

# Creating Safe Workplaces - for Managers

When we think of “safety” at work, images of wet floor signs or diagrams displaying “safe” ways to lift heavy boxes spring to mind. While physical occupational health and safety are important, it’s also critical that we address the concept of “psychological safety” at work.

## WHAT IS “PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY”?

Amy Edmonson, Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School, defines psychological safety as:

*“a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking.”*

**Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior  
in Work Teams**

*Edmonson 1999*

## WHY DOES THIS MATTER AT WORK?

*“When we feel safe inside the organisation, we will naturally combine our talents and our strengths, and work tirelessly to seize the opportunities.”*

**Simon Sinek**

*author, speaker, marketing consultant*

Psychological safety underpins successful workplaces. Research into USA-based workplaces, undertaken by Gallup, found that psychological safety at work is linked to a number of benefits, including:

- 40% reduction in workplace safety incidents
- 12% increase in staff productivity
- 27% reduction in staff turnover

Professor Edmonson’s research also confirms that

psychological safety at work predicts improvements in:

- Quality
- Learning behaviour
- Productivity

This is in turn backed by internal research at Google which found that teams with high rates of psychological safety were more successful at:

- Implementing a diverse range of ideas
- Delivering high levels of performance
- Retaining staff within the organisation

*“In a psychologically safe team environment, people are less concerned with managing impressions and more focused on the possibilities and the contributions that their coworkers are making.”*

**Shana Lebowitz**

*writing in Business Insider*

## WHAT HAPPENS IN TEAMS/ ORGANISATIONS WHEN PEOPLE DON’T FEEL SAFE?

Psychological safety at work isn’t a given; a safe, empowering, successful culture is an outcome of specific practices and strategies. The number of workers who feel psychologically



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safe is comparatively low; The Australian Workplace Psychological Safety Survey, which canvassed 1,176 employees, found that:

- 23% of lower income workers felt their workplace was psychologically safe to take a risk
- 45% of employees on significantly higher incomes felt safe to take a risk at work

Workers who don't feel safe are less likely to:

- Speak up when they notice something is wrong
- Share new ideas

This can lead to negative consequences in your workplace. According to Professor Edmonson, workers who do not feel psychologically safe may fear that speaking up will result in being labelled by their supervisor, management or other staff as being:

- Ignorant
- Incompetent
- Negative
- Intrusive

Consider the consequences... A factory worker may fear the impacts that could come from raising their concerns about the timing of equipment maintenance.

This worker is aware that their company hasn't been doing too well and that budgets are tight. However, they have noticed that a specific machine hasn't been working correctly and that the maintenance of this equipment has fallen behind. The worker is worried that the poor condition of the equipment could lead to an injury. Despite this, the worker remains silent as they fear retribution for speaking out.

What could be the ultimate result of this staff member's silence, their hesitancy to speak out due to a culture of low psychological safety?

Several weeks later, the equipment jams shut, causing a potential halt to production. A new, inexperienced worker believes they can quickly fix the machine by reaching in to adjust the placement of a certain part. When the worker reaches into the machine, it inexplicably springs back to life and, as a result, the worker sustains serious injuries to their arm...

Another example, raised by Professor Edmonson in her writing and presentations on psychological safety, takes place in a hospital where she studied the characteristics of high performing teams.

As she began her research, Professor Edmonson believed that the best performing teams would be the ones that made the least number of errors. Her research actually found the opposite: better performing teams seemed to be making more errors.

What set the teams apart was their culture: the best performing teams were ones with an open, engaged culture where members were willing to admit to errors, discuss these errors and learn from each other's mistakes.

***"There is a need for leaders to lean in to the fact that if we can improve people's sense of psychological safety at work we will realise significant productivity gains."***

**Julie McKay**

*Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, PwC Australia*

## TIPS FOR CREATING A SAFE WORKPLACE

### **Empower staff to seize opportunities.**

Give your staff the autonomy and power to make decisions, ask questions, report errors or raise difficult issues.

### **Create a culture where employees feel safe to share new ideas.**

Invite your employees to take risks around speaking up, sharing new ideas and embracing innovations.

### **Build an open, engaging environment that encourages learning.**

Encourage people to be open making mistakes and developing new ideas to address errors.

### **Become a workplace that values everyone's contribution.**

Welcome feedback from everyone and recognise that each employee, no matter their role or rank, has valuable insights



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to share.

## **Enhance psychological safety to improve productivity.**

When employees are empowered and supported, they will feel safe, valued and happy. Research studies have established the positive link between employee happiness and higher levels of productivity.

## **FROM SAFETY TO SUCCESS**

Organisations can shift their culture from fear, blame and conflict to one of empowerment, contribution and engagement. How? Converge offers expertise and support across developing leadership skills, setting culture and managing change.

You can find out more by visiting the Converge website or by calling 1300 687 327.



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