

### HOW TO BUILD INCLUSIVE TEAMS: PART 4 - PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

I once had a manager who prided himself on "upgrading" his team. His version of success involved replacing each team member one by one until he had a group, he deemed worthy. You could always tell who was next on the chopping block—he'd start criticizing them in meetings, pointing out their flaws, and questioning their work in private conversations. It was a pattern everyone saw coming, and eventually, it happened to me. The result? I quit. I didn't feel safe in that environment. I knew that no matter how hard I worked or what ideas I brought forward, it wouldn't matter. No one in that team felt comfortable taking risks or sharing their true thoughts.

Looking back, it's clear that what was missing was psychological safety - the belief that we can take risks, share our opinions, and express ourselves without fear of negative consequences. Ironically, despite having studied psychology and organizational behavior, I didn't fully grasp the real-world importance of this concept until I experienced it firsthand, both as an employee and, later, as a leader.

Years after working under that manager, I became a leader myself, and, unfortunately, I didn't do much better. I had this mindset that pressure creates the best ideas - "pressure builds diamonds," as the saying goes. I'd challenge my team's ideas aggressively and didn't hesitate to express my unfiltered thoughts. I thought I was pushing them toward greatness, but, in reality, I was pushing them toward silence. My team stopped giving me their best ideas and started giving me the ideas they thought I wanted to hear. My reactions—eye rolls, dismissive comments—killed any sense of safety they might have had to voice their real opinions.

What I've since learned, through both failure and reflection, is that psychological safety is the foundation of inclusive leadership. It's not enough to create a diverse team; you have to foster an environment where everyone feels safe enough to contribute fully, where they can share their perspectives without fear of judgment or repercussion. Without psychological safety, inclusion is just a word. When people don't feel safe to express themselves, their diversity of thought, experience, and insight is lost. This is why I now prioritize creating a safe environment in every team I lead, and I work with other leaders to help them do the same. Building psychological safety isn't easy - it's fragile and can be easily broken—but it's the cornerstone of true inclusion, and it's the key to unlocking the full potential of your team.

#### The Power of Inclusion

Before we can start providing you with the tools you need to be an inclusive leader and build a diverse high performing team, it is important to align on a definition of inclusion. Inclusion has two main components: a sense of belonging and feeling valued for your unique contributions. A sense of belonging means that you and your employees feel accepted and integral to the team and company. When people feel like they are truly part of the team, they are more likely to contribute their best work, collaborate effectively, and stay with the company longer. However, belonging isn't enough if it requires changing who you are to fit in.

True inclusion requires that the team and organization value individuals for their unique contributions. A truly inclusive culture sees differences as strengths, leveraging diverse perspectives, skills, and experiences to enhance team performance. When a sense of belonging and feeling valued for unique contributions are combined, employees feel empowered to be their true selves and share their perspectives without fear of negative consequences. This is the foundation of a truly inclusive culture. Reflecting on my experience, I realized that by trying to build a team of clones, I had stifled the unique strengths each person could bring. It wasn't until years later that I embraced the diverse perspectives of my new team, and we started to thrive.

Part of the mistake I made with that first team was that I didn't think inclusion was something critical to focus on—I thought it was soft. But, in reality, inclusion provides substantial benefits. Research shows that companies with higher levels of inclusion make better strategic decisions (Korn Ferry, 2016), bring products to market faster, and have higher employee engagement, which leads to better business results (Korn Ferry, 2016). This leads to better business results, lower turnover rates, and improved retention and career progression (Cornell University, 2023; Google, 2020). Companies in the top quartile for diversity and inclusion are also significantly more profitable (McKinsey, 2020). These benefits clearly demonstrate how crucial inclusion is to achieving business success.

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This realization ignited a new passion within me. Since the beginning of the year, I've been focusing on making companies and teams more inclusive. And over this series of articles, I'll share the lessons I've learned and tools to help you foster a truly inclusive workplace. In this article, I will focus on one of the most critical components of being an inclusive leader and building an inclusive team: being curious and not judgmental.

## What is Psychological Safety and Why Do Some Teams Lack It?

Psychological safety is the belief that your team is a safe place to express ideas, take risks, and share opinions without fear of judgment or criticism. When people feel psychologically safe, they can be themselves, voice their thoughts, and take chances without worrying about negative consequences.

High-performance teams thrive on open discussion, challenging ideas, and taking risks. But if people don't feel safe to speak up, they hold back. Without psychological safety, a team's full potential is never reached because members won't bring their best ideas forward. So why don't all teams have psychological safety? There are several reasons that can prevent people from feeling safe enough to speak up.

- **Fear of Judgment or Criticism** - Some team members hold back because they're afraid of being judged or criticized. If they think their ideas will be shot down or mocked, they'll avoid sharing them. This fear stops them from taking risks and offering their true thoughts. Over time, people stop contributing, and the team loses out on valuable input.
- **Power Dynamics and Hierarchy** - In some teams or cultures, there's a strong sense of hierarchy. When the leader speaks, no one feels comfortable challenging their ideas. Team members fall into the habit of agreeing with the boss to avoid conflict, even when they see a problem with the plan. This "yes, boss" mentality prevents honest discussion and leads to poor decisions.
- **Blame Culture** - In some teams, failure is seen as a personal flaw, and people are quick to point fingers when something goes wrong. This blame culture discourages risk-taking. If team members know they'll be blamed for a failed idea, they'll stop taking risks and stay quiet. It feels safer to let others take the fall rather than speak up and potentially be blamed.
- **Lack of Trust** - Trust is the foundation of psychological safety. When there's a lack of trust in the team, people don't feel safe enough to share their thoughts or ideas. They worry that others won't support them or might even use their words against them later. Without trust, communication breaks down, and team members become guarded. This limits collaboration and stifles the team's performance.

## Critical Components of Psychological Safety

Some of you might recognize the challenges your team faces when it comes to creating psychological safety. Acknowledging these issues is a great first step, but to truly foster an inclusive and psychologically safe environment, you need to actively build trust, encourage openness, and invite differing viewpoints. Here are some key focus areas that can help you and your team create a culture of psychological safety.

- **Building Trust and Openness** - Psychological safety begins with trust. Without it, team members won't feel comfortable sharing ideas or taking risks. Trust isn't just about believing in someone's skills; it's about knowing that teammates won't judge or undermine one another. Leaders need to build strong connections within the team by fostering a sense of personal trust. This means creating an environment where people trust each other's intentions and feel safe enough to speak openly. Building this kind of trust forms the foundation for psychological safety.
- **Creating a Culture of Openness and Vulnerability** - For a team to feel psychologically safe, openness and vulnerability are essential. Team members need to feel free to share their thoughts, concerns, and even mistakes without fear of punishment. Leaders can encourage this by promoting a growth mindset—where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities. Leaders should also model vulnerability by admitting their own mistakes. When leaders show they aren't perfect, they signal to the team that it's okay to take risks and be open about their challenges.



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· **Promoting Open and Honest Communication** - Open communication is key to psychological safety. Leaders should be transparent about what's happening in the organization and within the team. This transparency builds trust and encourages team members to do the same. It's also essential for leaders to seek input from all team members, not just the most vocal. Inviting different perspectives ensures everyone's voice is heard. Leaders should actively seek and welcome differing viewpoints to create an environment where it's safe to disagree, leading to better decision-making and more innovative ideas.

· **Breaking Confirmation Bias** - One common challenge to psychological safety is confirmation bias—listening only to opinions that reinforce existing beliefs. Leaders can break this cycle by encouraging diverse viewpoints and making it clear that disagreements are welcome. Asking for opposing ideas helps create an environment where questioning the status quo is safe. By fostering open debate, leaders ensure that the best ideas surface, not just the most popular ones. This approach strengthens psychological safety and drives better team performance.

### **How to Build Psychological Safety in Your Team**

Now that we've identified key focus areas in order to build psychological safety in yourself and others, let's put these concepts into action. Here are four activities that I recommend. Two of these activities are designed to help build this mindset within your team. The other two activities are designed to help individuals (either yourself or one of your direct reports).

#### **1 on 1 Coaching Activities**

· **Psychological Safety Check-ins** - This is one of the easiest and most effective ways to start building psychological safety. During individual meetings, ask your team members how they feel about speaking up or sharing their ideas. Ask questions like, "How comfortable do you feel sharing your thoughts in team meetings?" or "What can I do to help you speak up more?" This check-in helps you understand what might be holding someone back from contributing more, and it allows you to work with them on solutions. Some people won't need this - they might already be open—but for those who are quieter, this is a great way to show that their input is valued.

· **Leader Vulnerability Exercise** - A simple but powerful way to build trust is for leaders to show their own vulnerability. In one-on-one meetings or with the whole team, share a mistake you've made or something you've struggled with. For example, "I made this mistake when I was in your shoes," or "I've had challenges with this too." When leaders admit they're not perfect, it shows the team that it's okay to be human and make mistakes. This openness builds trust and encourages others to share their own struggles without fear of judgment.

#### **Team Activities**

· **Psychological Safety Feedback Roundtables** - This activity brings the team together to talk about how safe they feel sharing their thoughts and ideas. To be honest, if your team doesn't feel safe, they might not be comfortable talking about it right away. That's why you shouldn't start with this activity - it's better to introduce it after some trust has been built. In the roundtable, the leader sets the stage, saying, "It's important for us to feel safe sharing our ideas, and I want us to talk about how we can improve that." The goal is to create an open conversation where people feel comfortable discussing what helps or hurts their sense of safety at work. It might take time for people to open up, so be patient and encouraging.

· **Role Reversal Activity** - In this activity, team members swap roles to better understand what their colleagues go through. It's a simple way to build empathy without making it about psychological safety directly. When people take on a different role, they gain insight into their teammate's challenges and perspective. You can also do this with customer or stakeholder roles to help the team see things from other points of view. The more people understand each other's challenges, the more trust and psychological safety they build. This activity helps everyone see things from a new perspective and better appreciate each other's roles.



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I Learned How to Build a Psychologically Safe Team and You Can Too!

It wasn't until I realized that I was repeating the same unhealthy habits as my former boss that I got the wake-up call I needed. It wasn't easy to admit, but it was necessary. I had to fail before I truly understood the importance of psychological safety.

I still believe that pressure builds results, but now I know my role is to create an environment where the team feels safe enough to challenge ideas and push boundaries. There's a big difference between a boss who criticizes everything and a team that feels comfortable challenging each other because they trust one another. That's where real growth happens.

To build psychological safety, start by showing vulnerability. Share your own mistakes and encourage your team to take risks. Don't assume they'll speak up—actively seek out different viewpoints and make it clear that disagreement is welcome. The more you invite diverse perspectives, the safer your team will feel, and the better they'll perform.

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