REDUCING WORKPLACE ANXIETY - PART 2 - PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Early in my career, a change in leadership left an indelible mark—for all the wrong reasons. Our team had celebrated our boss's promotion, hopeful about the future. When his replacement arrived, we were cautiously optimistic.

That optimism crumbled during his first meeting when he announced his mission to "upgrade" the staff. He proudly recounted replacing 95% of his previous team with "better fits," leaving us wondering, "Am I next?" What followed was a systematic dismantling of our team: subtle jokes turned into public criticisms, and formal warnings eventually led to terminations. As the last member of the original team, I saw the writing on the wall and left before he could push me out.

The constant worry was suffocating. Every day became a tightrope walk, focused on survival rather than excellence. Risk-taking, creativity, and collaboration vanished as fear took center stage. Ironically, the toxic environment he created justified his narrative that the team was underperforming.

Years later, I learned about psychological safety -- the shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. Reflecting on this experience, I realized how its absence stifled our potential. Fear may drive compliance, but it extinguishes innovation and trust, forcing even the most capable individuals to retreat into self-preservation.

Why We Need to Talk About Workplace Anxiety

When we talk about anxiety at work, we're not talking about clinical diagnoses or panic attacks. We're talking about the everyday stress, worry, and pressure that so many people carry with them — especially right now. It's the creeping tension that builds up over time. It chips away at focus, connection, and energy. And left unaddressed, it can quietly erode performance, well-being, and team culture.

Workplace anxiety doesn't come from nowhere. It's not just about having a bad boss or a tough deadline. Most often, it's the result of deeper, systemic issues—things that exist across teams and organizations, baked into the culture, communication, and leadership norms.

In this series, we're exploring **seven of the biggest drivers of workplace anxiety** — themes that come up again and again in the organizations I work with and the leaders I coach. These aren't just theoretical problems. They're patterns I've seen in action, and in many cases, lived through myself.

Here's what we'll be digging into over the coming months:

1. **Toxic Work Environments** – when fear replaces trust, and people feel unsafe to speak up or take risks.

2. **Imposter Syndrome** – when talented people feel like frauds, and anxiety drives perfectionism or paralysis.

3. **Lack of Supportive Relationships** – when workplace connections are strained, shallow, or absent altogether.

4. **Overwhelming Workloads & Unclear Priorities** – when everything feels urgent and nothing feels achievable.

5. **Neglected Well-Being** – when people are burning out, and no one's paying attention to the toll.

6. **Resistance to Change** – when uncertainty isn't addressed, and the unknown becomes a threat.

7. **Personal and Global Stressors** – when employees bring real-life challenges into a workplace that isn't ready to support them.

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Each article in this series will explore one of these drivers in depth, offering real stories, research-backed insight, and practical tools to help reduce anxiety—whether you're leading a team or just trying to get through the week with your sanity intact.

This month's article kicks things off with one of the most common and damaging culprits: a lack of psychological safety. Let's dive in.

Why Psychological Safety Matters

Psychological safety is the shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. It means team members feel secure to share ideas, voice concerns, and even make mistakes without fear of humiliation or punishment. This concept, first defined by Amy Edmondson, emphasizes that trust and mutual respect enable individuals to contribute fully.

When psychological safety is absent, anxiety, worry, and stress flourish. In such environments, team members operate defensively, prioritizing self-preservation over collaboration and creativity. The result is a workplace where innovation stalls, problems remain hidden, and chronic stress becomes the norm.

Conversely, psychological safety acts as an antidote to workplace anxiety and stress. When team members feel they can be candid without fear of reprisal, they are more likely to engage, take calculated risks, and learn from failures. This trust fosters an environment of experimentation and progress, essential for high performing teams.

For some, the challenge of feeling unsafe at work is compounded by external factors like discrimination or personal circumstances. In these cases, work can either amplify stress or serve as a refuge of inclusion and acceptance. When leaders prioritize psychological safety, they create a space where diverse voices are valued and everyone feels empowered to bring their full selves to work.

Psychological safety isn't a luxury—it's a necessity in today's unpredictable world. By minimizing anxiety and fostering trust, leaders lay the groundwork for innovation, collaboration, and resilience.

Removing Judgment and Blame

When things go wrong, it's human nature to search for someone to blame. Leaders often see blame as a path to accountability, believing that pinpointing who's at fault will prevent future mistakes. However, this mindset can derail team performance.

Blame quickly shifts from addressing what went wrong to targeting who went wrong. This personal focus fosters fear, discourages openness, and stifles innovation. In blame-driven cultures, team members avoid risks, hide problems, and focus on self-preservation rather than collaboration.

I saw this firsthand with my former boss. Mistakes were met with sharp criticism, with no effort to understand what caused them or how to learn from them. It created a culture of secrecy and defensiveness, where no one dared to take initiative or admit to errors. Instead of solving problems, this approach exacerbated them.

Leaders need to replace blame with curiosity. Mistakes are inevitable, but the key lies in how we respond to them. Instead of asking, "How could this happen?" ask, "What can we learn from this?" This mindset encourages teams to view errors as opportunities for growth rather than threats to their job security.

Curiosity shifts the focus from the past to the future, emphasizing improvement over fault-finding. By fostering a learning environment, leaders create a culture where people feel safe to own their mistakes, share challenges, and innovate without fear of judgment.

Removing judgment and blame is foundational for psychological safety. Once teams feel safe from criticism, they can embrace openness and vulnerability—critical next steps for building trust and collaboration.

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Fostering Openness & Vulnerability

Eliminating blame is a crucial first step, but psychological safety requires more. Leaders must actively foster openness and vulnerability to build a culture where trust and collaboration thrive.

Many leaders shy away from showing vulnerability, fearing it might undermine their authority. However, the opposite is true: pretending to have all the answers creates distance between leaders and their teams. Authenticity, not infallibility, builds trust.

Vulnerability doesn't mean oversharing or exposing every flaw. It's about honest, thoughtful moments. For example, a leader might say, "I misunderstood the client's needs earlier, but here's how we corrected it." This admission shows it's okay to make mistakes and learn from them. Similarly, acknowledging uncertainty—like saying, "I need your help figuring this out"—encourages collaboration and demonstrates that everyone's input matters.

Openness also requires leaders to invite vulnerability from their teams. Asking questions like, "What challenges are you facing?" or "What can I do to support you?" signals that honesty is valued. When leaders listen actively and respond constructively, they reinforce the message that it's safe to speak up.

This approach sets the tone for the entire team. As leaders model vulnerability, team members are more likely to admit mistakes, share ideas, and collaborate without fear of judgment. This ripple effect fosters psychological safety, trust, and mutual respect.

Openness and vulnerability turn teams into environments where everyone feels valued and supported. With these foundations, the potential for innovation, creativity, and collective success grows exponentially.

Recognizing the Power of Leadership

As a leader, your words and actions carry immense weight, often far beyond what you might realize. Leadership isn't just about making decisions—it's about setting the tone for the team. Your behavior can either create a culture of trust and psychological safety or foster anxiety and mistrust.

A critical concept for leaders to understand is the gap between intention and perception. A casual remark or a seemingly harmless joke can take on a completely different meaning when delivered from a position of authority. For example, my former boss's jokes about employees weren't just lighthearted—they signaled the beginning of a pattern that led to terminations. His words, whether intended or not, created fear and eroded trust.

To lead effectively, you must be intentional with your words and actions. Avoid making jokes at someone's expense, even in jest. Critique ideas, not people. And when offering feedback, do so in a way that challenges constructively without making the recipient feel diminished.

Leadership is about more than just authority; it's about creating an environment where people feel safe to share, collaborate, and take risks. Every comment, decision, and reaction shape the team's culture. By choosing your words wisely and demonstrating respect and empathy, you lay the groundwork for psychological safety and high performance.

The lens of authority amplifies everything you say and do. Recognizing this power—and using it thoughtfully—can transform your team into a cohesive, innovative, and thriving unit.

Building Teams That Thrive

Psychological safety is the cornerstone of high-performing teams. It's what transforms a group of individuals into a cohesive, innovative, and resilient unit. Leaders play a pivotal role in creating this environment by removing judgment, fostering openness, and using their authority thoughtfully.

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When fear and blame dominate, teams focus on survival, sacrificing creativity, trust, and collaboration. By contrast, psychologically safe teams embrace mistakes as learning opportunities, value diverse perspectives, and tackle challenges with confidence and mutual respect.

The path to psychological safety isn't without challenges. It requires leaders to let go of perfectionism, embrace vulnerability, and commit to continuous improvement. But the payoff is profound: a culture where anxiety gives way to trust, performance soars, and individuals feel empowered to bring their best selves to work.

As you reflect on your team, ask yourself: What kind of environment am I creating? Are my words and actions fostering trust or fear? By prioritizing psychological safety, you're not just building a better team—you're creating a workplace where people thrive, innovate, and achieve extraordinary results together.

The choice is clear: fear or trust, blame or learning, isolation or collaboration. The future of your team depends on how you lead today. Choose wisely.

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