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What Psychological Safety Is

Let's begin. If you are here, you probably already know a bit (and potentially a lot) about psychological safety. But it's one thing to know about psychological safety, and it's another to work with a team or organization that relies on you to explain it. Many people show up with questions and even outright skepticism about the concept. The purpose of this chapter is to provide you with a brief overview of what psychological safety is, why it matters, and the evidence supporting its value, so that you can communicate effectively about it.

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain psychological safety.
- Articulate why psychological safety is vital for learning and performance.
- Summarize methods for measuring psychological safety.

WARM-UP

Think of a work situation, at any point in your career to date, in which you held back a work-related idea, question, or concern. This should be a moment when speaking up was technically possible, and yet you held back. It might have taken place in a team meeting, a town hall, or a one-on-one conversation with a manager or colleague. The only limitation is that the example should be about work rather than a personal matter.

1. Please make a few brief notes on the situation. This should include who was present, what the topic or issue was, and what you momentarily considered saying.

2. As you think back, what were the primary reasons that led you to hold back instead of speaking up?

3. What, if anything, was, or might have been, the consequence of your holding back? What difference might holding back your thoughts have had on the work or the team?

A note from us as you consider your responses: Everyone experiences moments of holding back at work. It happens because of a kind of tacit calculus in which we weigh the benefits of speaking up against the risks of doing so. The resolution is more often than not silence. Silence usually feels cost-free in the moment, while speaking up can feel costly unless it's clear that it will be well received.

In brief, psychological safety lowers the sense that speaking up is costly.

● DEFINING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

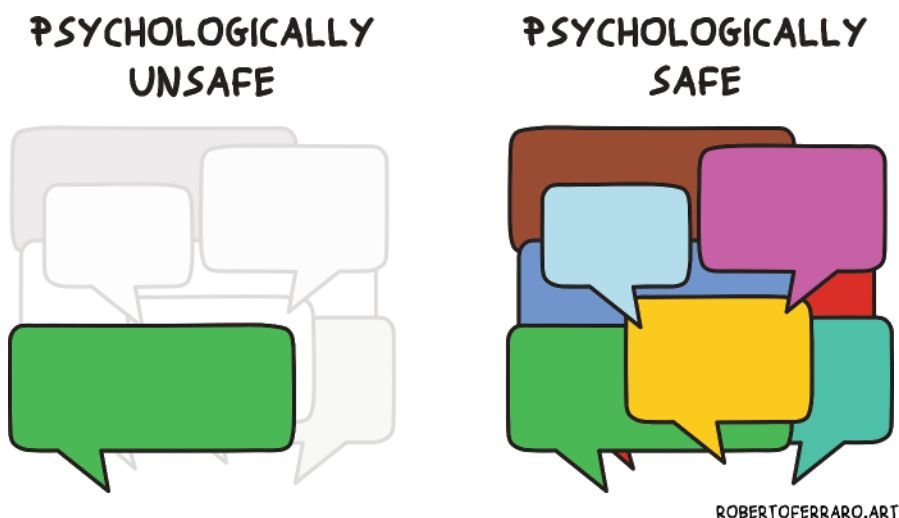
Psychological safety is defined as a shared belief that an environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking – for asking questions, admitting mistakes, raising concerns, offering ideas, or volunteering to try something new. The definition sounds simple. What it describes is not.

A key idea is that it is *shared*. Psychological safety is a property of a group, not a trait of any individual. A person who speaks freely in one team may be silent in another because the climate is different.

By *climate*, we mean the atmosphere that forms among a group of people. A climate is built from accumulated signals: how a leader responds when someone raises a problem, whether admitting uncertainty is treated as honesty or weakness, and whether a dissenting view is engaged or dismissed.

Psychological safety addresses the pervasive interpersonal fear that governs so much of what people say, share, or withhold at work every day. It enables multiple voices to surface (Exhibit 1.1).

Exhibit 1.1 Psychological safety enables multiple voices to surface.



EXERCISE 1.1: In Your Own Words

Now, put psychological safety in your own words. Don't worry about the official definition or how we would describe it. What does psychological safety mean to you?

● WHAT IS INTERPERSONAL RISK ALL ABOUT?

Understanding psychological safety requires an understanding of interpersonal risk. Interpersonal risk is about the fear of losing esteem in the eyes of others.

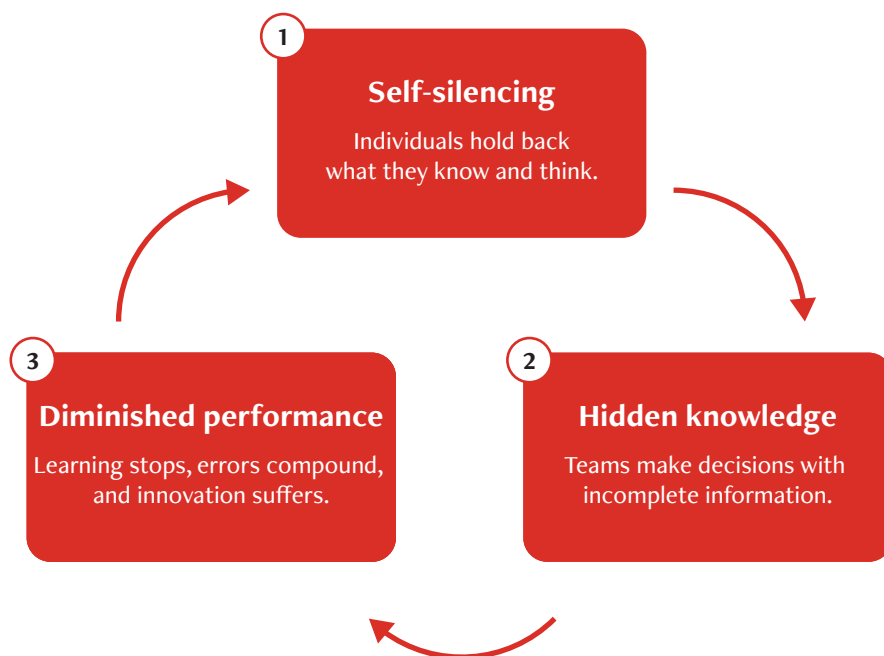
We experience four main types of interpersonal risk: the fear of looking ignorant, incompetent, intrusive, or negative. To avoid interpersonal risk, people refrain from certain behaviors.

● FOUR TYPES OF INTERPERSONAL RISK AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES ●

1. To avoid looking ignorant, people don't ask questions.
2. To avoid looking incompetent, people don't admit weakness or mistakes.
3. To avoid looking intrusive, people don't offer ideas.
4. To avoid looking negative, people don't critique the status quo.

It's easy to imagine the negative effects that this avoidant behavior can have on organizational performance and culture (Exhibit 1.2). Confusion persists. Problems languish. Innovation stagnates. And these issues compound over time.

Exhibit 1.2 The negative cycle of self-silencing and diminished performance.



REFLECTION: Return to the reflection exercise from the chapter’s warm-up. You provided an example of a time you held back. Circle the interpersonal risks that were most at stake for you in the moment.

- Fear of being seen as ignorant
- Fear of being seen as incompetent
- Fear of being seen as intrusive
- Fear of being seen as negative

🌀 WHAT IS IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT?

Whenever a person seeks to avoid or minimize interpersonal risk, they are engaging in *impression management*.

Impression management is the process by which people attempt to influence how others perceive them.¹ It is a deeply studied phenomenon in social psychology.

The concept traces to sociologist Erving Goffman, whose 1959 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* proposed that social life is fundamentally theatrical.² Goffman argued that we are all performing for audiences. We adjust our behavior, our language, and even our appearance depending on who is watching and what we want them to think of us. Goffman called this “face work” – the ongoing effort to present and protect a particular image of ourselves in the eyes of others.

In the decades since, social psychologists have built an extensive empirical literature confirming what Goffman observed: people are highly motivated to manage the impressions they make, and they are, for the most part, quite good at it.³ We learn the basic moves in childhood: how to present ourselves favorably, how to avoid looking foolish, how to read a room. By adulthood, the process has become largely automatic. We rarely experience it as a deliberate calculation. It simply shapes what we say and, importantly, what we don't.

How Does Impression Management Relate to Psychological Safety?

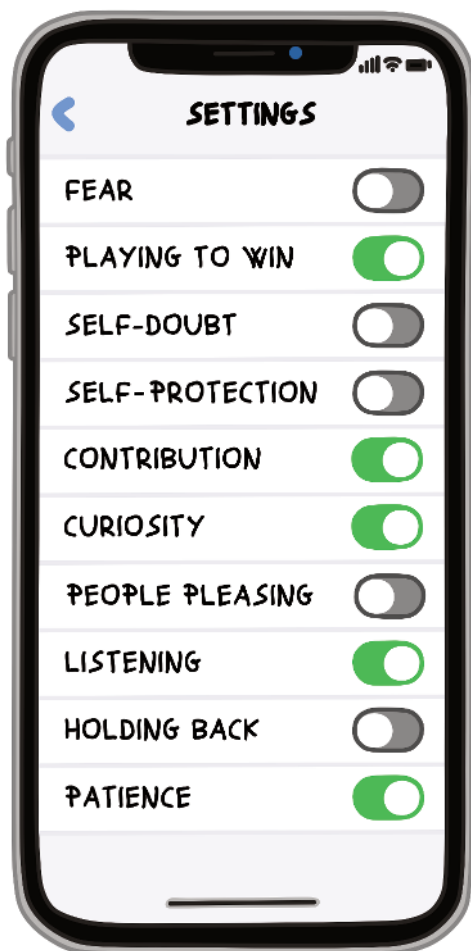
We all engage in some degree of impression management at work. This isn't bad on its own. We want to be seen as good colleagues who add value to the work.

But too often, impression management subtly becomes more important than the actual work. Thus, we all have had moments when we are more focused on the potential social cost of speaking up than on addressing the task or problem before us.

Under these conditions, asking a question risks looking ignorant. Admitting a mistake creates the risk of looking incompetent. Offering an unconventional idea risks looking naive or intrusive. Pushing back on a leader's plan risks looking negative or disloyal.

These are not irrational fears. In many organizational environments, these behaviors do carry real social costs: a raised eyebrow, a subtle shift in how one is regarded, a missed opportunity for advancement. So, people stay quiet, not out of indifference or laziness, but because they are doing exactly what social experience has taught them: protect your image, and you protect your standing (Exhibit 1.3).

Exhibit 1.3 What psychological safety involves and what it doesn't.



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Why Does Impression Management Hold Us Back?

Here's the problem. When people hold back, they benefit as individuals in the moment, but the team misses out on potentially important input. To see why silence wins the voice-silence calculation, consider the benefits of speaking up versus holding back (Exhibit 1.4). The risk-reward asymmetry that people naturally perceive becomes immediately clear.

The pressure, in the moment, to hold back for your own sake can overpower the uncertain opportunity to benefit the team or organization by speaking up.

Exhibit 1.4 Why silence wins in the voice-silence calculation.

	WHO BENEFITS	WHEN BENEFIT OCCURS	CERTAINTY OF BENEFIT
Voice	Organization and/or its customers	After some delay	Low
Silence	Oneself	Immediately	High

This is precisely why psychological safety is vital. We need to overcome our default inclination to hold back. When nothing is done to build psychological safety, the natural asymmetry that leads us to hold back rather than speak up wins.

● WHY CARE ABOUT PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY NOW?

Most leaders don’t need to be told that their work is uncertain and complex. They live it. Plans change. Problems surface mid-project. Decisions get made with incomplete information. The person closest to the problem is often several levels below the person making the call.

In an uncertain or complex environment, a team’s ability to learn and adapt depends on whether people are willing to say what they actually see or think. This is how concerns are flagged early, mistakes are caught before they compound, and innovative ideas have their moment.

But as we have seen, the willingness to step forward with an idea or question is *not* a given (Exhibit 1.5). This willingness has to be cultivated. That’s what psychological safety is about – the shared sense that speaking up is not just permitted but welcome, and that doing so won’t cost you. Without it, the information a team needs to perform, innovate, and course correct stays locked inside the people who hold it. The point is to engage and learn because, ultimately, this is where performance comes from (Exhibit 1.6).

Exhibit 1.5 Types of interpersonal fears and their common responses.

THE FEAR	COMMON RESPONSE	COSTS
Fear of looking IGNORANT →	Don't ask questions. Even when uncertain or confused.	→ Errors go uncorrected; coordination breaks down.
Fear of looking INCOMPETENT →	Don't admit mistakes or say you don't know. Hide errors and weak spots.	→ Small problems compound; learning opportunities are missed.
Fear of looking INTRUSIVE →	Don't offer ideas. Keep suggestions to yourself.	→ Innovation stalls; better solutions go unheard.
Fear of looking NEGATIVE →	Don't challenge the status quo. Conform, even when you disagree.	→ Bad decisions go unchallenged; groupthink takes hold.

Exhibit 1.6 Psychological safety enables everyone to bring their best, even if they don't always get it perfectly right.



Psychological safety is not an end in itself. We don't seek psychological safety for its own sake. We seek it to unlock learning and deliver value.

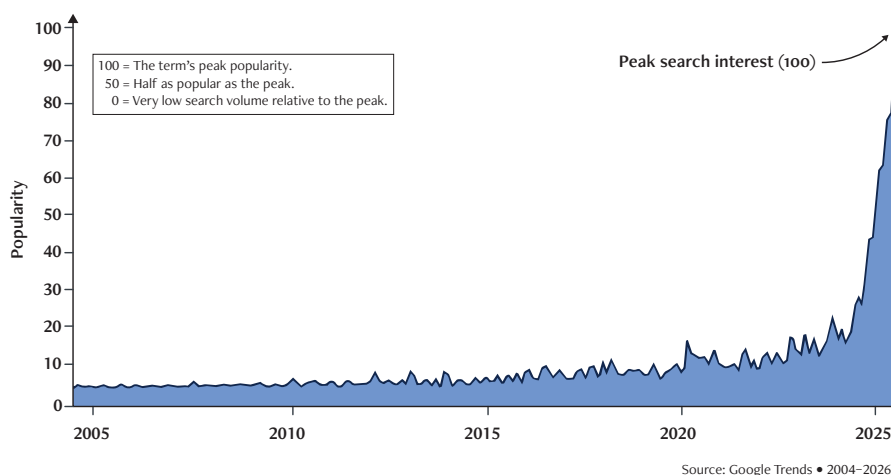
● HOW DID PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY MAKE ITS WAY FROM RESEARCH TO THE WORLD OF WORK?

For most of its history, psychological safety was a concept known primarily to researchers. That changed decisively in 2016, when Google publicized the findings of its Project Aristotle, a three-year-long internal study designed to identify what distinguished its highest-performing teams.⁴ The factor that influenced performance more than any other was psychological safety.

This finding landed with force. Here was one of the most analytically rigorous companies in the world, with access to extensive data about its teams, and it had concluded that the single most important factor in team performance was whether people felt safe to speak up.

Other organizations took notice. In the years since, psychological safety has moved from academic literature into boardrooms, leadership development programs, and employee surveys in companies across every sector and every corner of the world. The concept has been the subject of thousands of studies, countless articles, and significant organizational investment. (See Exhibit 1.7 for the change in Google search interest over time.)

Exhibit 1.7 Search interest in “psychological safety” over time.



● WHERE DID THE CONCEPT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY COME FROM?

Back in the 1990s, Amy stumbled into psychological safety quite by accident.

As a PhD student, she had joined a research team of physicians and nurses whose goal was to measure medication error rates in hospital patient care units. Her role was to help the team answer a simple question: Do better teams make fewer mistakes? She used a standard survey to assess team effectiveness in the first month, while trained nurse investigators visited the study hospital units every few days for half a year.

When the data came in, Amy analyzed it. The results were the opposite of what she had expected. Better teams appeared to be making more mistakes, not fewer! From the standpoint of a young researcher hoping to publish, this seemed like a real problem.

But rather than being a problem, it was a puzzle. So she sat with it. She thought about the coordination required between physicians and nurses, the need to speak up, to double-check, to catch errors on the fly. It simply did not make sense that better teamwork would increase error rates. And then something occurred to her, what she would later describe as a “blinding flash of the obvious.” What if the better teams weren’t actually making more mistakes? What if they were simply more willing to talk about them?

To find out, she sent a research assistant to carefully observe the study units. He knew nothing about the error rates, nothing about how teams had scored on the survey, nothing about her hypothesis. She just asked him to tell her what he observed in the different teams.

What he found was that the teams differed wildly in willingness to discuss errors. Some talked about mistakes openly and constantly, actively working together to understand and reduce them. Others barely acknowledged that errors happened at all.

When she mapped these observations against the error data, the correlation was striking: the units that spoke most openly about errors were the ones that, on paper, appeared to be making more errors. In fact, they weren’t making more mistakes. They were reporting them and learning from them.

That climate of openness – that shared sense that it was safe to speak up, to surface problems, to admit what went wrong – is what she would later come to call *team psychological safety*.

● WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY ABOUT PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY?

If you start talking about psychological safety at work, you may receive questions from your colleagues about the research that supports it. So, we thought it would help to provide a summary.

If research isn't your interest, you can skip this section. If you are interested, you can consider this a quick primer. It won't tell you everything – that could take a whole book – but it will ground you in the overall approach and should help you answer people's questions.

Research on Psychological Safety Through the Decades

The research base for psychological safety is large and growing. When Amy first used the term *team psychological safety* in 1999 to describe the climates of openness in teams she was observing, she searched to see whether anyone had used those words before.

To our knowledge, the first use of the term in management research was in the 1960s. In a book on organizational change, authors Edgar Schein and Warren Bennis noted, almost in passing, that people needed to feel psychologically safe to be expected to change their behavior.⁵ Although they did not develop this idea in depth, we have always appreciated this connection to early work on organizational behavior by two giants in the field.

Amy's research in the late 1990s further developed the concept and added the quantitative foundation, establishing both the measurement tools and the first systematic empirical evidence that team psychological safety predicted team learning and team performance.⁶

From that point, the literature grew steadily. By the early 2020s, more than a thousand peer-reviewed studies had examined some aspect of psychological safety. In 2023, Amy and our colleague Derrick Bransby published a review article

that described and synthesized the results of 185 studies conducted in the prior decade.⁷ These were drawn from 95 academic journals across 39 countries. The studies also spanned a range of contexts: from hospitals and surgical teams to nuclear power plants, commercial aviation cockpits, R&D labs, financial services firms, manufacturing plants, hotels, schools, military units, and multinational technology companies.

Researchers have also produced systematic reviews of research on psychological safety, as well as meta-analyses, which pool and reanalyze findings from dozens or hundreds of individual studies.⁸ These are, methodologically, an especially powerful tool for establishing whether a relationship is real and how large it is. The meta-analyses on psychological safety have consistently found strong, significant relationships between psychological safety and outcomes across studies with different samples, measures, and designs. They have also found that the relationship between psychological safety and team performance is higher when the work is more complex, interdependent, and knowledge intensive – probably like the work you’re facing!

What Does Research on Psychological Safety Tend to Look Like?

The dominant method in psychological safety research is the survey, and for good reason. Psychological safety is, by definition, a perception – a belief held by members of a group about what is and isn’t safe in their social environment. The most direct way to measure a belief is to ask people about it.

Survey-based research on psychological safety has also been supplemented by qualitative interview-based and observational studies that seek to understand how psychological safety operates in people’s workplaces day to day.

Measuring Psychological Safety with Survey Questions

Amy’s seven-item scale, developed in the late 1990s, has become the most widely used instrument for measuring psychological safety. It has been applied in numerous research studies and rigorously tested for validity and reliability.

Exhibit 1.8 presents the seven questions. You will notice that some are worded positively (saying you agree would indicate the presence of psychological safety). Others (those marked with an R) are worded negatively (saying you agree

indicates a lack of psychological safety). Later in this book we will provide a simpler scale that you can use, without any reverse scoring. First, we want to offer some information about how it is used in research and share the original scale.

Exhibit 1.8 A survey measure of psychological safety.

1. If you make a mistake on this team, it is often held against you. (R)
2. Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.
3. People on this team sometimes reject others for being different. (R)
4. It is safe to take a risk on this team.
5. It is difficult to ask other members of this team for help. (R)
6. No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.
7. Working with team members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized.

These questions are typically answered using a numerical scale that captures how much you agree or disagree with the statement – what is known as a Likert scale. (See Exhibit 1.9.)

Exhibit 1.9 Likert scale response options.

SEVEN-POINT LIKERT SCALE

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Slightly disagree
4. Neither agree nor disagree
5. Slightly agree
6. Agree
7. Strongly agree

REVERSE LIKERT SCALE

1. Strongly agree
2. Agree
3. Slightly agree
4. Neither agree nor disagree
5. Slightly disagree
6. Disagree
7. Strongly disagree

In research, we typically take the average of the responses to the seven questions (accounting for the reverse-scored questions). That gives the person's overall psychological safety response in one number. Then, we usually take the average of each team member's response together to arrive at the team's level of psychological safety (note, some studies examine the variance in addition to the average).

People often wonder why researchers use seven questions rather than just one to measure psychological safety. Wouldn't it be faster and easier for people that way?

Researchers ask more than one question to measure psychological safety because it is a perception. Research on perceptions has long shown that it's more accurate and reliable to ask about perceptions in a few different ways and then to take an overall average – the blend of people's responses to multiple questions.

Empirical Studies

An empirical study is any effort to systematically examine a phenomenon using real data. Hundreds of empirical studies have examined psychological safety. The most common form of these studies sends a survey to people in their work teams, asking them to respond to items that measure how much psychological safety they have. These studies use statistical methods to examine how psychological safety relates to outcomes that we care about at work. Those outcomes might be:

- Turnover of staff
- Burnout
- Productivity
- Quality of work
- Innovation
- *Many others*

Other studies examine the factors that predict or facilitate psychological safety. These examine how factors such as team composition, past experience, and team processes lead to greater or lesser psychological safety. In research, we usually refer to these as antecedents. Some antecedents that have been explored in research include:

- Leader behaviors of inclusiveness
- How varied the expertise is on the team

- How long the team has worked together
- *Many others*

If you wish to read more, it can be helpful to start with articles that summarize these findings by topic in greater detail.⁹

Future of Research on Psychological Safety

There is still a great deal more to know about psychological safety. Three areas of cutting-edge research on psychological safety that we're excited about:

- **More evidence-based interventions.** Researchers continue to explore not just how psychological safety works but also how we can systematically and effectively intervene to increase it in organizations. Maybe some of you will be our partners in doing so.
- **A more precise understanding of how psychological safety changes over time.** While much of the early work on psychological safety measured it at a single point in time, new studies are examining psychological safety over time within teams to see where it starts, how it changes, and what factors lead it to grow or atrophy in a particular team.
- **More diverse methods of measurement.** Future studies will continue to explore other methods of measuring and understanding psychological safety. While we've largely used surveys in the past, AI and other technological tools are rapidly transforming our ability to study, examine, measure, and understand psychological safety and other group dynamics at scale.

These are just a few of the exciting directions ahead for research on psychological safety. We hope you'll stay tuned.

TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ **Psychological safety** is a shared belief among team members that the environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking.
- ✓ **Interpersonal risk** exists because we naturally worry about looking ignorant, incompetent, intrusive, or negative.
- ✓ **Impression management** can often come at the cost of speaking openly; psychological safety helps reduce our natural tendency to hold back.