

Psychological Safety (PS) is the key trait of high-performing teams. It describes a belief that you will not be punished for asking for help or admitting a failure – neither informally e.g. by being ridiculed nor formally e.g. by being written up.

Trust & Respect

PS shapes how often we engage in learning behaviors such as sharing information, experimenting, double-checking when in doubt, suggesting improvements, and asking questions. – both with your peers and when a boss is present.

Basis for Learning

What is Psychological Safety?

Being able to show your whole self without fear of negative consequences

Want to build a high-performing team? Establish Psychological Safety!

Speaking up can be hard. You might be ignored or humiliated, you make yourself vulnerable. Silence pays off immediately: there is no risk of losing face. And there is seemingly no downside, since nobody knows you are holding back. But long-term you may grow resentful and detached.

Voice-Silence Asymmetry

Speaking up pays off in the long run: being able to bring your whole self to work, innovate, make fewer errors and improvement for the organization. PS makes it more likely that someone will speak up.

It is a trait of your immediate team. An organization can make PS more likely to evolve but it cannot “have” PS. PS lives at the team level and is shaped by the behavior team leaders and team members model.

At Team-Level

PS does not mean that everybody is always comfortable. It makes it possible to talk about hard and controversial topics, such as saying that you think someone made a mistake or admitting that you don't know something.

What it is NOT

Neither does PS mean that meetings take longer because more people speak.. Actually, meetings can conclude sooner because there is less covert beating around the bush. Doubts and concerns are voiced openly which leads to faster decisions. In an environment with PS candor is allowed and expected.

To become a high-performing team everyone needs to learn all the time. Fear inhibits learning. Thus PS is the enabling factor for high-performance. It is not enough, but other factors such as clear goals, mutual accountability, and purpose do not help unless there is PS.

“Psychological Safety takes off the brakes that keep people from achieving what's possible. But it's not the fuel that powers the car.”

Amy Edmondson

