

# Psychological safety and its role in high-performing teams



As we move into a new norm, organizations are struggling to adjust to the post-pandemic work environment, scrambling to overcome challenges like quiet quitting and the Great Resignation—all while leadership teams strive to succeed in the ever-evolving world we live in. Many organizations and employees alike are grappling with how to handle hybrid and returning-to-work practices, incorporate effective DEI initiatives and foster psychologically safe cultures, while keeping employees engaged and productive. Topics like diversity fatigue, Sunday scaries, and bare minimum Mondays—are becoming all too common in the headlines—and on the front lines.

Leaders in every type of organization are trying to figure out how to create a [high-performance culture](#) under new conditions. Team building, professional development, and corporate culture all look and feel different than they did before 2020.

This leads me to another—less-known—trending topic: psychological safety.

A year ago, I didn't even know what psychological safety was. I hadn't heard of this term. Now that I've learned more about it, I'm shocked that this is not discussed at the executive level in every organization.

So, what is psychological safety? Psychological safety was coined by Organizational Behavioral Scientist Amy Edmonson of Harvard University. It's defined as a shared belief held by a majority of members of a team that no one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes—and their team is a safe place for interpersonal risk-taking.

The [four stages of psychological safety](#) are:

- (1) included
- (2) safe to learn
- (3) safe to contribute, and
- (4) safe to challenge the status quo

—all without fear of being embarrassed, marginalized, or punished somehow.

Psychological safety is a condition in which you feel:

- included
- safe to learn
- safe to contribute, and
- safe to challenge the status quo

Psychological safety at work *doesn't* mean that everybody is always nice to each other or caters to every idea you have. As Adam Grant puts it: “Psychological safety is not relaxing your standards, feeling comfortable, being nice and agreeable, or giving unconditional praise.”

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It means that people feel free to “think out loud,” voice ideas without a solution, ask bold questions, openly challenge the status quo, share feedback, and work through challenges and disagreements. It is a culture of respect, trust, and openness—where people are comfortable bringing their full,

authentic selves to work and “laying themselves on the line” in front of others for the betterment of the organization.

It’s clear that psychological safety is important, but how important?

Several years ago, Google set out to discover what factors contribute to the most successful teams. They called this Project Aristotle. After years of research, they uncovered that psychological safety was the #1 factor in creating high-performing, successful teams.

Google found that teams with psychologically safe environments had employees who were less likely to leave, more likely to harness the power of diversity, more innovative, and, ultimately, more successful.

We’ve all been in meetings and have held back questions or ideas due to the fear of seeming incompetent. I get it. It’s unnerving to feel like you’re in an environment where everything you do or say is under a microscope. I think back to times in my career when I’ve felt like this—when I’ve noticed a process that can be improved, had an idea for a new initiative, or a correction for a team member—but suddenly became hyper-aware of all the reasons other people at the table might question my opinions when it’s time to speak up.

But imagine a different setting. A situation in which everyone is safe to take risks, voice their opinions, and ask judgment-free questions. A culture where managers provide air cover and create safe zones so employees can let down their guard. That’s psychological safety. And while it is an “invisible” component of an organization’s culture, the feeling of being in an environment that’s psychologically safe versus psychologically unsafe is as apparent to employees as night and day.

Google made the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle proud by proving, “The whole can be greater than the sum of its

parts.”

This concept is thus the critical component of a high-performance culture.

The mindset of the whole organization ultimately drives behavior and creates the environment that becomes your culture. You will have a culture one way or another. This culture stems from the mindset of the individuals who make up an organization. To foster an environment that is resilient, innovative, engaged, and achieves results—you must cultivate a culture of psychological safety. At Arbinger, we call this an outward mindset, where people feel their challenges, ideas, fears, frustrations, and goals matter as much as everyone else. It all starts with mindset, and the culture that it creates.

**Corporate culture, now more than ever, has an impact on results. For more information, [check out our new research](#).**