Psychological Safety in Schools & Multi-Academy Trusts

Improve Teacher & Staff Wellbeing with this starter guide

PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE WORKPLACES

Most of us, at some point in our careers, have worked in a toxic workplace that has brought us close to quitting. For some of us, that toxic workplace has tipped them over the edge. Like that time my colleague just got so fed up, they took off their uniform and walked home in their pants. Well, they always did have a flair for the dramatic.

Today, people are 10 times more likely to quit their jobs because of toxic work cultures with poor psychological safety — rather than compensation or work-life balance. That sounds almost unbelievable — unless you've worked in a toxic place.

"Like that time my colleague just got so fed up, they took off their uniform and walked home in their pants"

On the flipside, a study on team performance by Google found that the highest-performing teams have one thing in common: *psychologically safe* **workplaces.** Don't worry, if you don't know what they are, we'll explain shortly. Whether your employees are office-based or work remotely, psychological safety is a must-have in any high-performing organisation.

Put simply, if your workplace is psychologically safe, you'll likely be healthier, more productive and part of a more inclusive workforce. As educational institutions depend on knowledge sharing, trust, innovation and error reporting, psychological safety is essential so your team can perform at their best. As schools and trusts navigate new and ever-increasing challenges, this need for psychological safety is only growing.

At iAM HQ, we're pretty sure we have this in the bag, although we're always working on it. We've created this guide to help you foster psychological safety within your own workplace.

WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY?

In a nutshell, a psychologically safe workplace is one where employees feel able to express themselves without fear that their manager or colleagues will think less of them. Or worse, criticised, or even punished for speaking up. It happens.

Whether they're sharing ideas, asking questions, expressing concerns or acknowledging mistakes, employees must all feel that it's safe to speak up. Doing so creates an environment where people feel comfortable being themselves, and employees trust and respect each other.

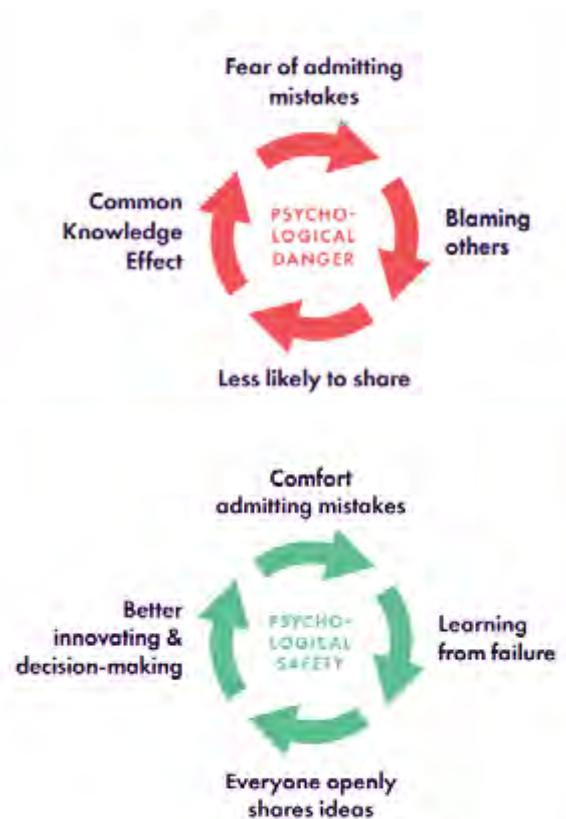If your workplace is psychologically safe, people:

• **Are trusted and feel safe**

• **Can be honest with managers and colleagues**

• **Are able to speak up when they need to**

• **Have the freedom and security to try new things and make mistakes**

• **Feel safe enough to be creative and take risk**

People should be themselves at work. If they are, they tend to perform at their best without any risk to their mental wellbeing.

We're not schoolkids anymore. Employees want to work for employers who treat them like adults. They also recognise their shared responsibility to keep learning, striving and getting things done.

Environments which enable this are psychologically safe.

"It's so much better to be in a workplace where you can be your real self, and contribute to the work in a meaningful way" Amy Edmondson, Author and Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School. Amy knows.

Fear of admitting mistakes

Common Knowledge Effect

PSYCHO-LOGICAL DANGER

Blaming others

Less likely to share

Comfort admitting mistakes

Better innovating & decision-making

PSYCHO-LOGICAL SAFETY

Learning from failure

Everyone openly shares ideas

THE BENEFITS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IN THE WORKPLACE

It doesn't matter if you work in a small primary school or a large multi-academy trust, building psychological safety will reap huge rewards for everyone, helping to create a happier, more engaged learning environment.

These rewards range from improved innovation, and better collaboration that will have a huge impact on your school environment, to reduced risk of failures, breaches, and non-compliance. Tangible stuff!

Beyond that, psychological safety results in happier teams. Employees take more intelligent risks, raise concerns sooner, stay on the team longer, are more resilient to change and external threats, and ultimately result in real improvements to how your team performs. Quite simply, psychological safety will help your school or MAT to achieve your goals and create an environment where both staff and pupils can learn, grow and thrive.

1. MORE INNOVATION

You won't hear ideas unless people feel safe enough to say them out loud (or write them down). When we suggest ideas, we're making ourselves vulnerable, because we're opening up the idea for critique, and that idea is part of us – it came from our own mind. If an idea is shot down by a psychologically unsafe workplace, it can be hard to take that psychological 'hit', so the people with ideas will stay silent.

Increasing psychological safety increases the likelihood of successful innovation, through intelligent risk taking and lower fear of failure, resulting in an improved learner environment and increased productivity.

2. FEWER PROBLEMS AND ISSUE PREVENTION

A willingness to highlight problems early, and talk about issues before they arise or become too big to ignore means that fewer issues occur when they matter most.

Higher psychological safety results in increased quality and reliability, however that looks in your field. Maybe it's more reliable software, better learning outcomes, or improvements in pupil attainment.

Psychological safety improves outcomes in two ways. Firstly, admitting a mistake provides the opportunity to mitigate the impact of it sooner rather than later, if at all.

Secondly, admitting a mistake allows the whole team to learn from it, and make changes to process, systems, or capabilities in order to reduce the chances of it happening again – or if it does happen again, the impact is reduced.

3. EMPLOYEE RETENTION

Psychological safety results in happier teams, increased employee engagement, and improved raising of genuine concerns to employee wellbeing, which results in lower churn rates and decreased costs related to recruitment and absenteeism. If you feel happy where you work, why would you want to leave?

4. BETTER PERFORMANCE

All of these benefits lead to improved performance and faster delivery, higher quality, reduced re-work, safer workplaces, lower recruitment and sickness costs, fewer security issues and faster innovation. Ultimately, the financial performance of your organisation will be improved.

Whether you belong to a small primary school or you're part of a large multi-academy trust, improving psychological safety will have a dramatic effect on your results and performance.

5.INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY

It's simply not possible to artificially create diversity in an organisation. Diversity is key to unlocking the potential of people through generating ideas, solving problems, and ensuring that everyone benefits whilst also reducing the risk of harm.

A diverse workforce, featuring people from different backgrounds, with different points of view, means nothing if those people don't feel included. To ensure everyone gets a say, and an equal opportunity to flourish, you need a culture of psychological safety. This lays the foundation for long-lasting, true diversity.

6. MOST IMPORTANTLY… INCREASED HAPPINESS

We've said it already, several times actually. But we really want to hammer this point home. A psychologically safe employee is a happy one. High performing teams aren't happy because they're high performing, they're high performing because they're happy.

Psychological safety is important not just because it creates create outcomes for your organisation, but because it's the right, the human, thing to do.

BUILDING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IN YOUR WORKPLACE

Developing and maintaining psychological safety is essential for workplaces, especially those where learning, knowledge sharing, error reporting and innovation are essential parts of your everyday tasks.

It's also really important in contexts which experience frequent change, where workloads are high, and where good team dynamics can make a huge difference to people's performance. As a creative business, we're really focused on ensuring a positive environment, we simply couldn't operate effectively without it.

The model shown, developed by Amy Edmondson, shows the value of creating an environment where both psychological safety, and motivation and accountability, is high. This is where you get the best performance from people - in the 'learning zone' - when they are at their least stressed and most engaged.

No one can do their best at work if they are mentally and emotionally depleted. You'll probably have noticed that yourself. In a school or trust that doesn't prioritise psychological safety, employees often feel that their 'spark' goes out. Psychological safety gives us an environment for people to reduce their stress, feel valued, have open and honest discussions, be able to say 'no' without fear of retribution and ultimately, do their jobs well.

HOW YOU CAN CREATE A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE WORKPLACE

So, we've established that we definitely want to create psychological safety in your school or trust. But what can you, as a manager or team leader, do to help create one?

Well, managers play a critical role in employee motivation and satisfaction. A recent study on "quiet quitting" showed that managers who balance the needs of different team members with driving results are more effective leaders.

That means it's not enough for leaders to simply drive strong employee performance. They need to take care of their team's wellbeing, too. The traditional image of a distant, unfeeling and uncaring leader is actively being replaced by a professionalism that values care, empathy, and inclusivity. When leaders make their teams feel seen, heard, appreciated, and supported, the team members are likely to deliver better results.

This starts by enabling psychological safety. It's critical to helping teams build better relationships, make smart decisions, innovate, and execute tasks.

Creating healthy cultures takes intention, time, and patience but there are a few things you can do as a new (or seasoned) manager to set the tone for more inclusive and equitable workplaces.

As a manager, it's normal to want to hold everyone to a high standard. That's part of your job. But focusing too much on "being perfect" can hurt more than help your team.

To build trust, let go of your perfectionism and let your team learn and grow on their own. Follow these strategies:

LEAD THE WAY

As a leader, you can foster psychologically safe environments by promoting conversation around different issues within the workplace. You can also model curiosity by asking your employees lots of questions, which creates a necessity for them to speak up.

ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR OWN FALLIBILITY

If employees see their managers admitting when they have made mistakes, or taking responsibility for errors, they are more likely to feel comfortable doing so themselves. That's why phrases like "I may miss something - I need to hear from you" really help to create psychologically safe environments.

LET YOUR TEAM MAKE MISTAKES

There's pressure on managers to prove themselves because when your team makes mistakes, it's likely to reflect poorly on your performance as a manager. It's worth remembering that you can only be as good as your team.

The best thing you can do as a leader or manager is to allow your team to make mistakes in a safe space. Hey, mistakes happen, none of us are perfect. But when they do, talk about mistakes, don't shout. Explain the mistake and its potential consequences. Include everyone without accusations. This allows your team to grow and thrive, rather than creating a vicious environment where the fear of making a mistake overtakes the courage to try again.

ENSURE FEEDBACK IS CONSTRUCTIVE

Giving individual feedback is important for the development of your workforce, but it's crucial that your employees do not feel criticised or stilted by it. Try to draw on your employees' strengths whilst encouraging growth in areas requiring improvement.

AVOID BLAME CULTURE

What's the point in blaming people for a problem? All that will do is make employees feel victimised or shamed. Instead, figure out why it occurred, and look for ways to minimise or eliminate these issues in the future. Rather than asking, "Who's at fault," shift the focus to, "Where did the process break down?"

Discussing how to prevent a mistake — rather than shaming colleagues and peers — goes a long way in promoting trust on your team as opposed to fear or contempt.

Consider this example. A member of the team accidentally deleted an important document and there were no other copies. Assigning blame won't help. Instead, come up with new solutions, like creating a shared folder to store important files or establishing protocols to duplicate a file before use to avoid the same issue in the future.

RECOGNISE AND CELEBRATE PEOPLE

Employees want to feel valued at work. That what they bring to the table is worthwhile. It's in our nature! But individuals feel valued in different ways; some prefer incentives, others crave responsibility. Figuring out and acknowledging each individual's needs is critical to leading more engaged and productive teams.

OFFER AN
OPEN DOOR POLICY

Ever had a situation where you were afraid to go and knock on the boss's door? Doesn't make for a happy workplace, does it? Make sure you're available and make sure your team knows it. When they approach you, endeavour to be approachable, open-minded and non-judgmental. Employees will then be more likely to come to you to discuss potential issues.

ADVOCATE FOR DIVERSITY,
EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

As we mentioned earlier, one of your key responsibilities as a manager is to ensure that your team is made up of individuals from diverse backgrounds. This diversity must translate into a sense of belonging where people feel seen and valued for their differences rather than assimilating into one dominant way of thinking, communicating, or behaving.

Consider taking some diversity training and help support your employees to take the same approach. We're all conditioned into certain beliefs and assumptions that may be harmful, and sometimes, discriminatory. But these biases can be overcome with training and practice.

COMMUNICATE WITH CARE

To build team cultures where everyone feels respected, managers must learn to lead with more compassion and humanity. When people see their managers are human, they are much more likely to show up authentically and contribute productively.

But how do we do this effectively? Well, you could lead by example here. Don't be afraid to show your own vulnerabilities. If you're open about your struggles or speak up about what you believe in, it encourages others to follow suit.

You should also show empathy. When a team member decides to confide in you, how you lead one-on-one conversations matters a lot. Supportive work cultures happen when managers understand that disclosure of a personal issue is not an invitation to interrogate or intrude; rather, it's a moment to show solidarity and allyship. One effective way to do this is to use inclusive language. Be kind, help them open up, and offer the support you can.

Whether you're just starting out in your managerial role or taking the charge of a new team, know that creating an environment that feels safe, comfortable, and respected is just as much a part of your job as delivering results. As workplaces adjust to the new ways of working, you have the power to lead change and push for more equitable and inclusive leadership.

ENCOURAGE CURIOSITY

Every breakthrough is the result of curiosity, so promote healthy debate around decisions that are made. Encourage your employees to voice their opinion, ask questions and challenge decisions, all in a healthy way of course.

PRAISE EFFORT, NOT JUST RESULTS

Create a culture of praising your employees for their effort, not just the results they bring. When people believe that performance is contingent on effort, and not just results, they are willing to try new things and persevere in the face of failure.

HOLD REGULAR MEETINGS

Hold regularly scheduled meetings, where any member of the organisation can pose ideas or questions to upper management. If anyone does speak up, make sure they know that their ideas or suggestions are being taken seriously.

WHAT NOT TO DO

When it comes to building a psychologically safe culture where staff are mentally well and performing well too, there's not much worse than leaders or managers who talk the talk but don't walk the walk. In some cases it can even reset any progress you've made towards psychological safety in your workplace.

Try not to do the following:

- **Execute good ideas poorly – this will lower morale and increase staff dissatisfaction.**

- **Shut down ideas, requests or challenges.**

- **Add to time pressures, workloads and bureaucracy in the name of wellbeing and mental health.**

For mental health and wellbeing to be prioritised, something else may have to give - but this isn't a 'nice to have' optional extra. The mental and emotional wellbeing of teachers and school staff is essential for a well performing school or trust. Building and maintaining the right culture will ensure the right performance too. Adopt an honest and curious approach with your staff to find out what would help them, and follow through on what you commit to.

HOW TO RECOGNISE IF YOUR WORKPLACE IS BECOMING MORE PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE

So how exactly do we know when our workplace is becoming psychologically safe? Well, as organisations build greater psychological safety, four recognisable stages emerge.

It all starts with a feeling of belonging. Employees must feel accepted before they're able to contribute fully in ways that improve their organisations.

According to Dr. Timothy Clark, author of The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety: Defining the Path to Inclusion and Innovation, employees have to progress through the following four stages before they feel free to make valuable contributions and challenge the status quo.

STAGE 1 — INCLUSION SAFETY

Inclusion safety satisfies the basic human need to connect and belong. In this stage, you feel safe to be yourself and are accepted for who you are, including your unique attributes and defining characteristics.

STAGE 2 — LEARNER SAFETY

Learner safety satisfies the need to learn and grow. In this stage, you feel safe to exchange in the learning process by asking questions, giving and receiving feedback, experimenting, and making mistakes.

STAGE 3 — CONTRIBUTOR SAFETY

Contributor safety satisfies the need to make a difference. You feel safe to use your skills and abilities to make a meaningful contribution.

STAGE 4 — CHALLENGER SAFETY

Challenger safety satisfies the need to make things better. You feel safe to speak up and challenge the status quo when you think there's an opportunity to change or improve.

If you're a leader, you've got to nurture and promote psychological safety to help employees move through those four stages and reach a place where they feel comfortable with interpersonal risk-taking and speaking up. Doing so will foster a climate of respect, helping employees to collaborate and feel safe to take risks, which results in more effective innovation.

MEASURING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Phew. So, you've been working on creating a psychologically safe workplace, and managed to avoid some of the pitfalls. Now comes the task of measuring psychological safety. You have to find out if it's actually working, of course. The challenge is to effectively gather reliable data regarding psychological safety and share the results in a way that allows teams, schools and trusts to make decisions on how to improve their environment.

Luckily, some of the hard work has already been done for you here. The Fearless Organisation Scan provides the instrument to measure this and begin the crucial conversations that teams need to have in order to access the benefits offered by improving psychological safety.

Using the seven question survey developed by our friend Amy Edmondson, and widely regarded as the gold standard to measure psychological safety, you can receive metrics on overall psychological safety.

This framework can be used to measure the psychological safety within your team. **The seven questions to ask include:**

- **If someone makes a mistake on your team, is it often held against them?**

- **Are members of your team able to bring up problems and tough issues?**

- **Does anyone on your team deliberately act in a way that undermines another's efforts?**

- **Do people on your team sometimes reject others for being different?**

- **Is it safe to take a risk on your team?**

- **Is it difficult for members of your team to ask other members for help?**

- **Are the unique skills and talents of people on your team valued and utilised?**

A FINAL THOUGHT

The road to psychological safety isn't an easy one, but it's more than worth the struggle. With psychological safety in place, the conditions are set to help everyone perform to their true potential. For schools, trusts, teachers and school staff alike, this can only be a good thing. Start today and let everybody bring their full contributions to work.

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

To learn more about creating psychological safety in your workplace, take a look at our **Psychological Safety eLearning Collection** or **sign up for a free trial** with iAM Compliant. You'll have access to this brand-new course collection along with our full training library containing over 250 fun and engaging eLearning courses for all your staff CPD needs.

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