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Setting the Scene

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P psychological safety impacts every single person on the planet and influences every part of your daily life, such as your family interactions, your social life, work, health, relationships, finances, education, your creativity, your engagement with your local community, your spirituality/religion and your digital life.

What Is Psychological Safety?

Psychological Safety is multi-dimensional in nature, making it a complex aspect of workplace culture. Psychological safety is primarily focused on an individual's subjective experience of safety, comfort and confidence within a specific context, whether it is a physical space, an environment, a situation or when interacting with people. It incorporates many cognitive-emotional-behavioral aspects, such as your emotional and mental well-being, your mental processes, your emotional responses, thoughts and the way you behave.

You might be wondering how that translates into the workplace. Psychological safety in the workplace is rooted at the individual level, where cultivating intrapersonal awareness lays the groundwork for bringing your Authentic Self to work. This intrapersonal foundation acts as a catalyst, playing a pivotal role in cultivating positive team dynamics and collaboration.

In other words, psychological safety in the workplace starts with you understanding your thoughts, emotions and behaviors. This self-awareness is crucial because intrapersonal aspects directly influence your performance and behavior in the workplace. This intrapersonal awareness not only serves as a catalyst for bringing your Authentic Self to work,

but also acts as a driving force in enhancing and refining communication, team dynamics and collaboration.

In psychologically safe workplaces, communication with crystal-clear clarity is a top priority and the work environment is intentionally designed to facilitate exceptional collaboration and teamwork, promoting a deep sense of belonging where everyone in the team can thrive. Regular opportunities for reflection and creative exploration empower individuals to fully utilize their unique talents and perspectives, resulting in increased innovation and enhanced problem-solving capabilities.

Ultimately, a psychologically safe workplace is one where both individuals and teams can thrive and achieve their full potential.

What Affects Your Sense of Safety?

Sense of safety is an individualized experience. This means that a situation or a conversation with a colleague that feels safe to you may not feel safe to another member of your team.

Let me give you an example. In team meetings, you feel safe bringing your whole self to work, you discuss your projects and openly reflect on your progress with the rest of the team. You feel confident discussing obstacles that you are facing, resolving conflicts and dealing with misunderstandings and miscommunications – because you feel safe. But is that true for every individual within the team? Does everyone in your team feel safe doing these things?

Your sense of psychological safety can be influenced by a wide range of factors. Here are a few to get you

thinking about what affects your sense of safety in the workplace.

Conditioning begins the moment you are born. What you believe to be true today as an adult is a result of the social conditioning and messages you heard as a young child. By the age of around six to seven years old, your belief system had been formed from what you experienced around you. Your beliefs are formed through your experiences, inferences, deductions and through accepting what others tell you to be true.

Most of your thoughts and beliefs are not your own. This conditioning comes from a variety of different sources. Close to home the messages come from your parents, family, school, friends, peers, people in your community and religious institutions. External influences are the political system, the government, mass media (TV, magazines, newspapers, radio stations), the books you read, the websites you browse, music and marketing advertisements.

When you were young you didn't question the messages and perspectives that you heard, saw and felt. You accepted the messages were all true and real and you didn't question the assumptions or conclusions you made.

Learning by example, you modeled the behavior and attitudes of those around you. You were taught a certain way of being that is right and "appropriate." You were rewarded with love and praise when you acted in a certain way and punished when you didn't act a certain way. You internalized the critical messages and voices you heard. Some of these beliefs and thoughts about yourself and the world around you were assimilated through osmosis.

In essence, you are trained to have a certain response, whether that is a positive, negative, rational or irrational response to the situation.

The person you are today and your interactions with family, friends and work colleagues are influenced by the social conditioning and messages you internalized during your formative years and, as a result, you are highly likely to have certain biases and perspectives.

You are a product of your environment and upbringing. The messages and beliefs you internalized during childhood play a significant role in shaping your personal and professional identity, impacting the way you present yourself in various contexts, including the workplace. They shape your self-perception, how you interact with others and even how you approach your work.

For example, if you were constantly told as a child that you need to work hard and get a good job to be successful, you may feel pressured to work long hours and sacrifice other aspects of your life for your career.

Additionally, if you were told that success looks a certain way, you may feel like you need to conform to these societal norms and pursue a particular career or lifestyle, even if it does not align with your true passions and desires.

Ultimately, these repetitive thoughts and beliefs can limit your potential and prevent you from fully realizing your true potential at work and in life. And they affect how safe you feel in different scenarios.

Let me give you some practical examples of conditioning from an LGBTQ+ perspective. We live in a world where we are taught (conditioned) that to be heterosexual and cisgender is normal and anything outside of that is wrong or not accepted. Think about it. The mainstream media typically portrays heterosexual and cisgender relationships, right? When there is a program with a steamy LGBTQ+

love scene it hits the news and gets everyone talking. I have been on many radio programs over the years discussing TV shows where there was a “controversial” LGBTQ+ element. Usually that controversial element is an intimate love scene with same-sex couples. Tell me, how often do you hear debates on the radio about heterosexual intimate scenes? I recall . . . never.

In the UK, many LGBTQ+ individuals grew up not having any LGBTQ+ references or a safe space to explore their sexuality, because of Section 28 (from 1988–2003 in England and Wales). On the flip side, non-LGBTQ+ individuals were not educated or given the safe space to ask questions about LGBTQ+ life. The political landscape at the time and social attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people were hostile. Section 28 conditioned us to think LGBTQ+ life is wrong and immoral.

And let’s not forget the AIDS crisis. In the mid-1980s there was an intense media focus on AIDS, a new disease that was terrifying and had no cure. It was known as the “gay disease.” The AIDS crisis dominated the 1980s for the LGBTQ+ community. I remember it being talked about on the TV when I was a kid and remember when it hit the headlines of newspapers. People were frightened. Terrified. Public health campaigns were rolled out across the UK. A leaflet was sent to every household in the country. There was a week of educational programming on TV at peak time, and family TV presenters were demonstrating condoms on prime-time television.

The AIDS epidemic (and media coverage of this) and Section 28 created misunderstandings and a terrified nation. The information provided by the government and the media about AIDS and HIV was inaccurate, and as a result,

homophobia escalated dramatically at this time, with many LGBTQ+ people hiding away in fear.

The impact of all this can be seen today, in the workplace and in society. Misunderstandings. Stereotyping. Judgments. Criticism. Hatred. Aggression. Frustration. Shame. Guilt. Abuse, bullying and harassment. So, you see, as a result of all of this, LGBTQ+ people have more layers of social conditioning to unpick than non-LGBTQ+ people.

Filters. We all have filters. They influence what you see, hear and think, and can cause you to mishear and internalize what has been said in a different way than what was intended. Everything you see and experience in the world is processed through these filters. We are conditioned to have white, heterosexual and cisgender filters. Unconsciously, everyone in your organization is making decisions, having conversations and performing their roles while influenced by these white, cisgender and heterosexual filters. This can have profoundly damaging effects on LGBTQ+ individuals and other marginalized communities.

Privilege. Having privilege means having an advantage that is out of your control and that you didn't ask for. Privilege describes benefits that belong to people because they fit into a specific social group or have certain dimensions to their identity.

Here is an example of heterosexual/straight privilege. "I can express affection in most social situations and do not expect hostile or violent reactions from others." If you don't have to think about your safety when out in public with your partner, you are privileged.

To use your own privilege for good and be an ally, you must be aware, listen and speak up. The first step is self-awareness. Understand and acknowledge your own privilege. The second step is to educate yourself; learn about

other people's experiences. Actively listen to the lived experiences of individuals who encounter different oppression from your own. The third step is to support others who are facing oppression. Learn how you can stand in solidarity with them. Break down barriers (or systems, or accepted practices) that perpetuate their oppression.

Ok, so let's bring all that together: conditioning, filters and privilege. How do they impact on an individual's sense of safety in the workplace? They undermine your confidence to express yourself, influence your sense of belonging and directly affect your ability to make meaningful contributions to the collective success of your team.

Let me give you an LGBTQ+ scenario to help you picture how conditioning, filters and privilege manifest in real-life situations. When you walk down the street, you may glance at a heterosexual couple expressing their love for each other in public and not really think about it. But what if this was a same-sex couple? Would you have the same reaction?

In public, many same-sex couples are hyper-vigilant and constantly on high alert. Why? Because the general population are influenced by their conditioning, filters and privilege to regard that behavior as wrong or immoral.

Same-sex couples in this hyper-vigilant state can never be fully in the moment and able to appreciate the love and affection between them and their partner. Subconscious thoughts of "don't let your guard down" and "don't assume everything will be ok" are always with them. Holding hands, a touch to the leg or the arm, a stroke of the face, a glance that says you care – these are always considered. Same-sex couples are always assessing and on guard.

Over the years, I have experienced physical and verbal abuse when in public with my partner. As a result, we are

vigilant and always on high alert and never express affection when out in public. We are not alone in this.

In a pharmaceutical company I worked with, I recall having a conversation with an individual who identified as a gay man. He had been with his partner for a few years and was asking for my advice. He was experiencing real issues with public displays of affection (holding hands) due to the negative and aggressive reactions from the general public as well as his colleagues whilst engaging in work social events. This resulted in him and his partner not engaging in public displays of affection at work events or when outside the house. He went on to say that this was starting to impact on their levels of intimacy at home.

Let me tell you. The abuse, the judgments, the disconnection and constantly looking over your shoulder. All that stuff that goes on outside the home, it is not possible to be unaffected by it. It is challenging to take off the masks you wear, quickly and effortlessly when you get home, and it can be difficult to turn the switch from “mask on/distant” to “intimate” with your partner.

So yes, suppressing your natural urges to be affectionate and intimate in public over the years can impact on intimacy back in the home. It isn't like suddenly you stop being affectionate or intimate together. It is more subtle than that. Because you are closing off a part of yourself when you are outside of the home, naturally that begins to seep into your relationship back in the home too. Subconsciously, back in the home you continue to wear that mask and to hold those barriers up.

I hear time and time again my clients say things like “I have noticed I am not tactile with my partner in front of my family or friends anymore. We used to be.” Another

thing I hear often is “I noticed the other day that we were sitting at opposite ends of the living room. This is our ‘new normal.’ In the past we would be sat up close, snuggling and sharing a bar of chocolate.” Lastly, I hear all too frequently (and a feeling I share) “I still won’t walk down the street holding hands with my partner or kiss on public transport, for fear of being attacked. Simple things that heterosexual people take for granted.”

Experiencing the subtle homophobia, biphobia and (not so subtle) transphobia that is underlying our society, you learn to hide certain elements, gestures or mannerisms, socially, with your family/friends and in the workplace. You learn to adapt to keep yourself (and your loved ones) safe.

Assumptions and **stereotypes** affect your sense of safety. Let’s explore both of these. An *assumption* is something that is accepted as true or as certain to happen, without proof.

Let me take you on the Assumptions Journey. This is how they form:

1. You have an experience. There is an input of raw data and observations from your experience. These are the facts.
2. You filter in information and details from that experience: the environment around you, the sounds and smells.
3. You analyze the situation based on your own life experiences. This may lead you to categorize people and situations incorrectly.
4. You assign meaning to the situation using all the information you have filtered through. This is where you interpret what the information is telling you.

5. You develop assumptions based on the meaning you created in 3 and 4. This blurs the distinction between what is fact and what is story.
6. You develop conclusions based on your assumptions about the person/situation. Here is where emotional reactions are created.
7. You adjust your beliefs about the world around you, including the people involved in your experience of the moment.
8. You take action based on your adjusted beliefs.

Your mind is a powerful tool. It wants to categorize everything. You automatically and intuitively categorize everything around you based on your conditioning, your upbringing, your education, your life experiences and your exposure to groups of people via the media. When you engage in “quick thinking” it leads you to pre-judge others, based on a set of predefined social categories or norms. People in your “in-group” you judge positively, whereas for others you make negative judgments.

You may make assumptions based on one experience or a piece of information without checking whether this is the case for everyone. This can result in people being treated less favorably and not being provided with the same opportunities or choices enjoyed by others. Making assumptions about people may reveal a lack of insight or knowledge.

Now for a practical example to illustrate how an experience can result in assumptions. Walking through an alley way, a homeless man attacks and robs you. This experience results in you associating all homeless people with violence. You now treat all homeless people with disdain.

Daniel Kahneman, author of *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, suggests that your brain has two operating systems. System 1 is the brain's fast, automatic, intuitive approach. System 2 is the mind's slower, analytical mode, where reason dominates. Assumptions come from quick thinking, which is automatic, intuitive and impulsive and demands very little effort. Quick thinking leads you to form impressions and make decisions that often result in errors of judgment. You make assumptions based on stereotypes.

A *stereotype* is a fixed and oversimplified belief about a particular group or class of people. Stereotypes are mistaken ideas or beliefs many people have about a thing or group. These are usually based upon how the person looks on the outside and their behaviors.

Let me give you an example. Imagine a person riding a Harley-Davidson motorbike. You might assume they are rebellious. You picture them dressed in leather, with studs and patches. You think they are older and visualize their hair blowing in the wind out of their open face helmet. A set of wraparound shades usually completes the look. You assume this is a male. In reality, they love the freedom of the open road but defy the stereotype. Their rebellious appearance conceals a warm-hearted personality. Contrary to expectations, they are not necessarily older; age is irrelevant to their passion for riding. The wraparound shades protect their eyes from the sun, not worn as a symbol of defiance. This rider could just as easily be female, challenging the assumption that the Harley-Davidson experience is exclusive to a particular gender. Many stereotypes are rooted in prejudice so you should be wary of them.

Worrying about other people's assumptions of you and if they are stereotyping you can lead to individuals

curating their image, hiding elements of their identity and choosing not to bring their Authentic Self to certain situations in the workplace. It can also alter an individual's behavior, where they censor their mannerisms, gestures and communication styles. Ultimately, it impacts on their feelings of safety in the workplace.

Let us move on to **bias**. In simple terms, bias is a tendency to favor certain people or ideas over others, often leading to unfair treatment based on preconceived judgments. *Individual biases* affect someone else's sense of safety. These are where attitudes or stereotypes affect your views, actions and decision-making ability. Individual bias spikes when you are less aware of what you are doing. For example, when you are on "autopilot" or quick thinking.

Systemic biases, also known as structural or institutional biases, refer to ingrained and widespread patterns of prejudice, discrimination or favoritism embedded within the structures, policies and practices of a society or organization. These biases are often woven into the fabric of institutions, influencing interactions, decisions and outcomes on a larger scale. Unlike individual biases that originate from personal beliefs, systemic biases emerge from historical, cultural and societal factors, leading to unequal treatment and opportunities for different groups.

Individual and systemic biases cultivate an environment where individuals are subjected to unfair treatment and unequal opportunities, and as a result they may feel a sense of exclusion, which can destroy their confidence, affecting their physical and mental well-being and overall sense of safety at work.

Empower yourself to address biases by taking proactive steps. Start by acknowledging that everyone has biases and

then take time for self-reflection. Question your assumptions, examine your thoughts and consider different perspectives to gain a clearer understanding of your own biases. Be aware of your physiology, recognizing how hydration, hunger and tiredness affect your thinking. After you have corrected any physiological issues that might interfere with your ability to identify your own biases, you can look for opportunities to address bias in the following areas. Challenge your biases by checking the facts behind your opinions and perspectives. Smash stereotypes by recognizing what assumptions you make and the stereotypes you assign to people. Then look for different sources of information. Educate yourself, slow down your thought processes and be mindful to distinguish between “fast brain” and “slow brain” responses. Avoid multi-tasking, reduce stress and actively invite others to challenge your perspectives. Practice allyship by responding to biased comments or behaviors from others.

Personalities can affect your sense of safety – in a few different ways. *Personality* is one component of your identity. Personality consists of predictable behavior patterns. A personality trait is a habitual pattern of behavior, thought and emotion. It is consistent and lasts over time; you carry it from one situation to the next, for a long period of time. You can’t change or transform your personality. It is hard-wired in the brain.

Personality affects safety in several ways. One, when you experience different personalities to yours; imagine this dynamic. You are in a meeting with someone who is strong, assertive, fast paced and driven. You, on the other hand, are calm, laid back and compassionate in your approach. Or maybe you have someone who is very outspoken and social working alongside someone who is an introvert and reflector.

They have two very different personalities. When you have such strong contrasts, it can lead to clashes, unspoken tension or frustration, and such interactions can make individuals feel unsafe. Navigating these dynamics can be tricky.

A second way personality can affect safety is as a cause of conflict. Some personalities hate conflict and do everything they can to shy away from it. Others prefer to address issues head on, to resolve the situation quickly. In a global study we conducted,¹ we found that many employees were shying away from conflict situations or conversations that could result in conflict situations, instead choosing to not address it with their colleagues. They would internalize the conversation that triggered them, wait until they got home and then start chewing it over and over. This then impacted on their home life, relationships and physical and mental health. The next day, they take all that chewed over emotion and unfinished communication back into the workplace. As you can imagine, this causes long-term impact on relationships, creativity, communication and performance.

Another side of conflict is this. Imagine you have two parties involved – one a supplier, the other the buyer. The buyer raises a concern about the work produced by the supplier. The supplier tries to rectify the situation by increasing the time spent on the project or by addressing the issue with the output. They do not acknowledge the complaint or issue that was raised, either in live conversations or digitally. It is left unaddressed. In this scenario, the buyer, after raising a concern about the work, feels frustrated as the supplier focuses solely on fixing the output without acknowledging the issue.

Three, aspects of your personality can affect how safe you feel at work. Applying Eysenck's Personality Theory,² team members who score high in extroversion and low in

neuroticism (emotionally stable) are more likely to feel psychologically safe in the workplace. Team members who score low in extroversion (introverts) and high in neuroticism (emotionally unstable) are less likely to feel psychologically safe in the workplace. It makes complete sense. I'll dig into this more in Chapter 6, "Pillar 3."

Another element that affects sense of safety is **power**. I'm referring to the power dynamics between individuals. Interactions and relationships between individuals often revolve around hierarchy, authority and influence, which can significantly impact how safe someone feels in expressing themselves.

Individuals that belong to **marginalized groups** or individuals with protected characteristics may not feel psychologically safe at work due to a history of discrimination, microaggressions and exclusion, which can create an environment where their identities and contributions are undervalued or ignored. Whilst belonging to a marginalized group can influence how safe someone may feel at work, it's essential to note that safety concerns in the workplace are multifaceted and not solely attributed to one factor.

Neurodivergent individuals may feel unsafe when an organization fails to acknowledge and accommodate their abilities and needs. Individuals may struggle to navigate a work environment that doesn't cater to their strengths and challenges. This can lead to individuals feeling misunderstood or even marginalized. The lack of awareness or resources to support individuals with autism, Asperger's syndrome, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), bipolar disorder, sensory processing disorder or dyslexia, for example, can lead to misinterpretations, difficulties in communication, unintentional exclusion or feeling overlooked.

Mental health profoundly influences an individual's sense of safety in workplace situations. Struggles with mental well-being can amplify feelings of vulnerability, hinder open communication and create barriers to fully engaging and thriving within the professional environment. Mental health is a big issue in the LGBTQ+ community. I believe this is because LGBTQ+ people experience bullying, rejection, stigma and discrimination and have layers of conditioning to unpick. Those who identify as LGBTQ+ are more likely to develop problems like low self-esteem, depression, anxiety (including social anxiety), and eating problems, and misuse drugs and alcohol, self-harm and experience suicidal feelings and other mental health problems.

Discrimination, harassment, bullying and stigma make people feel unsafe in the workplace. They usually occur due to a lack of understanding or education. There is the added challenge of reporting harassment and abuse, which impacts on how safe individuals feel in the workplace.

Feeling **excluded** at work might manifest in the following situations, such as during conversations about parenting, discussions about family life/relationships and conversations delving into personal details with colleagues. Exclusion may also occur when discussing activities external to work, managing leave entitlement, expressing your gender identity, navigating gender expectations, addressing race-related issues, dealing with cultural and background differences, managing (dis)abilities, confronting age-related biases, and handling discussions related to sexuality, educational background or political views.

Negative behaviors contribute to an unsafe workplace environment. These can manifest through spoken or written

words, abuse, insulting behavior, personal insults, offensive emails or comments on social networking sites, as well as images, graffiti, physical gestures, facial expressions and jokes targeting an individual's sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, religion, belief or age. Unwanted physical contact, ranging from touching to serious assault, and intrusion through pestering, spying and stalking are also forms of negative behaviors that individuals may encounter in the workplace.

There are also specific work-related aspects that influence an individual's sense of safety within the workplace. These include the leadership and management style, the effectiveness of communication and trust-building, expectations, roles and responsibilities. The way conflicts are addressed when reported, the feeling of being valued, respected and appreciated, maintaining a balanced workload, job security and organizational policies that promote fairness, equality and ethical behavior also contribute to an individual's overall perception of safety in the workplace. The handling of bullying and harassment within the organizational context further shapes the work environment's safety dynamics.

As you can see, there are many different aspects that influence an individual's sense of psychological safety in the workplace. Which ones of these affect your sense of safety in the workplace?

And let's not forget that these aspects rarely exist in isolation. There might be a whole host of these aspects, intersecting and mixing around together in various combinations at any given moment. Individuals may be unaware that many of these aspects are coming into play.

Ineffective and Effective Implementation

Ineffective implementation of psychological safety can manifest in various ways. Here are a few examples. Training is conducted on an ad hoc basis merely to “check a box.” In meetings, individuals remain quiet unless explicitly prompted. Errors are made and not seen as learning opportunities. Micro-management stifles autonomy. High staff turnover and disengagement are prevalent. There is a lack of trust and collaboration. Individuals and teams shy away from risk-taking, leading to limited innovation. Individuals meet the minimum requirements and clock off precisely on time. A culture of blame, miscommunications and conflict is widespread. Measurement of psychological safety is either non-existent or includes only a few employee questions, tagged onto another survey unrelated to this topic.

The consequences of not having a psychologically safe workplace are far-reaching for individuals. Here are a few. Physical, mental and emotional health of individuals are impacted. Poor performance and decision-making are evident. Communication is strained and ineffective. Conflict resolution is minimal. Blame culture emerges, resulting in grievances, conflicts and liability risks. You observe increased absenteeism and withdrawal behaviors in your team. Individuals shut down, feeling insecure and putting up barriers for protection. They compare their performance and abilities to their peers. Stress levels are raised, causing frustration and resentment, which exacerbates existing health issues. Engagement is lowered, with individuals withholding their skills, knowledge and experience. This has a knock-on effect on their levels of satisfaction and sense of purpose at work, affecting relationships, curiosity, creativity and innovation – directly impacting your business.

The impact on the organization is substantial. Turnover, revenue and profit are negatively impacted. Human resources (HR) teams witness increased attrition, with a worrying level of retention amongst the newest recruits. With the employees that remain, engagement is low and absenteeism is high. Productivity takes a hit, and you have missed opportunities for innovation. Ineffective collaboration occurs between individuals and teams. Silo working takes hold. Toxic cultures develop and escalate. There is a greater risk of accidents, incidents and injuries. Problems go unreported and corners are cut. Any wrong-doing, unethical or illegal behavior goes unchallenged. These situations lead to tragic failures, which in certain industries can be catastrophic. All of this could have been prevented if individuals felt safe to bring their Authentic Self to the workplace.

Effective implementation of psychological safety can manifest in various ways. Ongoing discussions about psychological safety occur in various contexts: one-on-one meetings, team meetings and organizational-wide interactions. Individuals are empowered to initiate conflict resolution strategies, promptly addressing issues. You experience open and inclusive communication and a non-judgmental and respectful atmosphere across the business. Trust and effective collaboration are evident, all underpinned by supportive, authentic leadership. You have cultivated a learning culture, and a workplace that exudes empowerment, autonomy, authenticity, alignment (accompanied by supportive policies and practices), as well as accountability and fairness. Psychological safety is measured annually, with the questions focused solely on psychological safety. The results are transparently shared and interventions are openly discussed and agreed upon.

Organizations that proactively cultivate a psychologically safe environment experience a range of benefits, including improved employee well-being (less staff sickness), heightened levels of employee engagement (people giving their all to their work), enhanced creativity and innovation (new ideas for products and services, as well as creative solutions to challenges faced), stronger teamwork and collaboration (high-performing teams and collaborative working), increased opportunities for learning and development, reduced turnover of staff and enhanced talent retention (loyal and happy employees), refined decision-making and problem-solving capabilities and the cultivation of a positive organizational culture and reputation.

Psychological Safety versus Inclusive Culture

Many individuals believe that psychological safety and inclusion are intrinsically linked, that you can't have one without the other. I challenge this view. You can feel psychologically safe in a situation without feeling included or integral to the group. But can you truly feel included if you don't feel safe? Inclusion encompasses a broader sense of belonging and acceptance within a community or group. If you don't feel safe, it is likely to hinder your sense of belonging and your perception of feeling included. In other words, if you don't feel safe it is likely to create obstacles or difficulties, making it challenging for you to experience a genuine sense of belonging and inclusion in a community or group.

Psychological safety is a precursor to feeling included and lays the groundwork for genuine inclusion. Without

psychological safety, you can't have a truly inclusive culture. Therefore, cultivating a psychologically safe environment is the catalyst for genuine inclusion. Despite this, organizations often tend to prioritize inclusion initiatives over creating a psychologically safe workplace.

Let me illustrate this through the Hierarchy of Psychological Safety, as shown in Figure 1.1. The Hierarchy maps out organizational responsibilities, embracing both internal and global dimensions.

There are eight levels of responsibility. The first five levels delve into internal dimensions, while the final three levels transcend organizational boundaries.

Level 1 is Individual Safety. This level focuses on establishing a foundational level of psychological safety at the individual level, promoting authenticity, resilience and personal responsibility.

Advancing to Level 2, we experience Interpersonal Safety. This level concentrates on nurturing psychological safety in one-on-one interactions, placing a strong emphasis on effective communication and interpersonal skills.



Figure 1.1 Hierarchy of Psychological Safety

Level 3 introduces us to Team Dynamics Safety. Here, the primary focus is on cultivating a psychologically safe team environment, where everyone in the team can thrive.

Moving on to Level 4, we arrive at Collaboration Safety. At this level, the spotlight is on creating an environment conducive to innovation and collaboration.

Level 5 is dedicated to Organizational Safety. This level broadens the scope of psychological safety to the organizational level, underscoring an unwavering commitment to cultivate a safe and inclusive workplace culture for all employees.

Transitioning into the external dimensions, Level 6 is External Relations Safety. Here, the focus shifts to extending and influencing psychological safety standards in external collaborations. This involves cultivating robust and thriving relationships with clients, stakeholders and partner organizations.

Level 7, Community Safety, shifts the focus toward elevating psychological safety to positively impact the wider community. This level places a significant emphasis on proactively collaborating with the community through various initiatives, extending organizational commitment beyond boundaries.

Finally, at Level 8, Industry and Global Safety, the perspective expands to a global scale. Here, the emphasis is on elevating psychological safety to exert a positive influence on industry dynamics and global contexts. This level is dedicated to challenging and transforming industry and global workplace attitudes, actively working to dismantle outdated practices. The ultimate objective is to establish a global landscape of workplaces and industries that prioritize and cultivate psychological safety.

In the Hierarchy, genuine inclusion is located at Level 5, Organizational Safety, where psychological safety permeates

the entire organization. This is often seen as a pivotal stage where an inclusive culture may be more fully realized. Unfortunately, many organizations tend to concentrate solely on Level 5 with their inclusion initiatives, disregarding the foundational Levels 1–4. This neglect results in significant challenges for individuals and teams, ultimately hindering the progress and success of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives.

Feeling safe at work is a fundamental right for everyone. When this sense of safety enables you to express your Authentic Self, you thrive – which leads to increased happiness, well-being, inspiration, connection, engagement and empowerment. These factors contribute to the development of high-performing teams and a genuine sense of belonging. A psychologically safe workplace empowers individuals to perform at their best, driving EDI initiatives forward.

Psychological safety underpins both an inclusive culture and an environment where employees genuinely belong, playing a pivotal role in the success of EDI efforts.

Therefore, focus your attention on cultivating a psychologically safe workplace. It will inherently nurture inclusivity, enrich diversity and positively impact well-being, team effectiveness and overall organizational success.

Misconceptions

Through my extensive work with corporations, it is clear there are misconceptions about psychological safety. Here are a few of the common misconceptions I hear regularly.

“Inclusion takes priority over psychological safety in our EDI initiatives since it doesn’t affect everyone.” Psychological

safety is seen as a “nice to have,” once inclusion and belonging have been addressed. Remember, psychological safety underpins inclusion. Without psychological safety, you will not have an inclusive culture. If you want to create an inclusive culture, you need to start with the foundations. Create an environment where people feel safe. Once they feel safe, valued and able to express their Authentic Self, the groundwork for genuine inclusion has been established. Psychological safety serves as the bedrock upon which the pillars of diversity, equity and inclusion stand. Neglecting psychological safety in favor of other initiatives can undermine the very essence of a truly inclusive culture. Prioritize psychological safety from the outset. It will lead to a significant shift in your overall organizational culture. This shift goes beyond just a surface-level approach to diversity and inclusion, as it addresses the core factors that enable individuals to thrive.

“Psychological safety and inclusion are intrinsically linked.” This has been discussed in detail in the section above.

“Leaders are responsible for psychological safety.” With most corporations operating within a traditional organizational paradigm, characterized by hierarchical structures, power and decision-making are concentrated at the top. Rest assured, the responsibility doesn’t lie with leaders.

“Psychological safety only affects a few people, specifically the ones that are susceptible to stress and anxiety.” Whilst these factors do play a role, businesses are failing to recognize the impact it has on everyone in the organization, from leaders to employees. This includes employees that work full-time, part-time, temporary, freelance/contract, on job share, shift-workers, volunteers, interns and project-based staff. Everyone. It influences employee

health, overall well-being, levels of engagement and ultimately, performance.

“Psychological safety revolves around the fear of speaking up or making mistakes.” Psychological safety is a much bigger concept than interpersonal risk taking, with a wider scope that often goes unnoticed or is downplayed. As you progress through the pages of this book and reflect on the Hierarchy of Psychological Safety, I am sure you will see and appreciate the breadth of psychological safety.

“A single training session for everyone in the organization will create a psychologically safe workplace and provide all the tools that we need.” Many businesses focus on key performance indicators (KPIs) and short-term goals and fail to measure impact. There is so much pressure to deliver immediate results and meet these KPIs that the bigger picture is often overlooked. Many organizations prioritize productivity and efficiency over creating a psychologically safe environment. A single training event or a one-off conversation will not create a safe workplace. True transformation takes time, effort and a collaborative approach, and sustained attention on it. And you must measure impact. Otherwise, why did you waste all that time, money and resources?

“HR teams, well-being teams and Employee Resource Groups are the ones that should lead the discussions about psychological safety.” Whilst these groups of people are often the ones that engage in conversations about psychological safety, it is thought that these groups bear the responsibility and are the ones that tend to initiate interventions for the organization. The discussion about psychological safety must extend to the leadership team and have buy-in from everyone to ensure a comprehensive and organization-wide commitment.

“It is impossible to measure how psychologically safe employees feel at work.” It is possible to measure psychological safety. I have developed a tool to accurately do so. More on that in Chapter 3.

Navigating Roles and Responsibilities

Creating a psychologically safe environment is a collaborative effort. Every single individual within the organization plays a crucial role in creating a workplace where everyone can not just survive but thrive. It requires commitment and effort from everyone, regardless of their role or level of seniority. Throughout this book, you will be presented with the methodologies and tools designed to support you on your journey.

You must remember that the responsibility for cultivating psychological safety doesn’t sit on one individual’s shoulders. It is a shared commitment that involves every single person in the organization. However, there are additional responsibilities that can be divided into three distinct spheres: leadership, managers and HR.

The leadership team has three primary areas of responsibility. The first is the task of developing and communicating a clear mission and set of values that prioritize psychological safety. Second is championing psychological safety as loudly as possible. This includes ensuring the narrative of psychological safety is disseminated throughout the organization and integrated into every aspect of working life, from discussions in leadership meetings, team meetings and one-on-one meetings, to ensuring maximum attendance at training events and organization-wide

completion of psychological safety annual assessments. Last, it is important that they lead the way in cultivating a culture characterized by effective communication, mutual respect and collaboration, where diverse perspectives are valued and all employees are treated with dignity and respect. It is essential to recognize that this last responsibility isn't confined solely to the leadership team. It is a collective responsibility shared by all within the organization.

Managers have five primary areas of responsibility. Firstly, they are expected to lead by example and model the behavior they expect from their team members. This involves embracing vulnerability and sharing their own experiences, thereby creating a culture of openness and trust. Secondly, they should encourage open communication and active listening within their teams, to create a safe space for individuals and build trust. Thirdly, a key element of their role involves providing feedback and support to their team members, to help them grow and thrive in the organization. Fourthly, managers play a pivotal role in championing diversity and inclusion. This is manifested through their hiring and promotion practices, recognizing the value and importance of individuals with different backgrounds, skill sets and experiences. Lastly, managers are responsible for addressing any incidents of conflict or harassment promptly and taking a strong stance against these behaviors.

The HR team has several additional responsibilities. These include establishing policies and procedures that support psychological safety, inclusion and equity. They must provide adequate resources and training to support individuals and teams. They are responsible for ensuring all employees have access to confidential resources for support, such

as an employee assistance program or counseling services. Monitoring and addressing any issues related to discrimination, harassment or bullying in the workplace need to be prompt and effective. They are tasked with measuring and monitoring psychological safety and taking action to address any concerns or issues, as well as continuously evaluating and improving upon the workplace culture to ensure that it is safe, inclusive and supportive for all employees. Again, it is vital to note that some of these responsibilities are not exclusive to HR. The learning and development team, well-being team, managers and employees each hold specific roles and responsibilities within this collaborative effort.

In this chapter we have begun to explore psychological safety in the workplace. We began by defining the concept of psychological safety and delving into the factors that influence our sense of safety, gaining a deeper understanding of its impact in the workplace. From there, we examined the contrasts between ineffective and effective implementation, as well as the relationship between inclusion and psychological safety. We addressed the most common misconceptions head-on, dispelling myths that often hinder the implementation of psychological safety methodology. Lastly, we navigated the landscape of roles and responsibilities, underlining the collective effort required to cultivate psychological safety throughout the organization.

In the next chapter, we are going to explore the concept of bringing your Authentic Self to work. Buckle up, this is the exciting bit. It might blow your mind a little, but trust me, it is exciting.

Notes

1. Gina Battye (2022). Psychological Safety Global Study. www.thepsi.global.
2. For more information about Eysenck's Personality Theory: <https://hanseysenck.com>.

