



# Why Your Team's Agility Depends on Psychological Safety

by Mark Marone | March 20, 2020

## Key Insights

- ▶ Teams that lack trust and psychological safety will struggle to be agile.
- ▶ When psychological safety exists, team members are more collaborative and more comfortable taking the interpersonal risks necessary to be innovative and to successfully implement change.
- ▶ Creating an environment of psychological safety relies heavily on the soft skills and behaviors involved in social intelligence.



“I screwed up.” Three simple words, but in some teams, they might just be the hardest ones to utter — and the organization is inevitably suffering as a result. Not because of the mistake, but because the team lacks trust and psychological safety. Without those key elements, team members will struggle to work together effectively, make good decisions and keep up with rapidly changing business developments. In other words, the team will struggle to be agile.

With artificial intelligence (AI) ushering in a new era in the workplace — one that’s bringing massive, ongoing change and a lot of uncertainty with it — agility is becoming more and more important. As [Dale Carnegie’s research](#) has shown, increased agility will require building an environment of trust and psychological safety that comes from high levels of [social intelligence](#). That’s because, to successfully implement change, organizations need people to feel like they can be honest and not get in trouble for it. With new technology and evolving customer demands dramatically altering the competitive landscape, everyone needs to be encouraged to try new things without fearing backlash if they fail.

## How Trust and Psychological Safety Enable Agile Teams

In teams where psychological safety exists, people are comfortable bringing up issues, pointing out errors, asking the “dumb” questions and taking a gamble that might not necessarily pan out. Team members are confident in taking interpersonal risks because they know they won’t get punished, blamed or treated like they’re stupid. It’s not surprising then that they’re able to cooperate so well and get the information they need so they can make decisions quickly.

Our research has found that agile teams are fueled by collaboration, creativity, innovation and the ability to thrive through change. They seize on new ideas, respect each other’s

corporate cultures and essential to success in the era of AI.

## Tips for Building Psychological Safety

In a world dominated by technology, interpersonal human skills still matter and, in many ways, they matter more than ever. Here's how you can get started creating an environment of psychological safety to increase your team's agility:

1. **Don't criticize, condemn or complain:** "How could you not know that?" "Where have you been?" "This is wasting everyone's time!" When someone asks a question and everyone pounces, you can bet that person won't be speaking up again anytime soon. Dale Carnegie's Principle #1, "Don't criticize, condemn or complain," reminds us that the quickest way to destroy psychological safety is to criticize or attack someone for something they said or did.
2. **Admit mistakes quickly and emphatically, especially if you're the leader:** While everyone is responsible for creating psychological safety, the leader's actions can be particularly powerful. When leaders own up to their mistakes, they show that it's okay to not be perfect, and they make it safe for others to follow suit.
3. **Be curious and open to different thinking.** When leaders model curiosity by asking questions instead of giving direct orders, they're telling people their opinions and ideas are important. When team members remain curious and open-minded, it helps them avoid knee-jerk reactions that might shut down some of the "crazy" ideas that will open the door to creative, innovative solutions.
4. **Take the fear and judgment out of failure.** Plans will go wrong. Mistakes will be made. How people respond to another person's failures and how quickly that person can recover are what matter most. Dale Carnegie offers some helpful guidance in this area as well. For example, often the best course of action is to follow Principle #26 and "Let the other person save face." Being candid doesn't mean trampling on someone's feelings or aggressively calling them out in front of others.
5. **Be transparent:** Our research uncovered this important factor for agility within the context of artificial intelligence in the workplace. AI can chip away at psychological safety when people don't understand what it's doing, how it does it and how it's being used.

For example, when we asked respondents how likely they would be to trust and accept a performance appraisal conducted by AI instead of a human supervisor, 65% were at least somewhat likely — so long as the criteria were transparent. When we asked the same question with the caveat that the criteria weren't completely transparent, the percentage dropped to 39%. The lesson: Build transparency in to what you're doing, and communicate openly with your stakeholders.

As you can see, creating psychological safety relies heavily on the skills and behaviors involved in social intelligence. These soft skills are increasingly paramount as we look at what it will take to develop the workforce to become more agile and adaptable in this changing business environment.

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