Research Brief: Psychological Safety

The Glue that Binds

Why do some teams thrive and some teams fail? Many will say "there is just something about this place" (in fact John Clarke did in his blog: https://www.thoughtarchitects.ca/post/there-s-just-something-about-this-place). However, positive work cultures aren't just magic, they are the result of a cultivation of a way of being. It is how we engage with others that both shapes and is shaped by the culture, and it stems from the "shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking" (Edmondson, 2019). Sounds easy, right? Imagine, however that there is a big project underway. As you listen to others report on that project, it almost sounds to you like there is some scope creep…but maybe you don't really understand the project? You ponder if you should ask a really basic question like "what are the goals of this project?" If you decide you won't ask, it is likely because you don't want to appear unknowledgeable to your peers. If you do, you likely trust your group members to support your own learning. That is psychological safety.

Amy Edmondson is the pioneer of psych safety. She started her career studying healthcare organizations and medical errors. She was part of a team that started with questions around the technical processes and safety mechanisms in place to reduce errors, and ended up looking at the adaptivity of groups and how culture impacts safety. She stumbled across psychological safety as the "underpinning" of all high functioning teams. It was a necessary ingredient for teams to succeed. This has been recently validated at Google under Project Aristotle. This project looked at what makes teams successful and identified that teams need:

- Dependability
- Structure and Clarity
- Meaning in Work
- Personal Impact

None of these mattered though, if psychological safety was not present.

Take Psychological Safety to the Next Level

Healthcare is a complex adaptive system, in fact it has been described as the most complex industry to work in because of the many variables and unpredictable nature of the work. This means that whatever the outcome is shaped by the inputs, but predicting that outcome is not certain. It is like raising a child – there are multiple ways to do that, and each way has no certainty to have a specific outcome. This is the nature of working with people. Nothing is certain!

Unfortunately, the impact of this uncertainty is that it can create an unsafe place for patients. According to the Canadian Patient Safety Institute more patients die in Canada from adverse

healthcare events then they do from cardiac disease (CPSI, 2017). One of the most commonly cited reasons that patients are harmed in the healthcare system is the breakdown of teamwork, communication and staff not feeling safe to speak out when they saw something wrong. Fostering an environment where people feel safe to speak up when they see something wrong, ask for help when they need it, and to learn from their mistakes. Adaptive issues, when there is no certain outcome, require the input and perspective of many. This is the very nature of adaptability, and why it matters to the patients we serve.

It's All About Biology

Ultimately, we have a need to feel safe. It is part of the human condition. Over the centuries human societies have evolved and thrived when they cooperated (Sinek, 2018). When culture is created in ways that biologically and socially get the best out of people, teams thrive.

Individually we all have three basic psychological needs that are as foundational to our existence as food and water – the "nutrients" of well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). We all have a need to have:

> Autonomy – This is the need to self-regulate one's own experiences and actions. It is a way of being "volitional, congruent and integrated" (ibid p. 10)

> Competence – This is the need to feel effective and have mastery and operate effectively in your context. Competence is seen in curiosity and striving for refinement. It is a fine balance of being challenged and having mastery.

> Relatedness – This is how we feel socially connected, a sense of belonging and being a person of significance for others.

When we operate in an environment that supports these needs, we flourish. This is a psychologically safe environment. When we operate in an environment that does not support these things, we see what we often describe as "bad behaviour" – interpersonal conflict, desire for power, and aggression.

The Myths we Operate On

What are the ways that people feel safe? Neurocognitively it is when we keep the pre-frontal cortex engaged and ensure the amygdala is "kept quiet". However, much of our workplace is designed in a way that does not necessarily support the creation of a "brain compatible" organization that fosters psychological safety. In their book "The Nine Lies About Work", Buckingham and Goodall (2019) dig deeply into data to understand why we do the things we do. What they found that there are things that we do that are not supported by the data. We have instead created myths about work. In alignment with psychological safety and our three "psychological nutrients", there are some myths that stand out:

1. People care about the company they work for – People actually don't. They do, however, care deeply about what team they work for. We consider our local teams, and the way in which our local managers lead us as the way that culture is embodied – and if it is consistent or inconsistent with the stated values. The Gallup organization even identified eight key metrics that help

identify sustained team performance. What people care about is that they are in a needs-promoting environment, not what company they work for.

2. People need feedback – It often appears that people need, and want, feedback. From 360 performance reviews, to leadership style assessments to performance reviews, our world is filled with feedback. However, people don't actually want it nor do they thrive with it. What people are looking for is attention – and attention that is given in a "safe and non-judgemental environment" is what makes people thrive.

3. People can reliably rate other people - Closely related to the lie about people needing feedback is the lie that people can reliably rate other people. Through their data and research, Buckingham and Goodall have found that: a) humans cannot be trained to rate others; b) ratings done by others is inherently contaminated with personal biases; and c) adding more feedback does not improve the outcome – it just adds in more contaminated data. So what data is reliable? They found that people can reliably rate their own experience – when done in safe environment.

Psychological Safety and Patient Safety

Leaders play a key role in creating the necessary and desired conditions for teams and individuals to perform their best work and in turn make care safe for patients. Dr Allan Frankel and Dr. Michael Leonard have described in depth the relationship between culture, psychological safety and patient outcomes. This may seem intangible, but it is real, and has real implications on things like medication errors, infection prevention and control rates, and Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems scores.

Effective teamwork and communication are essential to the delivery of safe and reliable healthcare and the underpinning of both of these is psychological safety.

> "A robust safety culture is the combination of attitudes and behaviours that best manages the inevitable dangers created when humans, who are inherently fallible, work in extraordinarily complex environments. The combination, epitomised by healthcare, is a lethal brew."

Continuing to Build the Skillset to Create a Psychologically Safe Environment

You have already started to noticed how your listening impacts how you interact with others. Adding to your thinking is how do you "park" me-focused listening and open up to what has been termed by another participant in one of our sessions as "generous listening" – listening to understand the way in which another person sees the world. It is about being content neutral and judgement free while seeking to understand. It is about understanding that others thrive when they are led with a solution-focused questioning approach that facilitates self-insight, rather than through advice-giving (Ringleb & Rock, 2008).

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