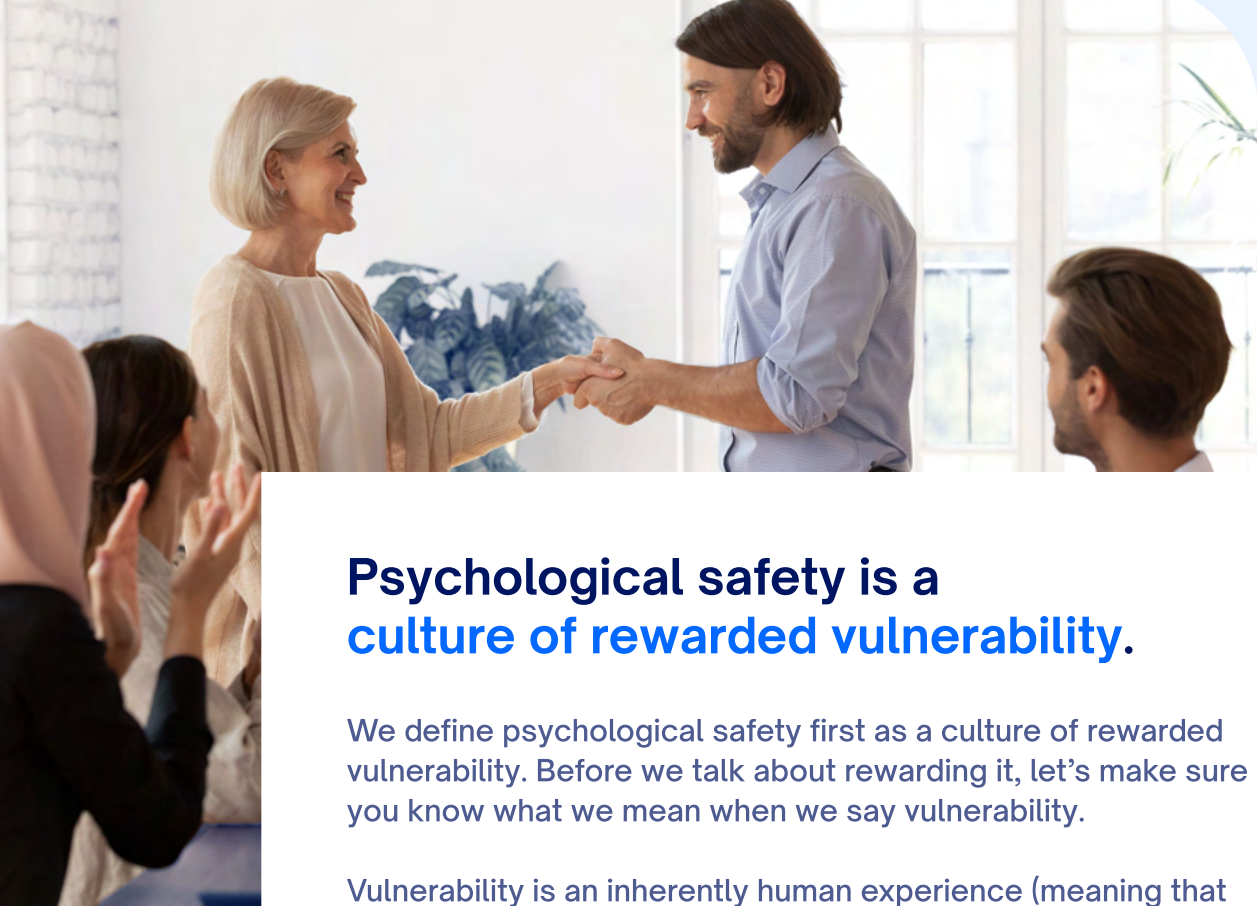
**Timothy R. Clark** publishes The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety and focuses his work on helping organizations move from theory to practice through modeling and rewarding vulnerability.



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# **What is Psychological Safety?**





## Psychological safety is a culture of rewarded vulnerability.

We define psychological safety first as a culture of rewarded vulnerability. Before we talk about rewarding it, let's make sure you know what we mean when we say vulnerability.

Vulnerability is an inherently human experience (meaning that every person experiences vulnerability, although they might experience it differently than you do). Every time you do something that exposes your insecurity, makes you feel uncertain, or otherwise pushes you out of your comfort zone, you're committing an act of vulnerability.

### Some common acts of vulnerability include:

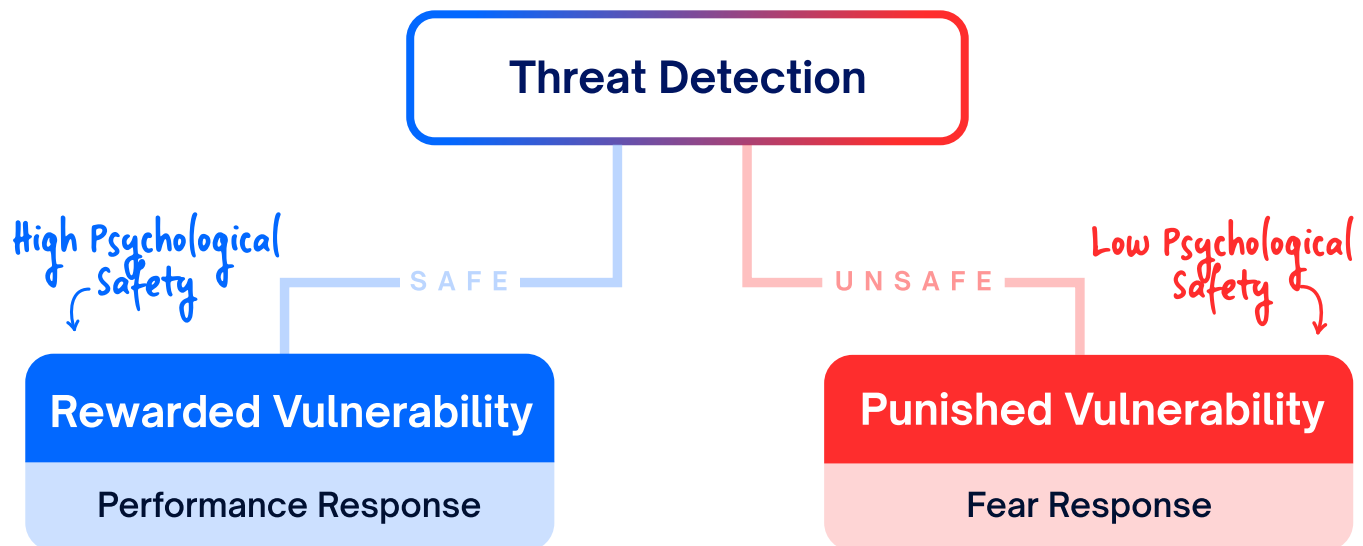
- Making a mistake
- Giving an incorrect answer
- Accepting more responsibility
- Receiving feedback
- Contributing to a discussion
- Clarifying expectations
- Asking for more resources
- Raising a concern
- Being your authentic self
- Interacting with other people
- Expressing your emotions
- Sharing something personal
- Connecting with your team
- Asking for help
- Admitting you don't know
- Trying something new





# The Neuroscience Behind Psychological Safety

It's natural to want to avoid vulnerable situations, especially if our most vulnerable moments are consistently mocked, penalized, or shamed. As a form of protection, we live our lives in a constant state of threat detection. Our heads are on a swivel, eyes peeled for moments when we could be hurt.



## The performance response.

When our acts of vulnerability are met with rewarded vulnerability, instead of punished vulnerability, we experience what's called a blue zone.

In blue zones, we can show up as our authentic selves. We're finally allowed to thrive, so we give our discretionary effort, seek development opportunities, and work towards innovation, all under a foundation of inclusion.

## The fear response.

Those negative interactions, which we call acts of punished vulnerability, bring out a natural fear response called a red zone. Essentially, we're in survival mode.

We avoid disruption, throw ourselves into executive function, and do everything in our power to keep the boat steady and sailing. We even edit and modify our authentic selves to become someone that can't be punished for who we are.



## Blue Zones = Evidence of High Psychological Safety

Rewarding vulnerability is the central mechanism through which we create psychological safety. As people engage in acts of vulnerability like being their authentic selves, asking for more resources, admitting that they don't know, expressing a desire for autonomy, and sharing what they really think, these acts of vulnerability need to be rewarded.

We call environments of rewarded vulnerability, or in other words, environments of high psychological safety, “blue zones.” In blue zones, you're valued for your individuality and can bring your whole, authentic self to work. Learning (including making mistakes) is encouraged as a part of your daily life. Your team uses their skills and abilities to participate in the value-creation process. They're excited to tackle problems and challenge old ways of thinking.

### Common instances of rewarded vulnerability:

- Verbally acknowledging and actively respecting boundaries
- Expressing gratitude for candid emotions
- Giving people the space to process
- Making yourself available and interruptible
- Valuing honesty over correct answers
- Clarifying outcomes and expectations
- Offering a way forward after a mistake
- Giving autonomy when it's earned

Creating a culture of rewarded vulnerability requires both modeling and rewarding acts of vulnerability. It's not enough for you to reward acts of vulnerability that your colleagues are willing to commit, you actually have to be vulnerable yourself. Yes, you. Especially if you're a leader with a lot of eyes on you. But even if you're not, engaging in acts of vulnerability will help others see that they're safe to follow suit.

You'll feel the difference in energy when you start rewarding, instead of punishing or ignoring, people's vulnerabilities. It's palpable. But rewarding the vulnerabilities of others is an active choice. Start open dialogues about your team's vulnerabilities and talk about how those vulnerabilities are currently being punished. Then you can talk about what you'll do to reward them instead.



## Red Zones = Evidence of Low Psychological Safety

While some forms of punishing vulnerability are macroscopic and clearly against organizational policy, others are microscopic and almost undetectable. This is why it's so easy for complacent cultures with fearful employees to allow their team members to suffer. In these organizations, punished vulnerability becomes so routine and consistent that you assume it's how it's always been, and how it'll always be.

We call these environments of low psychological safety “red zones.” In red zones, superiority reinforces barriers and forces teams to edit what makes them unique. There's no time to learn, much less to learn from mistakes. Micromanaging dissects autonomy into a series of tasks to be completed. Red zones stifle innovation, are exclusive, demean others, keep them silent, make them uneasy, and keep them disengaged.

### Common instances of punished vulnerability:

- Dismissing requests for help
- Reacting poorly to mistakes and failures
- Not taking “no” for an answer
- Asking someone to try something new without clear expectations
- Ignoring effort and expecting perfection
- Refusing to provide more resources
- Taking feedback poorly
- Shutting down challenges to the status quo

Because your experiences with vulnerability are unique, you might not realize that your actions are punishing the vulnerabilities of your team members. You might not even know what their vulnerabilities are. But it's not too late to change the way you interact, and it's not too late to learn what makes the people around you feel vulnerable.

Call out red zone behavior when you see it. All teams come with prevailing norms, habits, and an existing culture. You can't expect these changes to happen overnight, and there may be some unlearning that has to go on before you can institutionalize the new norms that you want. Identify the cultural liabilities that exist in your legacy culture and encourage behaviors that will mitigate that risk. Remember, what you tolerate, you normalize.



## Not all vulnerability is created equal.

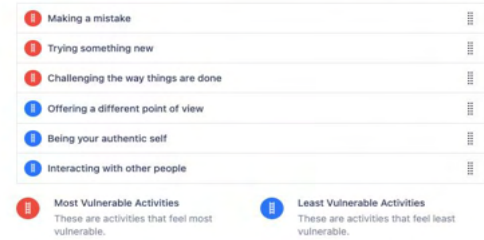
There are some acts of vulnerability that feel more vulnerable to us than others. What you expect to be easy for a member of your team may be debilitatingly difficult for them.

The way team members perceive different vulnerable behaviors depends largely on whether those behaviors have been consistently rewarded or punished.

Ultimately, rewarded vulnerability becomes the central mechanism for creating psychological safety and the key to a healthy and high performing culture.

### The Ladder of Vulnerability™

This report shows the level of personal risk you associate with each act, sorted from highest risk to lowest.

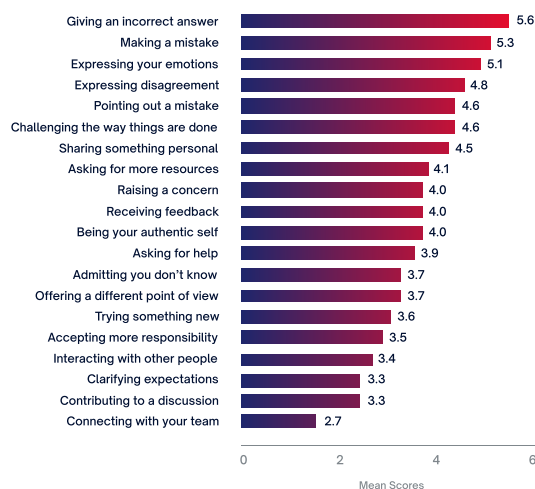


## Change the conversation around vulnerability at work.

Pinpoint the acts of vulnerability that affect you most and use your results to improve the psychological safety of your team.

[Take the Free Self-Assessment](#)

### The Ladder of Vulnerability



## Take a look at what the data says.

Our team surveyed employees in 834 organizations on their perceived risk of 20 of the most common vulnerable behaviors in the workplace.

This high level of data dispersion shows that people both perceive and experience vulnerability differently. Yet the mean scores reveal an overall hierarchy of interpersonal risk in professional life.

[Download the Guide & Explore the Data](#)





## The need for **culture by design**.

A neutral response to vulnerability creates an environment of doubt. Maybe there are times when a specific act of vulnerability is rewarded, but other times when that same act is punished.

This inconsistency causes hesitancy. It hasn't yet been proven that being authentic and vulnerable will be met with gratitude, encouragement, or positive reactions, so why risk it?

What does this mean? It means that it's not enough to avoid punishing acts of vulnerability. In order to reap the benefits of a culture of psychological safety, you have to actively reward, not just ignore or acknowledge, acts of vulnerability.



# 12 Common Breaches of Psychological Safety

What's the single most important question you can ask to reveal the level of psychological safety on a team? Answer: "Is it expensive to be yourself?" When human beings interact in social settings, they subconsciously engage in threat detection. We observe, monitor, and gauge group dynamics—not just once, but continuously. What are we looking for?

We're trying to figure out if we can be ourselves, and find out if the environment is psychologically safe. Psychological safety means it's not expensive to be yourself—not socially, emotionally, politically, or economically.

Here's a self-assessment that includes 12 common breaches of psychological safety that routinely occur in organizations. Ask yourself if you have experienced any of these breaches in the last 24 hours:

- 
1. Have you felt excluded in a social setting?
  2. Have you been afraid to ask a question?
  3. Have you remained silent when you knew the answer to a problem?
  4. Have you had someone else steal credit for something you did?
  5. Have you given a suggestion that was ignored?
  6. Have you been rudely interrupted in a meeting?
  7. Have you felt that you were the target of a negative stereotype?
  8. Have you faced retaliation for challenging the status quo?
  9. Have you had a boss who asked for feedback but didn't really want it?
  10. Have you been publicly shamed or made fun of?
  11. Have you been punished for making an honest mistake?
  12. Have you been made to feel inferior?

Is there a human being that hasn't experienced at least one of these breaches of psychological safety? Unfortunately not, they happen every day. No wonder most teams don't perform at capacity. No wonder so many employees feel disengaged. No wonder we often feel that it's expensive to be ourselves!



# 7 Things Psychological Safety is Not

Let's start by eliminating some misconceptions about psychological safety. Have you encountered any of these on your psychological safety journey?

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## It's not a shield from accountability.

Non-performing employees will invoke this as an excuse for poor performance, and insist that having psychological safety means valuing people without worrying about outcomes. While people should always be inherently valued, there's no diplomatic immunity from delivering results in the workplace.

## It's not just niceness.

An overemphasis on being warm and hospitable can turn into a cheerful indifference to the tough decisions that need to be made. We may shy away from solving problems, making breakthroughs, stopping what isn't working, and innovating.

## It's not coddling.

Psychological safety means respecting your humanity, not increasing your fragility. Leaders can't and shouldn't wrap their teams in bubble wrap, but should instead work to build their self-efficacy.

## It's not consensus decision making.

Psychological safety should give you voice, but it does not change decision-making authority. What should change is the level of engagement and collaboration that informs decisions. You should always be able to bring up and discuss issues without fear.

## It's not unearned autonomy.

Autonomy is earned, not owed. Psychological safety isn't a shift to universal and self-directed empowerment. It does have the potential to redistribute influence and increase contribution, but guidance, supervision, and approval will still be part of the equation.

## It's not political correctness.

Psychological safety does imply sensitivity for the views, feelings, and human attributes that define people. At its core, psychological safety is an apolitical, universal concept that unleashes the potential of people. No one should try to harness it for their political ends.

## It's not rhetorical reassurance.

You can't will psychological safety into existence with just words. Doing so will increase the levels of toxicity in your organization and you'll appear to be culturally tone deaf or hypocritical.

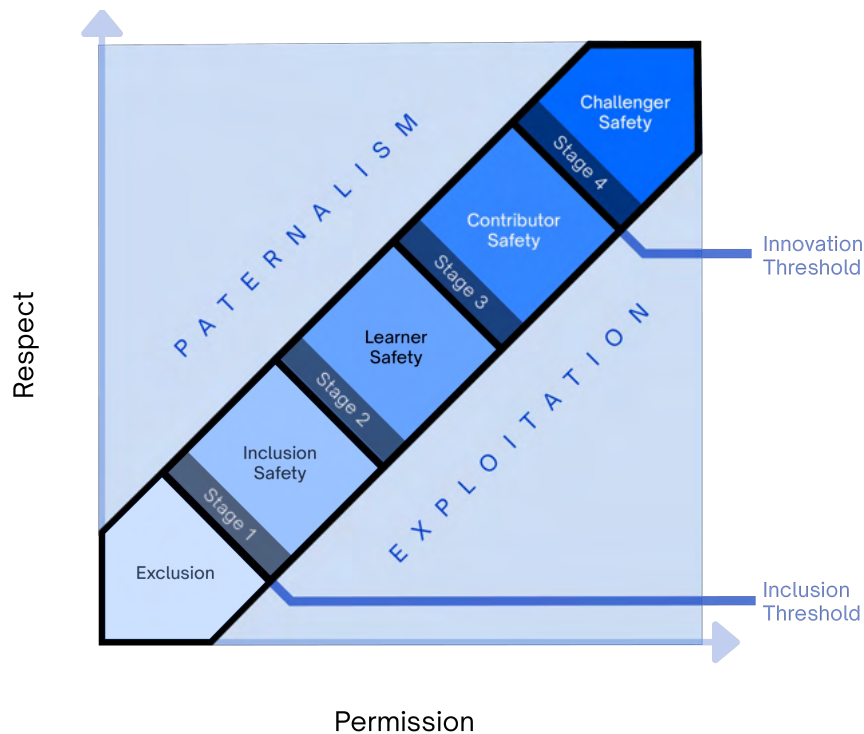




# **The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety**



## The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety



Let's get started on our second definition. Psychological safety is built in four progressive stages, and we call this framework The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety™. It acknowledges that we're humans first and employees second and follows a universal pattern that reflects the natural progression of human needs in social settings. These needs exist across demographics, psychographics, nations, and cultures.

Just like humans need water, food, and shelter to survive, teams that want to innovate need four things in order to thrive: they need to feel included and safe to learn, contribute, and challenge the status quo. Teams progress through these stages as they intentionally create cultures of rewarded vulnerability across The 4 Stages™ :

Stage 1 – Inclusion Safety:  
Can I be my authentic self?



Stage 2 – Learner Safety:  
Can I grow?



Stage 3 – Contributor Safety:  
Can I create value?



Stage 4 – Challenger Safety:  
Can I be candid about change?





# The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety™

Stage	Definition of Respect	Definition of Permission	Social Exchange
<b>1. Inclusion Safety</b>	Respect for the individual's innate need to be included, accepted, and gain a sense of belonging.	Permission for the individual to interact and be their true and authentic self.	Inclusion in exchange for human status & the absence of harm.
<b>2. Learner Safety</b>	Respect for the individual's innate need to learn, grow, and develop mastery.	Permission for the individual to engage in the learning process and make mistakes.	Encouragement in exchange for engagement.
<b>3. Contributor Safety</b>	Respect for the individual's innate need for autonomy, contribution, and recognition.	Permission for the individual to work with appropriate autonomy and independence.	Autonomy with guidance in exchange for performance and results.
<b>4. Challenger Safety</b>	Respect for the individual's innate need to innovate and improve the status quo.	Permission for the individual to make challenges to the status quo in good faith.	Air cover in exchange for candor.

Clark, Timothy R. The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety: Defining the Path to Inclusion and Innovation. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2020.



# Stage One: Inclusion Safety



Can you be your authentic self on your team? Inclusion safety satisfies the basic human need to connect and belong. As the first of the four stages of psychological safety, it serves as a foundation for the rest of the framework.

Without inclusion safety, teams can't learn and grow, contribute and perform, or speak up and challenge the status quo. Team members who don't feel that they belong won't risk making a mistake or challenging the status quo. They won't step outside of their comfort zones, volunteer to take on more responsibility, or be vulnerable with their team.

When it comes to inclusion safety, worth proceeds worthiness. You're worthy of inclusion just because you exist.

## When you have it...

You're valued for your individuality and can bring your whole, authentic self to work.

💡 People know your name and can pronounce it.

💡 There are consistent connecting rituals.

💡 Role titles aren't status symbols.

💡 Differences are celebrated.

## When you don't...

Superiority reinforces barriers and forces teams to edit what makes them unique.

💡 There are clear cliques on your team.

💡 People hide behind their authority.

💡 It's quiet in the office. Too quiet.

💡 People compare, compete, and don't collaborate.

## Do you create inclusion safety on your team?

**Ask yourself these questions to find out:**

- Do you feel superior to other people? If so, why?
- What conscious bias do you have? What about unconscious?
- Is the principle of inclusion convenient or inconvenient for you?
- What individual or group are you having a hard time including? Why?



## Interaction isn't connection.

Just because you interact with your colleagues doesn't mean that you'll automatically have meaningful connections with them. If your interactions are primarily negative (or neutral or inconsistent) then you haven't created an environment where real connection can happen.



## Bonding vs. Bridging

It's easy to bond with people that we naturally connect with. We have the common ground, shared experiences, and similar perspectives that make interaction easy and enjoyable. But what happens when you interact with people that you don't share a natural affinity with? How do you bond? You have to engage in what we call bridging behavior.

Bridging behavior attempts to close the gap between who "we" are, and who "they" are. As you engage in more and more bridging behaviors and choose inclusivity, you'll see evidence that those behaviors work. You'll feel more connected to your colleagues. As you immerse yourself in inclusivity, you'll see that gap closing and it will be easier to bond.



## Common Bridging Behaviors:

"Ask for my opinion"

"Bring me into a new group setting"

"Give me more responsibility"

"Express gratitude for my contributions"

"Talk to me about my life, not just work"

"Start with questions, not statements"

"Talk to me, not at me"



## Stage Two: Learner Safety



Do you have the space to grow? Learner safety is crucial to helping your people become their best selves. As the second stage of psychological safety, it encourages team members to engage in all aspects of the learning process without fear of being rejected or neglected.

Learning and growing is a fundamental need that needs to be satisfied in order for innovation to flourish in an organization. In this stage, fear is detached from mistakes, and mistakes are rewarded as part of the learning process. When we have learner safety we feel safe as we ask questions, give and receive feedback, experiment, and admit when we don't know.

### When you have it...

Learning, and making mistakes, is encouraged as a part of your daily life.

- Team members share their mistakes openly.
- You're supported in your learning goals.
- You're allowed to say "I don't know."
- Your leaders are learning right alongside you.

### When you don't...

There's no time to learn, much less to learn from your mistakes.

- People stay quiet when mistakes happen.
- You feel like your job is constantly on the line.
- Learning is viewed as a "waste of time."
- People only interact inside their roles.

### Do you create learner safety on your team?

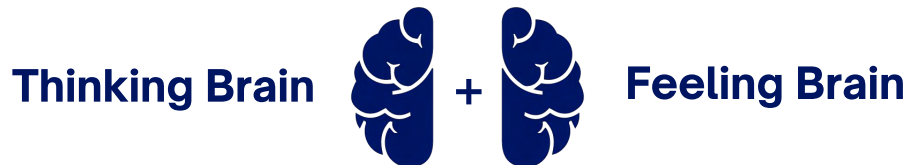
Ask yourself these questions to find out:

- Do you judge people's aptitude immediately or do you suppress that impulse?
- Do you learn as much or more from your failures as your successes?
- Do you punish failure?
- Do you encourage curiosity or choke it?



# Learning is an **intellectual** and **emotional** process.

Learning is both intellectual and emotional. We all bring some level of inhibition and anxiety to the learning process. We all have insecurities. Who hasn't hesitated to raise their hand to ask a question in a group setting for fear of embarrassment?



If we've learned anything about learning, it's that we learn in context, not in isolation. We can't learn with just our thinking brain, we automatically involve our feeling brain. Because, when we learn, it's the interplay of the head and the heart. We can either cultivate or crush, nurture or neglect, stimulate or stifle learner safety.

## Learning is **error-driven**.

There's no real learning that doesn't involve the risk of failure or mistakes. That's simply how we learn.

Unfortunately, some organizations place so much value on correct answers that they discourage people from taking real learning risks.

Leaders committed to safeguard learner safety know that learning is the source of competitive advantage. It represents the highest form of enterprise risk management, because the biggest risk an organization can take is to stop learning.

The choice is yours: What kind of risk will you entertain in your culture? The risk of learning, or the risk of not learning?

## Achieving **learning agility**.

When it comes to learning, the goal for all organizations is the same: to achieve learning agility.

Learning agility is the ability to learn at or above the speed of change. If learning agility is less than the speed of change, businesses, organizations, and individuals fall behind, become stagnant, and become irrelevant.

Our job as leaders is to help our colleagues learn when they're not in a formal, structured learning environment.

Sure, they're responsible for half of that process, but until they're given consistent permission and resources to learn, they won't risk it.



## Stage Three: Contributor Safety



Can you create value for your team? Contributor safety satisfies the basic human need to make a difference and offer meaningful contributions. When we create contributor safety for others, we empower them with autonomy, guidance, and encouragement in exchange for effort and results.

When you have contributor safety in your organization your team thrives under outcome accountability. Roles are clearly defined, but people are encouraged to think outside of their roles, and small wins are celebrated. When you don't have contributor safety, autonomy is given without guidance and team members may feel like benchwarmers.

### When you have it...

Your team uses their skills and abilities to participate in the value-creation process.

- Team members work with passion.
- You solving problem by asking questions.
- People naturally work with autonomy.
- Your teams have the space to do things their way.

### When you don't...

Micromanaging dissects autonomy into a series of tasks to be completed.

- People are bored and burnt out.
- You have tasks to complete, not problems to solve.
- Micromanagers take the personality out of work.
- People hesitate to take responsibility.

Contributor safety marks the beginning of solid, self-directed performance. With contributor safety, we provide responsibility in exchange for performance. As you work, we'll empower you to deliver meaningful results.

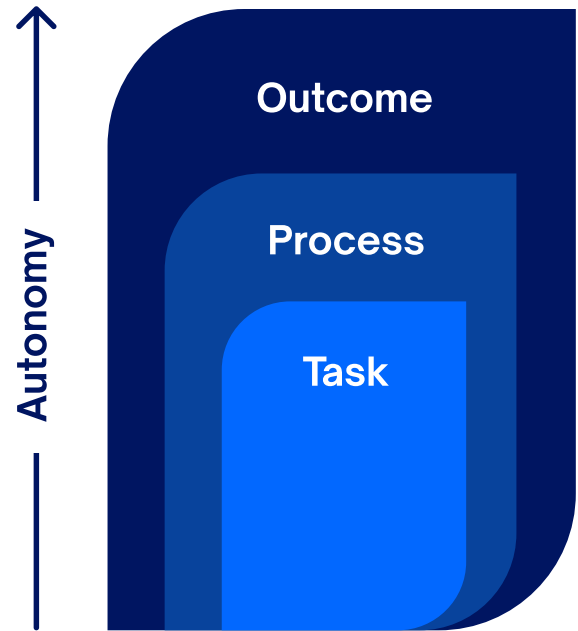
The more we contribute, the more confidence and competence we develop. Without this autonomy, how can you expect to foster the passion and responsibility that engaged employees crave and organizations need in order to innovate?



## Is my team ready for more accountability?

In any team, individuals work under three different levels of accountability—task, process, and outcome. Of course, these levels aren't actually this discrete and usually happen in a spectrum. But one thing is for sure: If your teams want autonomy, they have to learn to love accountability.

Unearned autonomy with no accountability can lead to disorder, discomfort, and dissatisfying results. But too much accountability with no autonomy can lead to micromanaging, hand-holding, and paternalism.



### Task-Level Accountability

Tasks are the basic, fundamental units of work. They are singular and simple in nature and have a predictable pattern and outcome. All outcomes and processes are made up of individual tasks that need to get done by someone, so they can't be avoided. But someone who operates under task-level accountability needs to be checked on often, closely monitored, and heavily mentored.

### Process-Level Accountability

Process-level accountability happens when tasks can be strung together in a predictable, consistent process where the person has some structural leeway, but still knows what needs to get done, and when. Sure, this grants a level of freedom that task-level accountability doesn't, but it doesn't create much space for innovation, creativity, or challenging the way things are done.

### Outcome-Level Accountability

Outcome-level accountability is where good employees become influential innovators: Here, how we get our work done doesn't matter so much. This kind of autonomy and trust gives team members permission to push boundaries. They'll feel a strong sense of responsibility for the projects and deliverables that are assigned to them. They'll be motivated to make things better, not because they were asked to, but because they want to.



## Stage Four: Challenger Safety



Do you feel like you can be candid about change? Challenger safety satisfies the basic human need to make things better. It embodies the support and confidence we need to ask questions such as, “Why do we do it this way?” “What if we tried this?” or “May I suggest a different way?”

Challenger safety allows us to feel safe to challenge the status quo without retaliation or the risk of damaging our personal standing or reputation. As the highest level of psychological safety, it matches the increased vulnerability and personal risk associated with challenging the status quo.

### When you have it...

Your team is excited to tackle problems and challenge old ways of thinking.

- Everyone has a voice and is listened to.
- There's no tiptoeing around bad news.
- Teams share their half-baked ideas.
- There's evidence of everyday innovation.

### When you don't...

You have a silent team that'll execute for you, but is scared to innovate.

- Fear is the primary organizational motivator.
- Disruptive ideas are discouraged and ignored.
- Discussions usually aren't productive.
- Groupthink and echo chambers are your normal.

### Do you create challenger safety on your team?

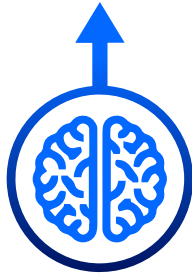
Ask yourself these questions to find out:

- How do you protect your team against the dangers of groupthink?
- Can everyone speak up at work?
- Are your meetings productive?
- Do you spend most of your time executing, or innovating?



## Managing & harnessing friction.

Collaboration is human collision, and unsurprisingly, causes friction. One of the biggest barriers a leader faces when creating challenger safety is learning how to simultaneously increase intellectual friction and decrease social friction.



### Intellectual friction.

Intellectual friction is the bones of innovation. These conditions encourage your team to harness creative abrasion and constructive dissent and arrive at positive, lasting change.

But intellectual friction isn't our default. We need to be taught and reminded that feedback and disagreement aren't meant to be personal attacks.



### Social friction.

Humans are emotional. We take things personally. Social friction derails innovative conversations. It separates, stratifies and encourages defensive, divisive, and disengaged behavior.

Usually, the problem keeps growing while a solution is nowhere in sight. We worry more about who is right, and not enough about what is right.

Keep in mind that social friction is a natural symptom of vulnerability and shouldn't be punished when it occurs. The leader's job is to facilitate human collision on their teams and harness it into intellectual friction, collaboration, and eventually, innovation.

You may have other industry or organization-specific nuances that will influence this process on your team. Regardless of where you work, decreasing social friction, and thus increasing psychological safety, will improve the quality of your interactions across every department.



## 4 Steps to Creating a Speak-Up Culture

Successful speak-up cultures consistently provide challenger safety to their team members. But how do you actually make challenger safety happen? You can't speak a speak-up culture into existence. Here are four steps leaders can take to create conditions that give all employees a voice — and motivate them to use it:

---

### 1. Separate worth from worthiness.

Speaking up is nothing less than an expression of one's authentic self. People will retreat from the opportunity to be their authentic selves if doing so is expensive. But if their worth is separate and distinct from the worthiness of their input, opinions, and views, they'll be more willing to use their voice.

### 2. Separate loyalty from agreement.

When loyalty becomes contingent on agreement, it produces manipulated conformity, which isn't loyalty at all. True loyalty, which refers to genuine concern for and dedication to the best interests of an institution and its people, must not only allow, but encourage, independent thought. Unless the organization divorces loyalty from agreement, the pressure to conform can produce dangerous groupthink.

### 3. Separate status from opinion.

Many organizations stigmatize and punish contrary opinion, motivating each person to become their own gated community. As long as that norm is in place, fear exacts a tax on open dialogue. Smart people don't make a smart team unless they can harness their collective intelligence by networking their minds and engaging in multidisciplinary learning. This depends on their ability to invite and process dissent.

### 4. Separate permission from adoption.

Most employees understand that a speak-up culture means they have permission to speak their minds and weigh in with suggestions, opinions, and concerns. Some employees mistakenly believe that to be heard is to be heeded. We all need the reassurance that when the answer is no, the very act of speaking up is appreciated and encouraged.





# **Psychological Safety for Early Adopters**



## 4 barriers to promoting psychological safety as an early adopter, and **what to do about them.**

Psychological safety is core business, and not everyone knows that yet. What's holding some organizations back from adopting it as a training and assessment category? And what can early adopters do in the meantime to champion psychological safety even when they have little to no support? Let's talk about some common barriers you may be facing:

### Barrier #1: Lack of Awareness

Awareness precedes adoption. Psychological safety is a relatively new concept that's only gained meaningful traction in the last five years, so you may need to put psychological safety on the map for your organization.

#### **Recommendation: Be Deliberate With Definition.**

When introducing the concept to an individual or group for the first time, be deliberate with your definition. If it seems too academic or complicated, it may be a non-starter. Give relevant and relatable examples that contextualize psychological safety's four stages.

### Barrier #2: Lack of Understanding

Psychological safety isn't artificial niceness or a lack of accountability. Unless you clarify, stakeholders might think it's a gimmick or dismiss it because of the baggage of the implied definition of the term. They need to know what psychological safety isn't, along with what it is.

#### **Recommendation: Know Your Stakeholders.**

Some leaders have a role focused on the performance of the organization, others are concerned about their people's experiences with inclusion and engagement at work. Know who you're talking to and merge their concerns with the key outcomes of psychological safety.



## Barrier #3: Lack of Trust

Psychological safety isn't a passing fad, but many people who don't understand the concept, or how it applies to your organization, may see it that way. Really, your stakeholders want to know that psychological safety has staying power before they invest their time and resources.

### **Recommendation:** [Bring Data & Build the Case.](#)

In the 2020s, it's hard to justify a large-scale intervention without a data-driven and evidence-based approach. For stakeholders who are skeptical about the long-term effects of psychological safety in your organization, bring them undeniable evidence of real intervention.

## Barrier #4: Resistance to Change

Some leaders aren't excited about psychological safety because of the perceived effort and resources that a change initiative usually takes. If your leaders think that psychological safety will be a threat to their title, status, and power, be aware that they may fight you along the way.

### **Recommendation:** [Don't Muscle or Smuggle the Change.](#)

You can't force, hide, or minimize your cultural initiative and expect it to be successful and supported. Psychological safety early adopters have to square up to the reality of what adopting psychological safety really requires. There's no shortcut.







# **Psychological Safety for Individuals**





## You are a **cultural architect**.

We said it in the introduction: culture is a complicated blend of values, assumptions, perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and customs. But essentially, it's just interaction.

Each seemingly discrete interaction both shapes you and is shaped by you. As those interactions build up (assuming you interact with the same people in the same settings) over time, a culture forms.

You contribute to and participate in all of it. Always. Because you are a cultural architect in your organization. How you show up affects the levels of psychological safety that your team experiences at work.

## Listen to the **podcast**.

You can become a cultural architect no matter your position, your title, or your authority. Join us in building cultures of inclusion, innovation, and candor by design.

Listen to action-oriented conversations with Timothy R. Clark that will help you create psychological safety in meaningful ways.

[Listen Now](#)



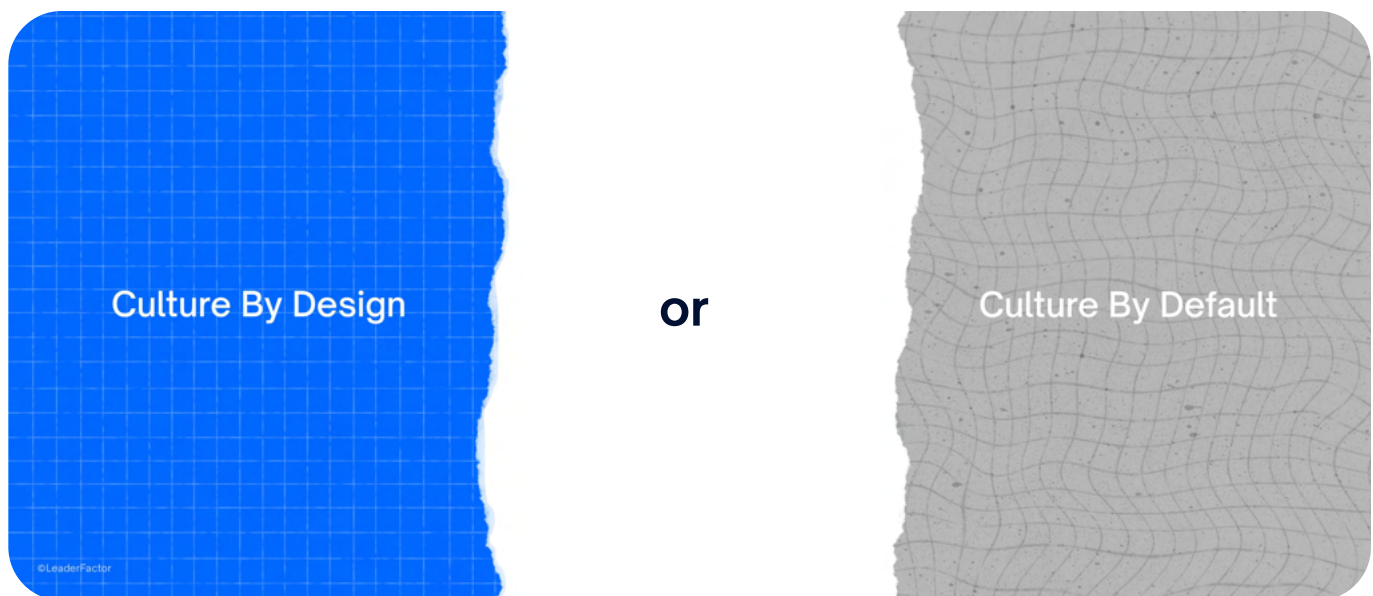


# What happens when we approach **culture by default**?

A team that allows its default culture to dominate has difficult-to-break norms and unwritten rules that influence how they show up every single day. Most of these expectations are unspoken, and people are expected to figure them out in a painful process of trial-and-error.

Eventually, you learn that there are people you speak freely with and other people you should tiptoe around. There are things that can be said, and things that can't. There are groups you know you're welcome to join, and cliques that clearly maintain barriers.

These kinds of teams struggle to maintain interpersonal relationships, much less learn, grow, develop, and innovate. And to think, it all comes down to the way we interact.



## Approaching **culture by design**.

What happens when you approach culture with intentionality? Well, first, your expectations are out in the open. You'll refer to them when team members are onboarded and trained, when succession planning, and when any major decisions are being made. No one will have to guess how they should interact with others, because they'll know what's expected.

Second, your behavior changes. Being intentional about your culture means being intentional about the little things. How do you greet your team members? Do you greet them at all? Who do you interact with during the day? What's your knee-jerk response to feedback and disagreement? What is said when a team member makes a mistake? Is brainstorming productive? Take inventory of your current culture. What would you change?



# Assess Your Personal Impact on Your Team's Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is built at the team-level through the team members' interactions. This means that you have a profound influence on the amount of psychological safety that your colleagues experience. Here are seven questions to ask yourself to determine your impact on your team culture:

---

## 1. Presence

Your presence has an impact on the tone of a meeting. When you enter a room, does your influence warm or chill the air?

## 2. Collaboration

When you collaborate with your peers, does your influence accelerate or decelerate the speed of discovery and innovation?

## 3. Feedback

Fear breaks the feedback loop. Does your influence increase or restrict the flow of feedback?

## 4. Inquiry

Telling has a tendency to shut people down, while asking draws people out. Does your influence draw people out or shut them down?

## 5. Dissent

Without dissent, we run the risk of echo chambers. Do you encourage and reward or discourage and punish dissent?

## 6. Mistakes

Mistakes are essential for learning and progress. Do you celebrate mistakes and the lessons learned or overreact and marginalize those who make them?

## 7. Truth

Even leaders need someone to check their blind spots. Can people tell you what you don't want to hear when you don't want to hear it?





# **Psychological Safety for Teams**

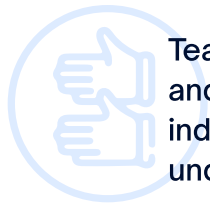


# Psychological safety leads to **high-performing teams**.

Individuals rarely accomplish extraordinary feats alone, which means the quality of an organization is a reflection of the quality of its teams. Because culture is built at the team level, a team that improves the way they interact with each other will improve their performance. Why? Because creating a culture of high psychological safety and improving everyday interactions unlocks the full potential of the team. As this becomes a consistent habit, you'll be able to multiply the force, scope, and magnitude of your organizational efforts.

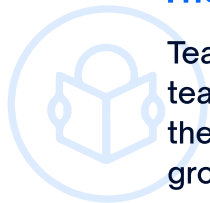
## Four patterns of teams with high psychological safety:

### They connect with each other.



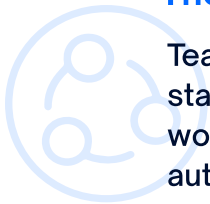
Teams with high levels of psychological safety know how to connect both formally and informally. They work to bridge their differences and give permission for the individuals on their teams to interact and be their true and authentic selves. They understand that great teamwork moves beyond interaction and into connection.

### They work to improve their skills.



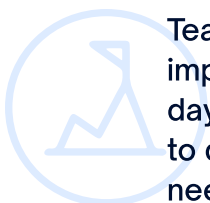
Teams with high levels of psychological safety are constantly growing. When teams acknowledge that the knowledge they have today is not enough, they open themselves up to development. They respect each other's innate need to learn, grow, and develop mastery.

### They create autonomy and accountability.



Teams that have high levels of psychological safety hold themselves to high standards of transparency and accountability. They're focused on doing their best work individually and collectively. They are provided the appropriate amount of autonomy with guidance in exchange for performance and results.

### They have breakthroughs and innovate.



Teams that have high levels of psychological safety believe in continuous improvement and innovation. They're proud but never satisfied. At the end of the day, they challenge the status quo of the organization by challenging themselves to do better and be better. Each team member learns to provide the air cover needed in exchange for the candor of their team members.



# Helping your team **improve psychological safety**.

Remember, we define psychological safety as a culture of rewarded vulnerability. But “rewarded vulnerability” can’t just be a theoretical concept, it has to have a tangible place in your workplace culture. This means you have to actually be vulnerable at work, and encourage others to do the same. But it’s not always easy to recognize when others are being vulnerable. To help you practice viewing your interactions through the lens of psychological safety, we’ll share a framework that will help you make modeling and rewarding vulnerability second nature.

## Model Reward

### The **L.I.V.E.** Model for Teams

The L.I.V.E. model is an acronym you can use in your everyday life to assist you in remembering to model and reward acts of vulnerability. The acronym stands for (1) look (2) identify (3) validate and (4) encourage. Consistently modeling and rewarding acts of vulnerability increases the overall levels of psychological safety on your teams and improves the quality of your interactions.







## Behaviors that foster psychological safety across its four stages.

As the foundation of culture, psychological safety will transform your organization and empower your team members to be inclusive and innovative in their everyday interactions. But psychological safety, just like culture, is delicate and dynamic. It's perishable, not permanent. It requires intention too.

Because unfortunately, psychological safety doesn't just happen. So it can't be a one-and-done initiative or a back-burner idea. It should be at the forefront of your strategy. It has to be monitored and measured. It has to be planned out, revisited, and consistently improved.

So how do you create an environment where your culture can actually stick? You start with behavior. If your team members can embrace concrete daily practices that model and reward vulnerability, you'll be well on your way to a consistent culture of psychological safety. It will become a sanctuary of inclusion and an incubator of innovation that'll be your greatest competitive advantage.



# 120+ ways to **immediately improve** the psychological safety of your team.

These behaviors, based on The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety™, are your key to actionable psychological safety initiatives and engagements that focus on your teams' real needs.

**T** Team Behaviors

**I** Individual Behaviors

**M** Manager Behaviors

★ Top 5 Behaviors

**M**

## **Never hide behind title, position, or authority.**

Titles are just artifacts an organization gives you to get work done. Don't confuse them with your own identity. If you hide behind these things out of insecurity, it creates a barrier to inclusion.

**T I**

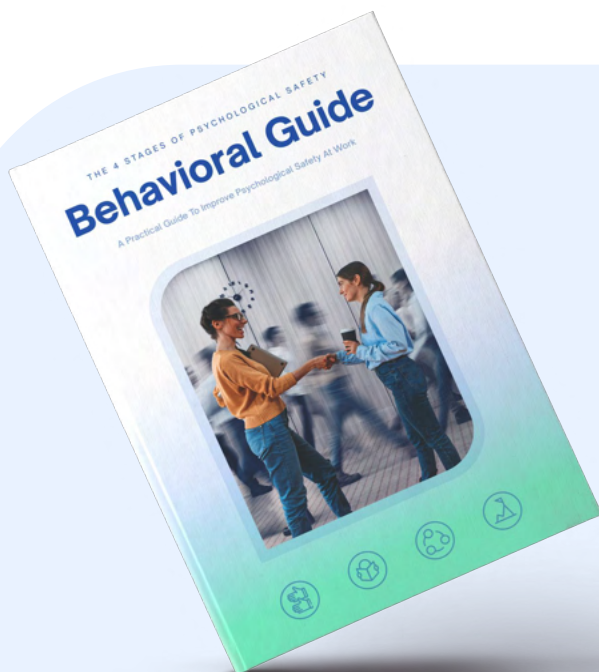
**Introduce yourself at the first opportunity.** Be proactive to introduce yourself to those who are new or you don't know. Once you break the ice and display warmth and acceptance, people will believe they belong.

**I** ★

**Share what you're learning.** Encourage others to learn is by sharing what you're learning. Share the topic, the insights, and the joy and satisfaction you've gained in the learning process. Your optimism will be contagious.

**M** ★

**Dedicate time and resources to learning.** If you talk about the importance of learning but don't dedicate resources to it, it's really not a priority. Formally allocate budget and dedicate time to learning. Offer consistent resources and time.



## **From theory to actual practice.**

Do you like the concept of psychological safety but don't know how to apply it?

We've created a list of 120 of the best psychologically safe behaviors. They're sorted into individual-, team-, and manager-focused actions you can take to build all four stages of psychological safety.

[Download Your Free Copy](#)



# 7 Ways to Reboot a Silent Team with Psychological Safety

Have you ever spent a day with a silent team? If so, you may have realized that unnatural silence is usually one of the first indications that a team has been neutralized by fear.

Going silent is a normal response to being rejected, humiliated, or punished in some way. Silent teams disengage because they have no voice. They shut down because they have been marginalized. So how do you reboot a silent team? Create an environment of rewarded vulnerability (psychological safety). Respect each member of the team, give them a voice, and re-invite them to participate. Here are seven specific suggestions:

---

## 1. Remove ambiguity.

Remember that all teams naturally feel for their limits. What are the rules, norms, and expectations? If team members have been punished for speaking up in the past, they won't believe it's safe to do so until you expressly change the terms of engagement.

## 2. Set the tone.

Remember, you are a cultural architect. You set the tone at the top. At all costs, protect the team's right to speak up, encourage them to do so, and support them as they do so. They need your air cover in exchange for their candor.

## 3. Focus on truth.

Never, never, never let hierarchy outrank truth. Don't hide behind title, position, or authority to justify or muscle a decision. That's an abdication of leadership. Remember: Truth can come from everywhere in your organization, and you need diverse perspectives and voices in your decision-making.

## 4. Remove pride of authorship.

Sometimes you will see something they can't. Sometimes they will see something you can't. If you jealously guard your own ideas, they will do the same thing. Display no pride of authorship.



## 5. Assign team members to disagree.

Give every member of your team a license to disagree and assign them to use it. Then brace yourself to hear the truth. Remember that a negative response to bad news or new ideas will re-silence the team and seal your fate as a hapless leader.

## 6. Discuss ideas on merit.

Don't make it emotionally expensive to challenge the status quo. Normalize the behavior by asking the members of your team to challenge specific things and discuss ideas on merit.

## 7. Embrace the journey.

Remember this pattern: A team often becomes lost and temporarily fails before it finds its way and eventually succeeds. This is a normal journey line. The process is messy, iterative, and non-linear, and there may be some pivots along the way. Point out that you're in uncharted territory and help your team enjoy the journey.







# **Psychological Safety for Managers**



# What makes a manager **effective**?

Good and effective managers use their resources to accomplish the goals and objectives of their institution. What's their biggest and most valuable resource? The people with whom they work. Which means that their success largely rests on their ability to influence others in healthy ways over a long period of time.

**Managers always have two competing objectives:**

1. They need to develop their people
2. They need to hit their numbers.

How do you sequence these objectives? Effective managers choose to develop their people first. They understand that their cultural infrastructure serves as a long-term investment in the numbers they're pressured to hit. Once that healthy culture is established, and if it can be maintained, the numbers will follow.

What's the takeaway? Our ability to manage to lead depends on how well we interact with others. If we can encourage and empower them to work passionately, autonomously, and effectively, they will thrive. They'll innovate. They'll encourage others to be inclusive, collaborative, and engaged.

## **Technical competence vs. **cultural competence**.**

Leading teams and businesses requires more than just technical competence. It requires cultural competence, at the heart of which lies psychological safety. Unfortunately, most organizations make no effort to measure, report, or promote candidates based on their cultural competence. They assume that pure technical competence will translate into pristine, healthy, vibrant cultures, and they couldn't be farther from the truth.

While the traditional pattern is to promote people based on the strength of their performance as individual contributors, on their technical competence, and on the results they deliver, this can't and shouldn't be the only promotion criteria that's considered.

If you choose to promote based on cultural competence, you're looking for someone who has a track record of creating psychological safety. You're looking for a behavioral pattern of rewarding vulnerability. If the prospective leader consistently and predictably rewards vulnerability, that rolls up into psychological safety, which rolls up into a healthy culture.



# 5 Steps to Psychological Safety For Managers

As a people leader, you can either lead the way or get in the way of your team culture. Why is that? Because teams don't outperform their leaders, they reflect them. What dictates whether or not your team thrives in healthy cultures is a manager's ability to create psychologically safe conditions for the people they work with. Here are 5 ways to make that happen:

---

## Step 1: Define psychological safety to the team.

You can't build real psychological safety until your team is on the same page about what it is, what isn't, and how it works in team social settings. Otherwise, you won't be operating under the same assumptions, expectations, and terms of engagement.

## Step 2: Separate loyalty from agreement.

This is the rule-setting phase, where you answer questions like: What's allowed here? What are the terms of engagement? How are we going to work together? Set the expectation that, on your team, you won't tolerate red zone behavior.

## Step 3: Separate status from opinion.

Hold your teams culturally accountable. Changing culture really comes down to changing patterns of behavior at the individual level, so when it comes to enforcing the expectation of blue zone behavior, you need to create cultural accountability. Remember, what you tolerate, you normalize.

## Step 4: Separate permission from adoption.

You, as a leader, are not immune to these cultural expectations. You cannot and should not expect your team members to operate under conditions of psychological safety that you're unwilling to create, maintain, and encourage yourself.

## Step 5: Reward the vulnerability of others.

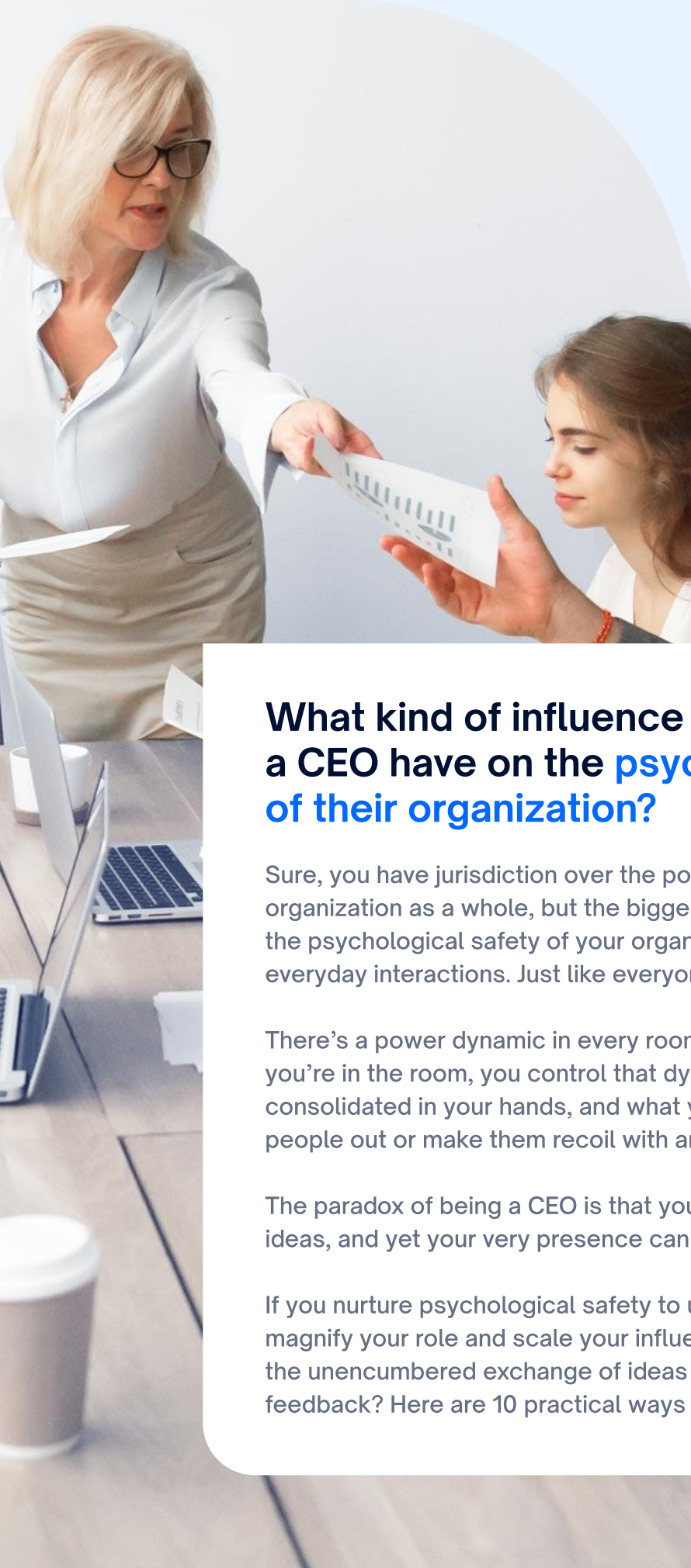
If you don't reward the vulnerability of other people, you're not going to continue to get their vulnerability. That response to vulnerability is the mechanism through which increase or decrease the levels of psychological safety on our teams.





# **Psychological Safety for Leaders**





## What kind of influence and impact does a CEO have on the **psychological safety** of their organization?

Sure, you have jurisdiction over the policy and practices of your organization as a whole, but the biggest influence you have over the psychological safety of your organization is still in your everyday interactions. Just like everyone else.

There's a power dynamic in every room. If you're the CEO and you're in the room, you control that dynamic. Positional power is consolidated in your hands, and what you say and do can draw people out or make them recoil with anxiety and fear.

The paradox of being a CEO is that your job is to encourage useful ideas, and yet your very presence can work against that objective.

If you nurture psychological safety to unleash the room, you magnify your role and scale your influence and impact. promote the unencumbered exchange of ideas and unedited circulation of feedback? Here are 10 practical ways to make that happen:



# 10 Ways CEOs Can Create Psychological Safety

## 1: Assign someone else to conduct the meeting.

Visibly redistribute power by leveling yourself down to be more of a player-coach.

## 2: Don't sit at the head of the table.

In many physical settings, seating reflects the hierarchy, but you can disrupt those rituals.

## 3: Create warmth and informality.

Of course, there's always a distinction between what's informal and what's inappropriate.

## 4: Model acts of vulnerability.

You have a first-mover obligation to model vulnerability to encourage others to do the same.

## 5: Stimulate inquiry before advocacy.

When you share your position too quickly it softly censors your team.

## 6: Reward challenges to the status quo.

Your team can help you see your blind spots and tell you what you're missing.

## 7: Push back with humor and enthusiasm.

Humor and enthusiasm inject excitement into the process and encourage rigorous debate.

## 8: Buffer strong personalities.

Your job is to create a shame- and embarrassment-free environment.

## 9: Listen and pause.

This sends a clear message that the individual, and what they're saying, matters.

## 10: Give highly targeted praise and recognition.

Don't withhold or be stingy with recognition. People want to know that you see and value them.



# What to Do With a Toxic Leader

At the far side of unhealthy culture is the toxic zone—a hostile environment where abusive patterns of interaction inflict mental, emotional, and psychological harm. It's easy to assume that they are fairly uncommon. That would be a big mistake. We conducted a global employee survey in which we asked 961 employees across a variety of industries and organizations this question: “Have you ever worked in a toxic culture?” Nearly nine in ten (86%) of those surveyed said they had.

In our research, we discovered a crucial distinction: Some employees worked with actively toxic leaders who, themselves, engaged in toxic behaviors (and diminished psychological safety), while others worked with passively complicit leaders who allowed others to be toxic without consequence.

---

## Remove the actively toxic leader.

After an abusive episode, most actively toxic leaders are more concerned about their image than the harm they cause. Nearly always remorseless, actively toxic leaders tend to focus on impression management. Specifically, they tend to display one or a combination of three common patterns of deflection—denial, blame, and excuse. Most actively toxic leaders must be removed from people management positions. Our research suggests that only 5 percent are coachable. The rest should be managing resources, not leading people.

## Coach the passively complicit leader.

The motivational profile of a passively complicit leader is often quite different. They represent the negligent side of leadership, tolerating cycles of mistreatment through the enabling behavior of being passive, aloof, or absent. Some believe the fear others induce through toxic behavior is productive and provides accountability that they, themselves, are either unable or unwilling to provide. Some are intimidated by the toxic members of their teams, and despite their positional power, yield to the influence of bullies and abusers. Finally, some passively complicit leaders are preoccupied with other things, and it is that aloofness that makes them dangerous. Fortunately, passively complicit leaders are almost always coachable if given honest feedback and the opportunity to improve.

**Remember, teams and organizations don't outperform their leaders, they reflect them. Sources of toxicity must be identified and either removed or coached.**





# **Psychological Safety Resources**





# Join a Public Workshop

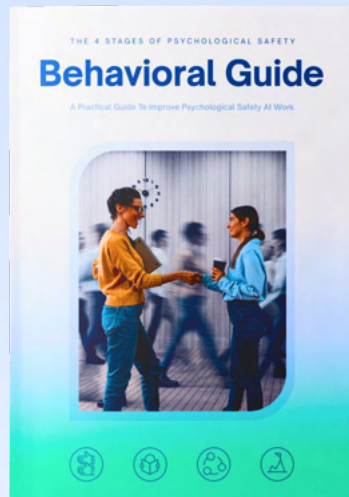
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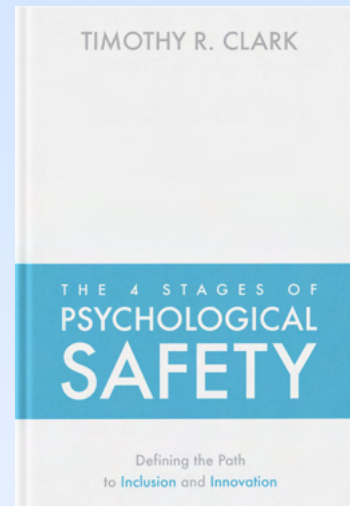




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