
Unlearning Old Habits to Create Psychological Safety

By: Robin Pedrelli

Back in 2014 Amy Edmondson introduced the corporate world to the concept of psychological safety. A concept she happened upon by accident while researching the correlation between team effectiveness and the rate of errors in medical care delivery. What she actually found is that the teams that were most willing to openly discuss and learn from their mistakes actually made fewer errors overall. That teams that created an environment where it was safe to express concern, to say I don't know and to challenge each other were continually learning, improving and innovating.

Imagine going to work every day and feeling confident enough in yourself and your team to say I need help or I'm not sure I understand. To ask, to gain clarity and to have the information you need to proceed with confidence rather than flubbing your way through the process hoping for the best. Or maybe being secure enough to express reservations about a plan or decision rather than remaining silent because no one else appears concerned. Think about the impact this would have on you as an individual as well as the impact this would have at the organizational level.

To create an environment where employees truly feel safe being themselves, expressing themselves and challenging one another requires undoing a lifetime of learned behavior. According to Edmondson, it turns out nobody wants to look ignorant, incompetent, intrusive or negative. And to avoid this perception is pretty easy – don't ask questions, don't admit weakness, don't offer ideas, and don't challenge the status quo. We learn this self-preservation strategy as early as grade school and by adulthood we've become quite masterful at it. But this behavior has unintended consequences. It limits creativity, it rewards conformity and can stifle growth.

There is a reoccurring theme here. Our ultimate goal is to create workplaces where people can show up as themselves. Where conformity is a thing of the past. Where we can all learn and grow and benefit from our collective wisdom. To do this, we need to let go of decades, even centuries of learned behavior. We need retrain our collective brains that asking questions in the pursuit of

knowledge is a sign of strength and wisdom not stupidity. That admitting weakness and asking for help is a noble leadership trait that should be rewarded. And we need to encourage individuality over conformity.

This shift will not happen overnight and will require constant and consistent behavior change, and positive reinforcement of behavior that empowers employees to learn, contribute and innovate.

Consider incorporating the following tips:

- Dedicate a portion of every meeting for team members to ask questions and don't be tempted to rush through this. Be comfortable living in the silence so employees feel compelled to contribute and ask questions rather than feeling pressured to keep silent in order to move quickly through the process. Respond enthusiastically when questions are posed to the group and invite input from everyone on the team.
- Admit your own weaknesses and let your team know where you are looking for their input. Invite all team members to share their own strengths and weaknesses and what each team member brings to the process.
- Explore the collective strengths and how individual weaknesses can be eliminated through collaboration and the sharing of ideas.
- Ask each team member directly for their input. Ask what they think, if anything has been missed, if there is another way to approach something.
- Use mistakes as a learning experience. Never cast blame but talk openly about what went wrong, how to improve and what can be done differently in the future.

Psychological safety is something we can create by first showing our own vulnerability and by rewarding a speak up culture. It is not enough to say it's ok. You need to make it ok. When people ask, answer. When an idea is challenged, stop and rethink. And by all means ditch the "family photo" where everyone shows up in khakis and their white button-down shirts. Invite everyone to show up as themselves, to ask questions, to bring new ideas to the table and to express concerns and reservations. By promoting an environment that supports psychological safety we can unlearn old habits to make room for new ones. Habits that promote courageous conversation and bold ideas.

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