



Psychological Safety is Key for Enabling Diversity in the Workplace

by Mark Marone | November 13, 2020

- Diverse teams can achieve greatness, but they need to exist in an inclusive environment that promotes psychological safety
- Psychological safety rests on the assurance that a team member will not be ridiculed or punished for making a mistake or speaking up with an idea
- The Dale Carnegie principles promote the cultural competencies necessary to cultivate psychological safety within diverse teams.

When was the last time someone told you “there are no stupid questions”? Did you believe them? Maybe you’ve said this as a manager, hoping to encourage discussion and help with clarity among your team. But in workplaces where inclusion and diversity are lacking, these attempts to open the lines of communication are met with silence.

Diversity in business has many **benefits**, but it is not as simple as assembling a group of diverse people. The [pathway to diversity](#) is found in the act of inclusion. Dale Carnegie’s steps to an inclusive environment include growing self-confidence, taking a genuine interest in others, becoming aware of cultural differences, and developing the cultural competencies necessary to sustain these changes.



What Is Psychological Safety?

Although the concept of psychological safety has been researched since the 1960s, the term was coined decades later by organizational behavioral scientist Amy Edmondson of Harvard. Psychological Safety is “a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking.”. Psychological safety can only be created in an environment of mutual respect and trust—the same requirements necessary for sustained diversity.

Determining whether this exists within a workplace requires critical and honest analysis and reflection. Ask yourself, do team members ask questions or offer suggestions within meetings or group settings? Do team members quickly admit to mistakes and reach out for help when needed? Just as there are hurdles to reaching diversity through inclusion, there are hurdles to overcome when creating a climate where psychological safety can exist. The benefits, however, are well worth the effort.

Benefits of Psychological Safety

In Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, he writes, “many things have a plurality of parts and are not merely a complete aggregate but instead some kind of a whole beyond its parts.” Diverse teams can be so much more than the sum of each individual, but only if that team exists in a psychologically safe space.

This was the belief that fueled Google’s [Project Aristotle](#), which determined that psychological safety is the single most important factor leading to team success and, in fact, serves as the foundation for the next four components of an effective team. But Google wasn’t the first one to draw this conclusion.

Among many others, [William Kahn](#) connected the importance of being able to share your authentic self with others to a person’s level of personal engagement at work. He found that “interpersonal relationships promoted psychological safety when they were supportive and trusting.” He describes environments where workers can fail or speak up without fearing consequences.

When it comes to speaking up, [Gallup data](#) reports that only three in ten US employees feel their opinions matter at work. Raise this number to six in ten and businesses could see turnover reduce by 27%, safety incidents decrease by 40%, and productivity raise by 12%. Despite these business positives, the majority of workers do not claim their workspace to be psychologically safe.

Barriers to Psychological Safety

Ever since cavemen started running from saber-toothed tigers, humans have learned to protect themselves from harm. In the modern office, these tigers may take the form of negative gossip, intimidation, public embarrassment for mistakes, or even threats of demotion. No one wants to seem ignorant, disruptive, incapable, or pessimistic. And the



members communicate and interact with each other. Interactions that admonish or belittle others, their culture, or their ideas work directly against a climate of psychological safety. The results of admitting ignorance or fault or of voicing a contrary opinion are perceived as an interpersonal threat, which causes team members to withdraw.

Every time a team member withholds their full self, they are robbing the team of an opportunity for learning and inclusivity. But the burden cannot be placed on the worker alone. Sustained diversity in an environment of psychological safety requires the efforts of everyone: executives, managers, and employees alike. Every team member needs to learn and practice daily the skills and cultural competencies necessary to overcome these barriers.

How Dale Carnegie Cultivates Psychological Safety

From not criticizing, condemning, or complaining to never telling someone “you’re wrong,” the Dale Carnegie principles work directly toward creating an environment and relationship of psychological safety. Even something as simple as knowing a team member’s name can make a huge difference in a person’s feeling of belonging. In *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Dale Carnegie brings attention to a particular story in which a Texas businessman articulates that “the executive who tells me he can’t remember names is at the same time telling me he can’t remember a significant part of his business.” Each member of a diverse team is significant to the project’s success and should be treated as such.

Effective teams work toward the same goal by bringing their collective ideas and energies together. To build or renew [psychological safety within the team](#), Dale Carnegie says leaders should “keep emphasizing, if possible, that you are [all] striving for the same end and that your only difference is one of method and not of purpose.” When teams follow a common purpose, the details, such as whose idea is implemented, become inconsequential to the overall goal. This allows teams to come to a common agreement and successfully complete tasks.

These efforts at inclusivity and diversity must be backed up by self-confidence, an interest in others, cultural awareness, and cultural competencies. Only through these steps can a workplace create and benefit from an inclusive and psychologically safe space. This is what it means to have diversity and to harness that diversity to bring good onto a team and into the world.

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