



Helping people work better together

Psychological Safety

The Bedrock of Organizational Culture



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This white paper explores the critical role of psychological safety in building healthy organizational cultures, including enhancing collaboration and the solutions leaders need to understand, develop, implement, and sustain a culture of psychological safety.

While psychological safety is paramount to fostering environments where individuals feel safe sharing ideas, asking questions, and challenging the status quo, a lack of psychological safety can have detrimental effects on workplace dynamics, employee well-being, and organizational performance. TIVC, an organization specializing in human enterprise optimization, has identified psychological safety as a key contributor to collegiality, teamwork, and mission success, demonstrated through our four-element framework for psychological safety: inclusivity, curiosity, trust, and collaboration.

To help organizations increase their culture of psychological safety, TIVC has developed a holistic approach that will improve and sustain an organization's psychological safety over time, making a long-term, positive impact on organizational culture.

Organized into three progressive but interrelated stages, TIVC's solution for increasing organizations' psychological safety includes a baseline and progress assessment, change management and strategic action plans, training, coaching, and developmental meeting facilitation. Our approach meets organizations where they are in their journey toward psychological safety, assisting in understanding current psychological safety levels and offering recommendations to create and enhance psychological safety through intentional leadership and inclusivity, curiosity, as well as trust and collaboration building strategies.

TIVC's approach provides a robust, holistic solution set for organizations to assess, establish, optimize, and sustain psychological safety, fostering an environment where individuals can contribute, collaborate, and thrive. Through this comprehensive framework, organizations can enhance their performance, innovation, and overall well-being.

For questions or requests for additional information, please contact our **Chief Strategy Officer, Yael Freimann**.

Company: TI Verbatim Consulting, Inc.
www.tiverbatim.com

215 W. Washington St.
Second Floor, Suite A
Charles Town, WV 25414

Point of Contact: Yael Freimann
Sr. Vice President of Growth
yfreimann@tiverbatim.com
(860) 519-2289



INTRODUCTION

Research findings reveal that a significant portion of the global workforce does not feel psychologically safe, leading to burnout, stress, and dissatisfaction. Researchers assert only 47% of the global workforce feels psychologically safe at work.¹ In a recent study conducted by Workhuman,² 48% of survey respondents somewhat or strongly agreed they've experienced burnout, while 61% have experienced elevated stress levels, and 32% somewhat or strongly agree they've felt lonely at work, which is correlated to effects of the lack of psychological safety in the workplace.³ A 2021 Workplace Bullying Institute survey⁴ also found that an estimated 48.6 million Americans are affected by workplace psychological abuse.

These statistics are from a growing body of conceptual and empirical work that have focused on understanding the nature of psychological safety, identifying factors that contribute to it, and examining its implications for individuals, teams, and organizations.⁵ Specifically, scholars have suggested psychological safety is key to understanding organizational factors such as voice, teamwork, team learning, and organizational learning.⁶ Findings from this body of work suggest that a lack of psychological safety poses risks to organizational innovation, creativity, and adaptability. Further, qualitative data⁷ from culture assessments indicates organizations that lack or have very little psychological safety often experience a host of problems that range from sub-performance, grievances, siloes, high turnover, hostile and/or toxic workplace environments, and overall employee dissatisfaction. These losses can have a significant impact on production, customer service to internal and external customers, the organization's cultural health, and its bottom line.

Beyond the extensive research indicating the detrimental effects of a lack of psychological safety, there is growing research and workplace activism asserting workers' rights to psychological safety in the workplace. The organization End Workplace Abuse has introduced a Workplace Psychological Safety Act⁸ that would secure workers' legal right to psychological safety in the workplace. The Surgeon General's recently released *Framework for Mental Health & Well-Being in the Workplace*⁹ also asserts workers' rights to psychological safety in the workplace, emphasizing psychological safety's importance to ensure mental health and well-being in the workplace.

Taking a proactive stance to enhance organizational culture and ensure a secure workplace environment requires organizational leaders to place psychological safety at the core of organizational culture and incorporate psychological safety into the organization's training and development strategy.



PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY EXPLAINED

Benefits of Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is the belief that an individual is safe in taking interpersonal risks and will not be punished, excluded, or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or taking ownership of mistakes.¹⁰ Edmondson also posited that psychological safety is a collective belief held by members of a

team that it is safe to ask for help, admit mistakes, raise concerns, and challenge other ideas, including ideas from those in positions of authority. A psychologically safe environment encourages, recognizes, and rewards individuals for their contributions and ideas by making individuals feel safe when taking interpersonal risks.¹¹ Additionally, psychological safety helps to explain motivations for employee collaboration and knowledge sharing,¹² promotes employee confidence to speak up with suggestions for organizational improvements,¹³ and drives initiative towards innovation in developing new services.¹⁴ Furthermore, research suggests that psychological safety enables organizations and teams to learn collectively¹⁵ and perform at high levels.¹⁶

Psychological Safety in the Workplace

Psychological safety is the bedrock of culture and organizational excellence. It is foundational to the health and collective wellness of an organization.

The outcomes of psychologically safe workplaces include a sense of belonging, feeling valued, and the ability to contribute to an environment where mistakes and shortfalls are viewed as learning and growth opportunities. In essence, psychologically safe workplaces allow for authenticity, enable growth, champion ideas and innovation, and promote teamwork. Psychological safety is essential to a healthy culture, team development, and organizational excellence.

The lack of psychological safety negatively impacts the organization's ability to stay relevant and successful in complex business markets. An organization's ability to innovate, whether to develop new products, implement new technologies, or formulate new strategies is critical to survival in competitive environments.¹⁷ Psychological safety can help in the work environment by providing spaces where teams can discuss difficult topics and handle disagreements more effectively.

TIVC's Psychological Safety Framework

The foundation of TIVC's psychological safety elements builds on research and organization assessment data. At TIVC, we consider current levels of psychological safety through (a) the lens of leadership and the workforce and (b) the alignment between practices and the people they aim to support.

Our approach uses a four-element framework of psychological safety—Inclusivity, Curiosity, Trust, and Collaboration—which outlines how organizations create and optimize psychological safety, promoting a healthy and thriving organizational climate (Figure 1).

Leaders must model these elements first, which will in turn foster an environment for the collective team to engage, creating psychological safety. These elements are critical to the foundation of psychologically safe teams. Top leadership needs to set expectations, model the behaviors, and hold others accountable for doing the same.

Figure 1. Elements of Psychological Safety



Inclusivity



Inclusivity highlights behaviors that foster a sense of belonging and a culture where people feel valued and empowered to engage, participate, and share their ideas, thoughts, and perspectives. Inclusion is the first and, arguably, a prerequisite step in creating psychological safety, as it allows members to speak up, contribute, take risks, and be vulnerable in team settings.¹⁸ Team members who are included and welcomed in group and team settings often feel wanted and appreciated, displaying more creativity toward increasing the organization's performance and improving organizational adaptability and innovation, as well as employee satisfaction and personal growth.¹⁹ When leaders and team members exhibit more openness, accessibility, and availability, employees' psychological safety is significantly improved.²⁰ Inclusion promotes an atmosphere of equality, tolerance, and trust, which enhances employees' psychological safety and promotes individual and group learning.²¹ TIVC has found that building psychological safety through inclusion creates an environment where differing opinions and perspectives are leveraged to position organizations with a competitive edge.

Trust



Trust promotes a mutual belief by giving validity to individual experiences, even if they differ from person to person. Trust fosters empathy and an assumption of positive intent when experiences are shared.²² Leaders and team members who trust extend an invitation to others to express thoughts, ideas, and suggestions without the fear of being embarrassed,

judged, admonished, reprimanded, or retaliated against.²³ A team that has trust is willing to be vulnerable with others,²⁴ has assurance that they will not be harmed or put at risk by the actions of others, and understands that their vulnerabilities will not be exploited.²⁵ When trust serves as a foundation in group relationships, those relationships significantly and positively impact the promotion of psychological safety.²⁶ Compared with members at low-trust organizations, people in high-trust organizations reported 74% less stress, 50% higher work productivity, 13% fewer sick days, 76% more engagement, and 40% less burnout.²⁷

Curiosity



Curiosity is invaluable when creating psychological safety. Curiosity provides the opportunity to challenge the status quo, ask questions, and explore options. It challenges the paradigm of "this is how we've always done it" and "if it's not broken, don't fix it." Curiosity fosters healthy levels of dissent, where questioning the status quo is a welcomed approach to problem-solving and process improvement. Curiosity positions organizations to fully leverage the innovation and creativity of their talent pool. When leaders purposefully demonstrate curiosity, other members of the team and organization are also encouraged to demonstrate curiosity.²⁸ In these environments, team members also feel safe to ask questions, fostering an environment of collaboration.²⁹ Asking questions with genuine curiosity can disarm the defensive and invite other cautious voices to emerge.³⁰ The adage that "there are no stupid questions" is born from curiosity and underscores the importance of psychological safety in the workplace. When leaders promote psychological safety and team members ask questions, they may elicit answers that could help organizations achieve their goals.

Collaboration



Collaboration focuses on engagement within teams and across an organization's talent pool and resources. Collaboration aims to break down silos while maximizing the use of talent and resources in a joint effort toward shared objectives. Many researchers use the terms "cooperation" and "collaboration" interchangeably when describing climates for dynamic relationships and psychological safety in organizational settings.³¹ However, there is a difference between cooperation and collaboration. Cooperation can be defined as working together to get the job done, whereas collaboration is the intentional act of working with and through others' talents and differences to get the job done.³² Cooperation is less intentional, while collaboration requires a deliberate focus. Collaboration is necessary for psychological safety because it values what individual team members bring to the group.³³ As team members with diverse backgrounds are free to voice ideas, concerns, and work-relevant thoughts, psychological safety will enable them to overcome any barriers created by their differences.³⁴ TIVC has found that when employees experience psychological safety through collaboration, organizations can expect to experience higher employee engagement, lower employee turnover, improved performance, and higher levels of group learning.

All elements of psychological safety require intentional acts from all members of the team. Leadership and managers set the stage and model the behavior while holding members of the team accountable for behaviors aligned with creating and maintaining psychological safety. In turn, all members of the team

are responsible for contributing to psychological safety and for restoring psychological safety when teams are lacking it. When something in the work environment threatens the overall organizational psychological safety, it is the team’s collective responsibility to collaborate to restore psychological safety.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

Because psychological safety is an integral component of a healthy workplace culture, fostering psychological safety requires a holistic, organization-specific solution. Organizational culture can be difficult to shift, which means leaders whose goal is to increase their organization’s psychological safety must be ready to take a holistic approach and look at progress over time, rather than focusing on narrow, isolated, or quick fixes.

Leaders ready to create a long-term culture change by increasing psychological safety should consider their organization’s progress and current placement within three progressive but interrelated stages of their journey:

1. **Understanding and creating the climate for psychological safety:** In this stage, leaders analyze their current psychological safety and identify where and how there are opportunities to increase psychological safety.
2. **Developing and implementing psychological safety norms:** In this stage, leaders and team members change the organizational culture, engaging with training to develop new psychological safety norms that will increase the organization’s psychological safety.
3. **Sustaining psychological safety:** In this stage, leaders return to analysis of the organization’s psychological safety, celebrating successes and identifying areas for continued growth.

Within these stages of psychological safety development (Figure 2), leaders can employ a number of solutions, depending on the unique organizational culture and the psychological safety gaps. Through our robust needs assessment process, TIVC identifies the appropriate solution set that will help leaders further the organization’s psychological safety.

Figure 2. Holistic & Progressive Psychological Safety Culture Development





Baseline Assessment

For organizations first beginning their journey to develop psychological safety, a baseline psychological safety assessment measures scores at the organizational, departmental, and/or team level to identify areas of strength and areas of opportunity. The assessment is measured by six questions for each element, for a total of 24 questions. Each element includes three questions specifically designed to assess the level of psychological safety within immediate teams and three questions regarding psychological safety with first line supervisors.

TIVC offers a psychological safety assessment at Basic, Premium, and Premium+ levels, which gives increasing levels of information within the organization's demographics regarding psychological safety. This assessment serves as a diagnostic tool to help inform the solution set the organization needs to create, sustain, or restore psychological safety. Based on the results, TIVC works collaboratively with the organization to provide solutions to cultivate or improve psychological safety through recommendations, consultation, and/or training.



Focus Groups & Interviews

Depending on key findings from a baseline assessment, our team can provide a deeper understanding of the results through focus groups and interviews. Qualitative data will describe the reasoning behind the scores and can be helpful in developing targeted solutions.



Training Courses & Workshops

Leaders and team members may not understand what psychological safety is or how to foster or engage it in the workplace. Psychological safety training courses and workshops provide employees at all levels of an organization an understanding of psychological safety and practical strategies for engaging others in a way that fosters and supports psychological safety. Additionally, leadership training develops leaders' skills in creating a climate where psychological safety can thrive, guiding leaders in implementing a plan to increase psychological safety within their teams. These psychological safety trainings help an organization to develop and sustain new psychological safety norms that create a long-term impact on the organization's culture.

In addition to courses and workshops focusing on psychological safety, organizations may also benefit from training on other skills that support a culture of psychological safety. For example, emotional intelligence is an essential skillset for leaders to successfully foster psychological safety, and similarly, team members need emotional intelligence skills to support and sustain a culture of psychological safety.

Emotional intelligence training, including the EQ-I 2.0 assessment, develops leader'' and team members' emotional intelligence, so they can fully embrace and engage the organization's new and developing psychological safety norms.

Depending on the organizational or team-specific needs, specialized training in other areas may also be appropriate. For example, organizations with a hybrid workforce can benefit from training on how to lead sustainable hybrid teams, tackling the specific way leaders can develop a healthy and psychologically safe culture with remote workers. Additionally, intergenerational communication training can support organizations struggling to fully integrate and engage the five generations currently in the workplace. Finally, organizations that may be pivoting from a toxic culture may need to engage in interpersonal conflict and change management training, supporting leaders and employees in new ways to engage in conflict and change productively.



Individual & Group Coaching

Because leaders have a distinct responsibility for fostering an environment of psychological safety and supporting psychological safety long-term, they can often benefit from individual and group coaching. Coaching provides leaders an opportunity to explore challenges and reconsider preconceived limiting beliefs that have impacted their ability to foster psychological safety within their team. Developing a culture of psychological safety can require a shift in leadership style, and coaching provides an effective means for leaders to explore and reflect on how they can adjust to embrace and lead within this new culture. Leadership coaching can also be particularly impactful when paired with other efforts to increase an organization's psychological safety, as coaching can support the organization's change management, strategic planning, and training efforts.



Team Developmental Meeting Facilitation

To successfully sustain a new culture of psychological safety, organizations may also need to reconsider and realign organizational practices, policies, and values to new psychological safety cultural norms. Team developmental meeting facilitation can provide organizations the support and guidance to make systemic changes that will improve and sustain psychological safety, including

- Adjusting performance review processes;
- Resetting meeting best practices
- Revising organizational strategy, mission, vision, and values; and
- Improving promotion processes.

While organizational commitment to psychological safety, leaders' fostering of psychological safety, and team members' engagement and support of psychological safety are all important, the organization must

also align their broader culture so that employees are provided the space and incentive for a culture of psychological safety to thrive.

For example, an expert facilitator can guide organizational leaders in a series of developmental meetings exploring current promotion processes and identify ways to ensure the promotion process rewards and supports individuals who foster psychological safety. In these developmental meetings, the facilitator engages leaders in discussion, facilitates leaders' analysis and synthesis of ideas, and creates takeaway documentation for leaders to implement.



Follow-Up Assessment

The journey to develop psychological safety has many detours and pitfalls, and organizations must continue to be reflective to maintain and reaffirm psychological safety. Through a follow-up assessment, leaders can re-evaluate experiences, shared values, team norms, organizational practices, and the effectiveness of psychological safety, ensuring an organization attracts and retains high performing, engaged employees. This progress assessment—and subsequent continuation of maintenance and development of psychological safety—sets leaders up for success long-term, continuing to sustain the growth of psychological safety they have achieved so far and improving areas that need attention.

CONCLUSION

TIVC's inclusion-first approach to creating, optimizing, and restoring psychological safety provides organizations a comprehensive, tailored solution to ensuring an engaged workforce and an organizational culture that values the contributions of all employees. We do this through a four-element approach to psychological safety: inclusion, curiosity, trust, and collaboration, and our robust solution set to progressively develop and maintain organization's psychological safety long-term.



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