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The Nature of Psychological Safety

Psychological Safety Isn't an Option, It's Part of Our DNA

When it comes to psychological safety, you're managing it, or it's managing you.

In early 2021, my team at Aristotle and I were contacted by a global company that was based in France. At that time, a lot of our focus was on educating the market. Nearly all of our conversations required in depth explanations of psychological safety and its importance. What it was, what it wasn't, and what kinds of issues would arise when it was low and what outcomes could look like when it was high. Typical cost, benefit conversations.

While there were plenty of people who had some knowledge, even a few who had been doing great work in this domain for many years. There were even some people out there who had knowledge and experience with implementation. Yet, much of the L&D, People and Culture, and HR world was unaware or had only recently become aware of the term, let alone what to do about it. It was even less common for leaders to have any awareness. But meeting someone—anyone—who knew the term, what it meant, or

was already working to do something constructive with the information was a rare treat.

As a result, when I sat down with an executive from this company, one of the top people in the American division, I was expecting the same extended conversation exploring the problems they were facing and diving deep on the topic of psychological safety.

Instead, they said to me, “We’ve been working at developing psychological safety in our organization; we measure it regularly and we have built it into our leadership framework. But we have a problem. It’s not getting better; people are sick of hearing about it and we have the same issues we had before.” After I got over the initial shock of talking to someone who had gone this far down the road, my curiosity piqued.

Why would this not be working?

The team structures and the nature of their work all pointed to a high need for psychological safety. The rollout of the program that was described sounded like textbook change management. Good communication, good support, executive buy-in—you name it. Our first meeting ended with a lot more questions than answers.

The hunt for red flags continued.

Internal culture architects and leaders are often too close to a problem to see what’s really going on. An outside perspective can be invaluable but only to those who can apply it.

The general message in the communications and training materials perpetuated several myths—one of the worst being that psychological safety should make everyone feel comfortable. Psychologically safe environments are often uncomfortable, because you feel a greater obligation to speak up and greater certainty it won’t be a problem when you do. If you share respectfully there is clarity that you will be appreciated instead of humiliated.

Another problem—they didn’t want anyone to be worried about their job. This was clearly stated in the training material—then the company had done a round of lay-offs after riding out the initial wave of COVID-19 lockdowns. Psychological safety doesn’t mean your job is secure. The company had several contracts come to an end at the same time. The reduction in force had nothing to do with psychological safety. They were trying to convince people that a psychologically safe environment meant more stable

teams, which people had understood to mean that they would not be fired. It was confusing and had a significant impact on trust.

Leaders were tying themselves in knots trying to make everyone feel comfortable, no candid feedback, no forward-thinking collaboration. Stressed-out leaders were starting to push back against the initiative because they felt like they couldn't get their work done and accomplish these high-minded ideals. They were being asked to be in two places at once—keep high standards, but don't make anyone feel like their standards aren't good enough.

Since then, this has become a much more common issue. Well-meaning initiatives that have misleading or unhelpful content that sets the stage for avoidable failures.

Psychological safety is an outcome; you change it by changing the factors that influence it. You can't wave a wand and get people to "do it more." You need to do the right things to build and nurture psychological safety to see it improve. Leaders need skills, and they need a system that helps and encourages those behaviors.

At its core, psychological safety is not about comfort or complacency. It does not imply that teams will avoid conflict or that feedback must be diluted. The opposite is true—psychological safety creates the foundation for healthy, constructive tension that drives performance and innovation.

When the pieces are in place, you will experience high intellectual friction with low social friction.

How We Work to Manage the Future

“The main function of the human brain is to organize our behavior in anticipation of future events.”

—Gerald Edelman, *American biologist*

We are in a continuous state of setting ourselves up for the next thing. Edelman's quote is one of my favorites because it helps people understand psychological safety and how people respond to their environment in a very broad and empathetic manner.

At its core, the brain is a predictive, learning machine. It constantly scans for patterns, recalls past experiences, and adjusts our behavior to align with what we expect might happen next. These predictions go beyond survival—they shape how we navigate social environments, including the workplace.

When the brain anticipates safety and acceptance, it encourages openness, risk-taking, and creativity.

When the brain senses uncertainty or potential threat, it prompts us to tread carefully, manage impressions, or withhold ideas to survive the moment or simply get by.

Metaphorically, I like to think of it like a door. If warning signs go up, the learning door is closed. If the environment is safe, the door is open. Leaders can help keep this door open with their connection, curiosity, and compassion.

Keeping that door open is central to your success as a leader.

This connection between anticipation and psychological safety is crucial for understanding why some teams thrive while others stagnate. In psychologically safe environments, individuals predict that speaking up will lead to positive or, at the very least, neutral outcomes. They trust that asking questions, sharing half-formed ideas, or admitting mistakes won't result in embarrassment or punishment. As a result, their behavior reflects curiosity and engagement rather than self-protection.

However, when psychological safety is low, the brain anticipates negative social consequences. A simple misstep, such as questioning authority, admitting an error, or suggesting a risky idea, can feel like a reputational gamble. The brain, in its effort to protect, organizes behavior around avoidance and caution. Over time, this leads to silence, hidden mistakes, and missed opportunities.

Consider how this plays out in a high-stakes meeting. A team member with valuable insight may hesitate to speak if their brain anticipates rejection or ridicule. That split-second calculation—driven by the brain's prediction of social threat—can ripple across the organization. Now multiply this by every individual who feels similarly, and the result can be catastrophic.

When leaders consistently demonstrate openness to feedback, reward brave contributions, and normalize learning from failure, they reshape the predictive landscape. Over time, the brain recalibrates. Employees no longer

brace for negative reactions but instead expect constructive dialogue, making it easier to contribute fully and authentically.

The beauty of Edelman's insight is that it highlights how psychological safety isn't just about creating a pleasant workplace—it's about writing a script that the brain can anticipate. When people predict that their contributions will be valued, they align their behavior with growth, exploration, and collaboration.

The challenge for leaders is to ensure that these positive predictions become the default setting in every corner of their organization.

So, how do people organize their behavior at work?

How People Manage Impressions and Their Environment

“People don't fear being wrong, they fear being judged for it.”

—Willard Barth, *author and consultant*

With so much of the conversation about psychological safety being academic, my first mission is to help you “see” it as a leader.

Most leaders overestimate the state of psychological safety on their teams. This is because of a lack of self-awareness, distance from their time as a team member, and the actions of team members who are wired to try and make it seem like things are better than they are. Impression management can act like a warning system. It gives leaders and culture architects something to see and respond to in real time, rather than relying solely on metrics or hindsight.

It is relatively easy to identify indicators of low psychological safety after the fact. Engagement scores, for example, provide insight into the past. In a way it is a consequence of the past. Psychological safety is all about predicting the future. Because psychological safety is an assessment of our environment, leaders are left asking the same question:

“How do I know when it's low?”

The answer? Look at the behavior. The term impression management was introduced by Erving Goffman in the 1950s (Goffman, 1959). Around the same time, the term psychological safety was introduced by Carl Rogers

in the context of human development (Rogers, 1954), and later adapted to organizational learning by Schein and Bennis in their work on group dynamics and change (Schein & Bennis, 1965). In their own way, one led to the other. This was a revelation for me. Impression management was known to academics, but I felt it was completely underutilized. Once you know what to look for, impression management can become your indicator to do something about it.

This term, *impression management*, came from researchers who wanted to see if they could observe if people were in a state of learning readiness. In other words—can we tell when people are ready to take on and apply new knowledge? Is the door open or closed?

They described impression management as a person's conscious or subconscious effort to control the flow of information about themselves in an attempt to control their environment or how they are perceived.

This is a universal phenomenon. We start doing this at such a young age it feels normal, which it is, but we can often have a hard time determining where it's good and where it has started to undermine our better interests. In practice you will find that it is so common and normal that developing awareness of this can be somewhat revelatory on its own. It is essential for us to manage ourselves and adapt our behavior if we are to successfully work in groups. If we didn't do this to some degree, we would live in a world more like the movie *The Invention of Lying* with Ricky Gervais—a world where no one lies but a man discovers the ability to lie, and chaos ensues.

The easiest place to start is with yourself. After a meeting or even during it, take note of times that you were self-editing to try and control the environment or the responses you would get from others. What were you doing and what reaction were you hoping to see?

Without some impression management it would be impossible to work together. Depending on our culture we may prefer more or less filters, but the key is that within a culture, norms are the rules we play by. Impression management helps us to align with those norms.

As a leader or culture architect, you are creating a culture with the people around you.

This isn't about vanity. It's not malicious. It's about survival. It's about connection. Humans are wired to belong, and in environments where opportunities, promotions, and reputations are on the line, the image people

project can feel as important as the work they produce. In some cases, it's actually more important than the work they produce. Impression management is a powerful force that shapes the culture and our experience of each other at work (Jones & Pittman, 1982).¹

Even though it isn't the entire list of tactics, listed here are several you might recognize, others, less so. But, most importantly—these are the canaries in the coal mine of low psychological safety:

- **Self-promotion:** Overtly or inappropriately highlighting one's own achievements, skills, and competence to appear capable and successful.
- **Ingratiation:** Using flattery, praise, or friendly behavior to be seen as likable and personable, perhaps better known as sucking up.
- **Exemplification:** Going above and beyond normal expectations to be seen as dedicated, virtuous, or morally worthy, like writing a fifty page report when a five page report was more helpful.
- **Entitlements:** Claiming responsibility for positive outcomes to appear competent or successful, particularly when it is undeserved.
- **Excuses:** Explaining away negative outcomes to protect self-image or avoid blame.
- **Virtue signaling:** Publicly expressing moral, ethical, or socially valued beliefs to appear principled or aligned (often without consistent follow-through, behavior, or decision-making).

The goal in recognizing these is to help create environments where authenticity is safer than impression management. By understanding these you can quickly adjust. If someone is self-protecting, you can help clarify why a more real or authentic answer would actually be more helpful. If you do it in a tactful, caring manner, you can bring people back from what might feel like a higher risk interaction.

At one end of the spectrum, impression management can look like polish and preparation. People dress a little sharper, double-check their presentations, and carefully articulate their contributions. This is normal and often beneficial; it reflects respect for the workplace and the team. But at the other end, impression management can turn into masking, hiding, and pretending.

The result is clear:

- A project manager downplays the risks in their proposal because they fear looking incompetent.
- Project timelines or targets are aspirational instead of realistic—all discussed and agreed on with everyone leaving the room to talk about how unrealistic they really are.
- People nod along in meetings, avoiding questions to avoid appearing uninformed.
- A senior leader avoids admitting they don't know the answer, opting instead to deliver vague over-confident statements. This gives the impression they know what's going on while subtly indicating that admitting mistakes should be avoided.
- A talented employee hesitates to propose a bold idea because past risk-taking led to public criticism.

Understanding impression management allows leaders to observe the outcomes of the environment and levels of psychological safety.

When psychological safety is low people shift from focusing on results to protecting their image. The workplace becomes a performance instead of high performing. Meetings are filled with agreement, but dissent happens behind closed doors. Mistakes are concealed, not because people don't care, but because the cost of vulnerability feels too high.

The original research of Dr. Amy C. Edmondson at Harvard Business School highlights this phenomenon. In her study of medical teams, Edmondson found that the highest-performing teams reported more errors, not because they made more mistakes, but because they felt safe to acknowledge them, having open conversation and learning to improve their work quality. In lower-performing teams, impression management led to under-reporting, creating the illusion of competence at the expense of learning and improvement (Edmondson, 1999).²

One example comes from Google's Project Aristotle (Google, 2016),³ a multi-year study into team effectiveness. The highest-performing teams

weren't those with the smartest individuals or the most similar backgrounds but those with the highest psychological safety. Team members consistently reported feeling comfortable being vulnerable and asking for help without fear of being judged.

In environments with strong psychological safety, impression management relaxes. People feel comfortable showing up as they are—flaws and all. A leader can say, “I’m not sure about this,” without fear of losing credibility. A junior employee can challenge an idea without being seen as disruptive. Questions aren’t a sign of incompetence; they are seen as a sign of engagement.

Impression management often looks like engagement. A quiet meeting may seem harmonious, but silence could signal fear. High-performing individuals may appear polished, but their reluctance to share doubts could indicate more concern for optics than outcomes.

- Is disagreement visible during meetings, or does it surface afterward?
- Are decisions based on merit or does the team quietly default to rank?
- Do team members acknowledge mistakes openly, or do they get defensive and evasive?
- Are questions and challenges distributed across the team, or do they come from the same voices repeatedly?

You have the opportunity to also ask yourself these questions:

- Am I seeing the behavior I need to get the results I want today and for the future?
- Is everyone agreeing with me?
- Do I feel like we’re aligned but by the next meeting I feel like I need to explain myself again?

Whether conscious or unconscious, this practice shapes how people show up, speak up, and contribute.

The presence of impression management isn’t inherently negative. It’s a positive when it helps people work better together. It is a negative when it is used to defend against social vulnerabilities and survive choppy social waters.

The goal is to make it less necessary.

The less people are managing their impressions, the more they are focused on solving problems in real time.

Our Primal Need for Safety

“Exclusion activates the same brain regions as physical pain. We are wired for connection.”

—Naomi Eisenberger, *Professor of Psychology, UCLA*

Understanding how the human brain works, particularly under stress or uncertainty, can completely shift how you lead. It reframes moments of silence, resistance, or hesitation not as laziness or incompetence, but as a natural, sometimes predictable and reasonable response to the situation. This can make you a more compassionate, more effective leader who knows when to push, when to pause, and how to build the trust needed for performance.

At the core of every human interaction lies a simple but powerful truth—we are wired for survival. We are most likely to succeed in the effort through connection and with others. This primal need for safety is the foundation on which psychological safety rests, and it explains why environments that foster trust, openness, and acceptance consistently outperform those driven by fear or competition.

If you are working with humans, you must acknowledge human nature or see your efforts be derailed by it.

To understand how your actions are perceived by others, you need to zoom out. This is a meta practice of systems thinking that is often only referred to only in the context of change management. But, that I think needs to become embedded in how you think about psychological safety, performance, of course, but more broadly in your everyday work as a leader.

The High Performer Trap

Before my work expanded to broader consulting and interventions with organizations, my focus was mainly one-on-one with organizational leaders. One, a client working in a large, complex, global organization was going through some massive changes. The executives and senior leaders I met there were some of the most brilliant and experienced executives I have known in my career. Jen stood out; she was brilliant. She had risen the ranks for years as a high performer. She had a team that trusted her and had built a network of like-minded colleagues. She was connected, savvy, and capable. But she was burning out.

She had reached two points in her career simultaneously.

The first one was what I like to call the high performer trap. High performers are often so capable they can do the work of multiple people. They can be so driven that they hide the extra work like it was just part of their job and not the job of others. As a result, when they move into a leadership role, there is a choice—learn how to delegate effectively or just keep doing more yourself. Jen was the latter—for years she had been advancing through the ranks and had never really learned how to effectively delegate or influence a high performance culture in her teams. They looked good in large part because she was overworking to take up any slack in the team. This brought her to an inflection point.

“Now that I’m here I don’t know what to do anymore.”

We had been working through this for several months. Building skills around framing, creating shared understanding with her team, and helping people grow skills to manage challenging tasks. There was a light at the end of the tunnel.

The second element she needed to navigate was a decision by HR to turn performance reviews into performance rankings. Performance review time had been stressful enough, but she had been doing a better job of providing ongoing feedback, so the stress was already lower. But, as was still part of her own style, keeping her work environment safe was ensuring that people liked her. She would do the work if it meant she felt liked. So now, not only was the work too much, but she was also going to have to provide the candid feedback she’d been avoiding.

The high performer trap was bringing her down. Being forced to rank everyone was dragging her down even further.

The performance rankings were implemented across the organization, so Jen wasn't the only one concerned. Right or wrong it was seen as a distraction by most leaders, and more than anything else, a waste of critical time.

To their credit, the leaders I was connected with made the most of it, using the time to really dig in with their people about how they wanted to grow, how they could improve, and what made their work feel important. They also used this time to think about their own performance. Overall, what could have been a wasted opportunity for many, became a great learning experience.

Enter the final straw. Two months afterward they were instructed by HR to go back to their teams and inform some of the team members that their rankings had been marked on a bell curve, they would be having lower rankings.

Jen was mortified—this caused sleepless nights and anxiety. Trust would inevitably be broken.

This was a primal, understandable reaction. The feeling from HR was that people would understand that this was just a process of calibration—concerns were met with dismissal. People didn't understand.

With trust broken, the wave of resignations began shortly after. Across the organization it went up and up. Not only had the organization gone through some rough times, but they were also now suffering the consequences of decision-making that ignored the simple realities of human interaction. Just as Jen was starting to feel a new sense of competence and her team was finding a new gear, the system itself undermined her efforts.

Disappointed, dismayed, and self-incriminating, Jen resigned as well.

If you do things that challenge the sense of security a person has, they will respond in a completely natural and predictable way. So don't be surprised when they do.

Psychological Safety Isn't a Luxury

Evolutionary anthropologist and biologist David R. Samson of the University of Toronto explores this in his research on social neurobiology and collective intelligence, emphasizing that humans are evolutionarily wired to thrive in groups (Samson, 2022).⁴ His work reveals that our brains

have not only evolved to survive threats in isolation, but more critically, to succeed through cooperation and social cohesion. This evolutionary wiring means that experiences of exclusion, rejection, or perceived threat within a group can activate the same neural pathways as physical danger.

In other words, the fear of speaking up can trigger a similar stress response to standing face-to-face with a predator. This is why we often refer to the quote “Nobody comes up with a good idea while being chased by a tiger.”

This neurobiological response explains why psychological safety isn’t a luxury; it’s a necessity. In workplace environments where people feel unsupported or judged, the brain defaults to self-preservation. Individuals shift into defensive postures, carefully managing impressions, avoiding risks, and retreating from collaboration. This behavior isn’t a sign of disengagement or laziness—it’s an ancient, hardwired reaction to perceived social threat.

When psychological safety is low the door to better thinking closes to focus on social survival. When psychological safety is high, the brain relaxes, opening the door to better, more effective thinking. In this state, the part of the brain responsible for problem-solving, creativity, and innovation comes online. People take risks, share ideas, and engage more fully because their primal need for safety has been met. This state of calm focus allows teams to perform at their highest level, navigating complex problems without the cognitive drag of fear or uncertainty.

The real challenge is to realize that people are highly aware of their social settings. They are so aware that simple things like “My door is always open” can sound to one person like an invitation and to another person like a scary proposition. When someone says, “we’ve had so much positive feedback on this—do you have any?,” we immediately do the calculation—do they want the feedback I have, real feedback, or just more praise?

It’s so common that we often don’t think of these phrases as a problem—or their sometimes hidden implications:

- “Don’t come to me with problems; come to me with solutions.”
→ Are you saying you want problems to remain hidden?
- “Failure is not an option.”
→ Are you saying I should hide mistakes or else?
- “We’ve always done it this way.”
→ Are you saying I shouldn’t try to make things better?

We can struggle to interpret these comments when tone, timing, and body language can shift our awareness to focus on threat. They can happen anywhere in our work. As a leader, you need to be aware that people are reading the signs. The benefit you gain by developing this awareness is an opportunity to try a different approach.

Samson's research also highlights the role of *oxytocin*, a neurochemical associated with bonding and trust (Samson, 2022). When individuals experience positive social interactions, oxytocin levels rise, reinforcing feelings of connection and reducing stress. The more consistently people feel heard, valued, and supported, the stronger this neural bonding becomes. Over time, psychological safety evolves from a temporary state to a deeply embedded part of a team's culture. This is when psychological safety becomes more resilient to moments where it might break down or be disrupted.

The implications for leaders are profound.

Ignoring psychological safety doesn't just stifle morale, it actively disrupts brain function, limiting the capacity for innovation and growth. Building psychological safety isn't about being overly permissive or lowering standards—it's about creating the conditions that allow the human brain to operate at full capacity.

It entails simply thinking about how a human would react in each situation, call it a meta-perspective, call it adaptive thinking, call it theoretical thinking. The bottom line is this: If you can imagine how a human with another world view would react to a situation, you can notice where it is consuming their effort, and do something about it.

If you want people to focus on high-minded efforts like innovation, they can't be thinking about survival at the same time.

By understanding this primal need for safety, leaders can shift their approach. This neurobiological reality reinforces why psychological safety is not just a cultural initiative, but a fundamental component of sustainable organizational success.

Clearing the Air and Dispelling Myths

“The trouble with the world is not that people know too little; it’s that they know so many things that just aren’t so.”

—Mark Twain, author

There’s a lot of confusion about psychological safety—what it is, what it isn’t, and how it works. If you don’t untangle these myths, you risk chasing comfort instead of growth, or worse, undermining the very culture you’re trying to build.

I would be doing you a disservice if I didn’t address what has become something of an elephant in the room. Psychological safety conjures up all kinds of assumptions and ideas. This has been an ongoing conversation within the communities of professionals I am connected to. The reason is simple: the myths are so commonly spoken it creates a significant amount of work just unraveling the crossed wires.

Myth: Psychological Safety Means Getting (Overly) Personal

Psychological safety doesn’t mean a bunch of therapists are going to enter your mind and start digging. I’ll admit, some of the team debriefs that I’ve done have gotten a little personal, but they don’t have to go that way to improve performance and the experience of the workplace.

You can have conversations that range from deep and inspiring to tactical and pragmatic. You can improve psychological safety without crossing personal boundaries.

One of my favorite coaching moments happened when training a group of internal facilitators.

We had been discussing several topics and we were about to go into an exercise where participants had an opportunity to share a personal

experience. Part of the framing for the exercise was to “Share to the level of vulnerability that feels right for you.”

When one participant’s turn came around, they simply said, “It feels too vulnerable for me. I don’t want to share right now.”

No argument from me. I simply replied, “Thank you for saying that; it really takes courage to go against the grain and hold true to yourself. Not only do I commend your courage, but I think it’s important to note that you might have just opened the door for others to be honest and maintain their boundaries.”

After a moment we moved to the next participant, unaware of the deeper impact this acknowledgment had provided.

It wasn’t until the end of the program that I even learned this was a memorable moment. When we were closing and discussing learnings and takeaways, he said this:

I had always felt like the kid at the pool watching everyone else play and not feeling like I could ever join. In that moment I realized I was already in the pool. I was already a part of instead of apart from the group. I’ve felt connected to everyone in this group ever since.

He had calculated both in the moment and reflecting after on how much psychological safety there was, how much courage was required, and the value of speaking at all. I wanted to empower courage—it created even more psychological safety for the whole group, and it acknowledged the value of speaking up.

I learned something else that day too—you’re never too late to feel seen.

The word *safety* itself implies exactly what it says—a state of being protected or unharmed. If you have the belief that any kind of discomfort means harm you will assume that comfort is safety—and safety means comfort. The real problem with this is that growth is inherently uncomfortable. To grow you need to be at the edge, where failure is a possibility, but hopefully unlikely with a willingness to keep going. Safety will only bring you to average. This is why you will often hear “psychological safety isn’t the absence of threat but the presence of connection.”

Safety brings you in from the cold—psychological safety brings you to the table of growth.

Myth: Psychological Safety Means Being Nice and Comfortable

In reality, psychological safety is about candor rather than false harmony. I like the axiom, “Niceness is for me today and kindness is for you tomorrow.” It’s the freedom to speak candidly without fear of punishment—not a promise that conversations will always be comfortable or that your ideas will always be accepted. Disagreement, feedback, and tension are essential to growth. The key is that it’s safe to have those conversations, not that they never happen.

Myth: Psychological Safety Means Lowering the Bar on Performance

In reality, psychological safety isn’t about protecting people from expectations—it’s about helping them meet them. When people feel safe to take risks, ask for help, and admit mistakes, they learn faster, solve harder problems, and raise the standard of excellence together.

Myth: Psychological Safety Means No Accountability

In reality, true psychological safety and accountability go hand in hand. When people feel safe, they’re more likely to own mistakes, step up, and learn from challenges. Safety allows for accountability to be developmental, not punitive. Psychologically safe environments create higher quality accountability upfront “How are we going to work together.” Poor accountability focuses on consequences rather than clarity and dependability. Without it, people hide, deflect, or shut down.

Myth: You Either Have Psychological Safety or You Don’t

In reality, psychological safety is situational and dynamic. It can vary between teams, leaders, and even conversations. A person may feel safe to share ideas in one context but not to give feedback in another. It’s not permanent but rather a living condition shaped by behavior, context, and relationships. It’s something that can change moment to moment so it’s something you continually build, maintain, and repair—not a box you check.

Myth: You Can Create Psychological Safety by Making it a Policy

In reality, psychological safety isn’t built through policy—it’s built through practice. You can’t mandate people to feel safe. You can’t police relationships into high performance or learning. You will struggle to do more than

remove some bad behaviors. You simply can't build behavior that way—you need something different. You earn more psychological safety and team trust through consistent behavior: how you respond to mistakes, how you handle feedback, how you navigate disagreement. A policy can signal intent, but trust is built moment to moment.

The Real Rules Are More Than a Values Statement

“Psychological safety is built in drops and lost in buckets.”

—*Dr. Taylor Mauriello, PhD*

Leaders often think culture is shaped by strategy, values, or intent. But culture is more than your values statement. Day to day, it's the patterns of behaviors and what garners attention that shape what people believe.

In any organization, psychological safety isn't just shaped by mission statements or leadership speeches. Three drivers—rewards, punishments, and attention—create invisible currents that guide behavior, signaling to individuals what is valued, tolerated, or discouraged. As someone working extrenally these are often easy to spot because we come in, have some conversations, and people will often just tell us what the real driver behind their behavior is. It's not always the case for those working on the inside. Regardless, this is a good framework to organize your thinking and perhaps even start creating some experiments around.

The fundamental truth is this: what gets rewarded gets repeated. The complexity lies in the fact that rewards and punishments often operate beneath the surface, and attention—arguably the most elusive of the three—can either amplify or suppress psychological safety depending on how it is distributed.

Rewards drive repetition: Rewards don't always arrive as promotions, bonuses, or public accolades. Sometimes, they are subtle—extra face time with senior leaders, more responsibility, or the freedom to pursue ideas. When individuals notice that innovation, vulnerability, or candor leads to positive reinforcement, they internalize these behaviors as valuable and safe. Conversely, when silence or compliance is rewarded, those behaviors become the standard.

Punishment, even when unspoken, drives its own version of repetition and shapes silence. A dismissive glance, a sarcastic remark, exclusion from important discussions, or a palpable shift in how someone is treated after making a mistake can act as quiet deterrents. Over time, these cues signal that certain behaviors—like raising concerns or challenging the status quo—carry risk. And while few organizations intentionally cultivate environments of fear, unaddressed micro-punishments accumulate, nudging people toward self-censorship.

Attention is a bit more of a wildcard. Unlike rewards and punishment, attention operates on a spectrum. For some, increased visibility is energizing—a sign they are valued. For others, too much attention feels like scrutiny. But the one constant is that attention reinforces behavior. What gets noticed, gets repeated or avoided. If a leader frequently calls out examples of collaborative problem-solving, the team will lean into it. Conversely, if the spotlight consistently falls on individual heroes, collaboration will fade into the background.

This is where psychological safety is uniquely vulnerable. Leaders may believe they are fostering an open environment, but the patterns of attention they reinforce often tell a different story. Those who seek more attention may dominate conversations, while quieter team members withdraw. The unspoken rules of engagement become clearer to those watching from the sidelines.

Ultimately, the dynamics of rewards, punishment, and attention create the undercurrent of an organization's culture. By consciously shaping these forces, leaders can cultivate a workplace where psychological safety is not an abstract ideal but a lived reality.

The key for you as a leader or culture architect is to zoom out and ask yourself:

- What is consistently rewarded that we don't want to see rewarded?
- What behaviors or contributions are punished in hidden or subtle ways?
- What wins favor or attention that doesn't actually benefit the organization or our people's experience of the workplace?

Interdependence Is the Thread to Follow

“The strength of the team is each individual member. The strength of each member is the team.”

—Phil Jackson, *Hall of Fame NBA Coach*

Interdependence is often invisible. Shifting your lens from job titles and org charts to actual working relationships clarifies where psychological safety is needed most and can help identify where to focus your energy.

In every organization, formal hierarchies and reporting lines dictate structure, but beneath that framework lies a more organic, often unseen network—one shaped by interdependence. This hidden map reflects how work truly happens, showing who relies on whom to get things done.

Interdependence measures the degree to which individuals or teams depend on each other to complete tasks, make decisions, or solve problems. And the more interdependent the work, the greater the need for psychological safety.

In collaborative environments, where people must rely on one another to solve problems and make decisions, trust and open communication aren't optional—they're foundational. In contrast, routine or independent tasks typically require less interpersonal risk-taking (Edmondson, 2018).⁵

Interdependence Is Not Binary

To understand how interdependence impacts the critical nature of psychological safety in different work environments, it's helpful to consider two contrasting examples. Interdependence is on a continuum. Some roles require a strict adherence to prescribed processes with limited peer collaboration, while others demand high levels of creative exchange and shared risk. In each case, psychological safety plays a critical role, but the way it shows up, and where it matters most, can vary significantly.

The medical field is a good example of a more complex environment. Professionals are asked to adhere to prescribed processes, but also collaborate with peers, maintain a high standard, and raise their hand when mistakes happen.

But, to think about this in a simpler way consider a factory production line. One worker's task flows directly to the next, but their personal success depends less on collaboration with the person beside them and more on their ability to follow procedure. I complete task A, you complete task B, and so on. However, the relationship between that worker and the line manager is different. The worker must feel safe to raise concerns, whether about a malfunctioning machine or an overlooked safety risk, without fear of retribution. Do the experience and relationships with other workers matter? Yes, of course. But, in this case, there is a greater degree of psychological safety needed between workers and leadership.

As a result, leaders need to emphasize different skills—feedback structures might look different, communication might look different, and so on.

This dynamic is exemplified by Toyota's production system, where every worker is empowered and expected to pull the Andon cord if they notice a problem. Pulling the cord stops the line, triggering immediate attention and support from team leaders to investigate and solve the issue. It's a visible and institutionalized expression of psychological safety: workers don't just have permission to speak up—they have a responsibility to do so. In this case the structure backs them up and so does the behavior of the leaders who respond. What makes it powerful is not just the cord itself, but the fact that pulling it doesn't result in blame or punishment. It leads to learning, improvement, and often, innovation. This practice, part of the Toyota Production System, exemplifies how institutional design can reinforce psychological safety by embedding structured responses to problems (Liker, 2004).⁶

Contrast this with a product design team tasked with developing a new technology, or consider drug research, product design, regulators, sales and marketing associated with a large pharmaceutical. Here, the interdependence is far greater. Success hinges on continuous dialogue, idea-sharing, and the ability to challenge assumptions. While the lab might seem like a factory, it most certainly is not. Ideation, problem identification, and novel problem-solving are at the center of the scientific process. Additionally, various teams must collaborate fluidly, building on each other's input and integrating diverse perspectives. A lack of psychological safety within one team or between teams means that silence isn't just costly, it has the potential to be catastrophic.

This is the kind of dynamic AstraZeneca leaned into while investing in its own innovation programs, particularly in its R&D and product development teams. As they tackled novel scientific challenges and accelerated development timelines, they encouraged cross-functional ideation sprints, bringing together scientists, regulatory experts, and commercial leads to co-create early-stage solutions. These sessions required not only technical knowledge but also the courage to challenge assumptions and propose alternatives in front of peers and senior leaders (Advantage Performance Group, 2025).⁷

In one instance, a junior team member raised a concern about a formulation pathway that had previously gone unchallenged. Instead of being shut down, their input sparked a full design rethink that ultimately reduced production complexity and improved efficacy. That contribution—and the organizational conditions that made it possible—highlights the critical role psychological safety plays in knowledge-based, collaborative environments where innovation and experimentation are the primary outputs.

If we were to map these two environments by interdependence rather than hierarchy, the difference can be striking. The greater the interdependence, the more complex the map will look. As a result, the skills leaders need, how you ask people to navigate the system, and the nature of an intervention when change is needed may look vastly different.

Environments like the Toyota example will require leaders to have clear communication skills, good framing, action debriefs, and understanding of the importance of appreciation and acknowledgment.

The multi-level, multi-disciplinary environment of a place like AstraZeneca requires that leaders put more emphasis on skills of facilitation, dialogue, and sense making.

Interdependence Is Driven by a Shared Goal

It is not uncommon for our work with an organization to start with some sort of assessment. And we often hear that a “team” consists of 80 people. We wouldn’t call this a team because 80 people aren’t going to have direct interdependence; there can be sub-teams even in smaller groups that are 8-12 members. Call groups whatever you want. What we want to know is where is the interdependence and the people working together to achieve a common goal?

For me, this is one of the most enjoyable parts of the job. We have had the opportunity to look at organizational structures all over the world and from numerous industries, but what is most common is a default to the standard organizational chart, if that even exists.

My invitation to you is to map a team based on their need for interaction instead.

Organizational charts that are based on real or implied power dynamics, focused on authority and roles, can clarify reporting lines but often provide limited insight for designing interventions. It's two-dimensional and has a highly varied relationship with psychological safety. Better interventions require a more three-dimensional look.

Mapping interdependence based on interaction and needs, focused on relationships and workflows, helps to map real-world collaboration and influence. This maps where psychological safety is needed most.

I want to share an example of what it can look like when a belief about interdependence was changed and used for good.

The story of Nissan's turnaround in the early 2000s is one I rarely see discussed. Facing bankruptcy in 1999, Nissan was a company weighed down by debt, inefficiency, and a deeply hierarchical culture (Ghosn, 2002).⁸

This was the cost of stifled innovation.

Carlos Ghosn took the helm after an alliance with Renault, and he made a bold and somewhat unconventional decision: to bet on the wisdom of Nissan's people. Rather than bringing in external consultants to overhaul the system from the top down, Ghosn invited cross-functional teams of employees—engineers, plant workers, line managers—to identify problems and propose solutions. But this wasn't just about listening sessions. Nissan committed to acting on what they heard.

They didn't just say they were going to act. They did what they said they would do.

In the first year alone, the company implemented more than 30,000 employee-generated ideas. These ideas touched everything from manufacturing processes and product design to procurement and logistics.

Innovation was in. Stagnation was out.

This strategy shifted beliefs in interdependence. Yes, the factory paradigm still existed, but the belief shifted from "I'm just a number" to "our ideas matter." Previously, individual departments worked in silos,

communication was top-down, and employees were rarely invited to shape the direction of the company. With the new approach, Nissan created space for people to challenge assumptions, propose bold ideas, and collaborate across functional boundaries.

All in service of a shared goal: survival.

By the second and third year of the Nissan Revival Plan, the pace of adoption didn't slow. Instead, it accelerated. Tens of thousands more ideas were not only surfaced but tested and refined through dialogue. Employees began to depend more on one another as their contributions were recognized, built upon, and celebrated.

Interdependence toward a common goal became their secret weapon.

What made this so powerful was that the organization responded productively to the ideas being shared. Leaders didn't just tolerate input, they created systems that rewarded it.

This response loop built psychological safety: employees saw that speaking up led to action, not punishment or dismissal. That safety created more ideas, more engagement, and more innovation.

What they created was a virtuous cycle of continuous learning, and mutual accountability.

Within a few years, Nissan returned to profitability, and by the mid-2000s, its market cap soared, peaking at around \$60 billion USD, a dramatic recovery from the brink of collapse.

What Nissan showed is that interdependence isn't just about collaboration. It's about belief.

This is an important example because teams aren't just those who have clear interdependence with numerous subject matter experts collaborating on a particular project. Sales teams are often brought together but have little or no interdependence for their success. But you can create it, and if everyone is learning everyone will do better. If the sales team can collaborate with compliance teams and marketing teams, everyone can win more.

Creating a collective game requires you first understand that people need a common goal and that by achieving that common goal they will prosper. Interdependence is about more than just who works next to each other.

This matters in two particularly important ways:

- If you are a culture architect, you need to follow the lines of shared goals and interdependence to improve and inform any kind of intervention.
- If you are leading a team, division, or organization, creating a virtuous circle of learning can happen when you align people toward a shared goal and help draw the connection between their contributions and the outcomes they impact.

Recognizing the nuances of interdependence is essential to prioritizing where psychological safety efforts should focus. Not every team needs the same level of support. By identifying the areas where silence carries the highest cost, you can better allocate your energy.

Psychological Safety Is Not the End, It's On the Way

“In a growth mindset, failure is not a permanent condition—it’s a steppingstone to mastery. Psychological safety creates the space to fail, but the expectation to keep growing transforms failure into progress.”

—Carol Dweck, *author and psychologist (Dweck, 2006)*

When psychological safety is treated as the destination instead of the foundation, it doesn’t lead to the outcomes you want. Shifting away from this perspective will help you reconnect to what comes next: learning, accountability, and meaningful progress. Whether you’re managing a team or shaping culture at scale, realizing it is a foundation to build on will help you avoid pitfalls and create more buy-in.

It’s easy to misinterpret psychological safety as the destination—a box to check off on the journey to building a better workplace. But this mindset often leads to unintended consequences. When psychological safety is treated as the goal, rather than a means to something greater, the outcome can be a workplace where people are trying to make everyone feel comfortable but lacking in momentum.

When I ask leaders or groups that are going through training what high performance is they often share some version of “Getting lots done!!.”

In practice, high performance is a combination of getting the RIGHT results, working in a culture you would recommend where people grow.

Psychological Safety as a Foundation

Psychological safety isn’t the finish line—it’s the foundation. It’s the environment that allows learning, innovation, and performance to thrive. But without a focus on accountability and growth, safety can simply lead to complacency. The goal is not just to feel safe, but to channel that safety into action, experimentation, and ultimately, high performance.

Imagine psychological safety as the ground floor. Learning is the next level up, and at the top stands consistent high performance. The ladder that connects them is accountability:

- Psychological safety without accountability leads to stagnation. A team may feel comfortable but lack urgency. A land of lost opportunity where ideas are shared, but follow-through is inconsistent.
- Accountability without psychological safety breeds fear and disengagement. An anxiety time-bomb where people may comply, but they won’t contribute beyond the bare minimum. Innovation is replaced by risk avoidance.
- Accountability is the rung on the ladder that moves you from a foundation of psychological safety to become an adaptability powerhouse with higher levels of learning and eventually innovation and performance.

The magic happens when these two forces exist together. Psychological safety along with clear expectations, shared goals, and mutual accountability. People know they can take risks, but they are also responsible for the results. They feel empowered to challenge each other—not from a place of judgment, but from a shared commitment to excellence.

Leaders build the ladder, and team members walk up it together. Sometimes, the real work lies in ensuring that the team stays anchored to tangible outcomes. Psychological safety without clear shared goals is like

having a ladder on solid ground but without anything to lean it against. Psychological safety gives people permission to be candid, and accountability ensures that candor leads to progress.

Discomfort is part of the process.

- **Learning requires friction:** Honest, kind feedback, even when hard to hear, accelerates growth.
- **Innovation involves risk:** Some ideas will fail, but each failure is data, not defeat.
- **Performance is a journey:** The goal isn't perfection; it's progress and iteration over time.

When psychological safety is understood as a stepping stone—not the end goal—it transforms how teams approach their work. The workplace becomes not just a safe space but a launching pad for curiosity, resilience, and achievement.

Opening the Door for Potential

In the end, psychological safety should lead to something greater. It should fuel bold decisions, unlock hidden potential, and create a culture where excellence is a collective pursuit.

I'll quote my colleague Dr. Taylor Mauriello when she said recently during a podcast recording: "I've learned that building psychological safety really comes down to creating accountability without breaking psychological safety down."

I love this perspective because it is useful for the culture architect and leader alike. We are coming together to get things done. This requires a level of shared accountability, responsibility, or obligation to not just our common goal—but to each other.

At the end of 2019, I worked with an executive team of a financial services firm. They were a tight team who had worked together for a long time; the newest team member at that point had been there for 12 years. As the year was coming to a close, they all felt like something was off.

I had done some work previously with this team so there was some trust already built. We started talking about psychological safety as a concept and decided to move the team offsite and see what their scores revealed.

The assessment of their psychological safety index (PSI) came back with very high scores, they scored 98 out of a possible 100. I remember my heart sinking—initially hoping that the score would provide some kind of revelation. But, when asked what it meant I simply said, “well, it doesn’t mean there isn’t anything to talk about but it looks like everyone is willing to talk about it when it comes up.”

Despite my own reservations, I leaned on my curiosity and my own willingness to wade into the unknown to try and unravel what was truly going on. Not to mention—sometimes as a consultant when you sell the ticket, you take the ride too, whatever that might bring.

As we started the session, perspectives were shared, a couple of “misfires” between members of the team came up and were discussed. But what quickly became apparent was the frustration over a possible merger.

Two key issues emerged: the team was preparing itself for the real likelihood that they would not be working together in the future. They were preemptively separating themselves from each other. The process had started to drag on and the prolonged uncertainty was starting to build an indescribable tension within the team. This led to a conversation about what emerged next.

The team was frustrated that they didn’t have common goals or a common mission except for one that would likely lead to the change in their team.

Rudderlessness became the word to describe what had previously been indescribable.

In other words, they lacked shared accountability. The CEO did what any good leader would do—he took accountability for not providing the direction they craved to grow, learn, and feel connected. We invested time together discussing what it could look like to manage these dueling realities out in the open—the challenge of creating a meaningful path forward together while working toward a future that would likely see this team separated.

As 2020 rolled around, the merger was scrapped and the team worked together to face the realities and undulating chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic. Out of all the teams that I helped advise and support through that chaotic time they were the most effective. They had high psychological safety, yes, but they had more. They had a desire to be accountable to supporting each other and getting the right results.

The discussion around psychological safety gave this team access to a conversation about accountability and the desire they had to be responsible for something meaningful.

This was a great reflection in practice of the five critical team factors Google shared from their Project Aristotle in 2016 (Google, 2016).⁹ I like to think of it like this:

- **Psychological safety:** Can I freely share my concerns, mistakes, ideas, and perspectives?
- **Dependability:** Can I depend on my teammates? Do they mean and do what they say?
- **Structure and clarity:** Is it clear how things get done so we can get them done effectively and improve where possible?
- **Meaning:** Do I and my contributions matter or am I just a number?
- **Impact:** Does what we do matter, or is this just for the shareholder?

Psychological safety is not a linear path. You don't build psychological safety, then accountability, then learn, then perform. It can break down when you least expect it. Therefore, you should nurture it constantly.

Leading a team is more of an endless cycle of build, repair, accountability, feedback, creating clarity, alignment, realignment, framing, reframing, inquiry, listening, connection to vision, connection to meaning. It all matters to some degree.

So, the goal quickly becomes, how do you make all this feel easier?

