

The leader's role in fostering psychological safety at work



Psychological safety is a concept that has yet to make its way into many boardrooms or team meetings, and it's something I rarely hear discussed in the leadership forums I participate in. However, it's gaining traction, especially after [Google's Project Aristotle](#) revealed that the most effective teams share a key characteristic: [psychological safety](#) at work.

This factor, often overlooked, is more crucial than intelligence, skill, or experience. It's about creating an environment where people feel safe to take risks, share ideas, and make mistakes without fear of negative consequences. Unfortunately, many leaders, myself included at times, unknowingly cultivate the opposite atmosphere—not out of malice, but due to a lack of awareness.

When psychological safety at work is compromised

In many of the cultures I've worked in, the mantra is, "Don't bring up a problem if you don't have a solution." I've seen firsthand how this approach fosters a workplace that feels

anything but safe. While the intention might be to promote high standards and maintain order, the unintended consequence is that it [shuts down voices that might raise important issues](#). The precedent is set: speaking up is not safe unless you have the perfect solution.

I've also worked for leaders who react harshly to mistakes, thinking they are holding the team accountable and reinforcing a culture of excellence. What they don't realize is that, to the team, every error feels like a potential landmine. This is where we really see the importance of psychological safety at work. Without it, people begin hiding their missteps, fearing the fallout more than the consequences of leaving issues unaddressed.

There have also been times in my career when I've brushed off dissent or questioning, believing I was streamlining decision-making or avoiding unnecessary conflict. However, this has created an echo chamber where only certain voices are heard. Team members quickly learn that it is safer to keep their heads down and agree rather than risk being seen as disruptive. This stifles innovation and leads to some of the most creative minds taking their ideas elsewhere. Some leave for competitors, start their own businesses, or simply move on—leaving the organization to miss out on their potential.

While examples of psychological safety should foster a sense of belonging, these negative examples can create a climate of fear and mistrust.

The leader who can't be proven wrong

The most frustrating situation for me is working for a leader who needs to be seen as competent at all costs. They don't want to be proven wrong, thinking it will undermine their authority. When someone suggests an alternative viewpoint,

especially one that contradicts them, they justify it as decisiveness or strong leadership, but it is [self-deception](#).

Their need to be seen as right often overshadows their willingness to consider others' ideas. Acknowledging another perspective feels like admitting a weakness, so they dismiss or ignore it.

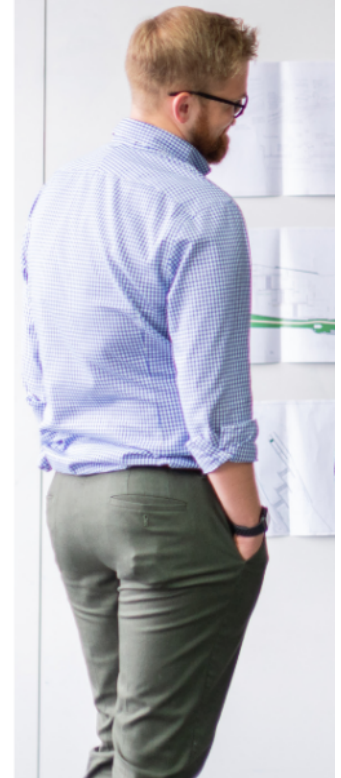
What they don't realize is the ripple effect this behavior creates. After shutting down one or two voices, the rest of the team quickly gets the message: speaking up is risky and not worth it.

If this sounds like you, consider asking yourself some of these questions to understand the impact of this behavior.

- **Am I open to feedback and criticism?** Do I see these as opportunities for growth or as personal attacks?
- **Am I willing to admit when I'm wrong?** How do I respond to mistakes or errors in judgment?
- **Do I create a safe space for others to share their ideas without fear?** How do I show up in a way that invites brainstorming, ideation, and collaboration?

Are you a leader who can't be proven wrong? Ask yourself:

- Do I see feedback as an opportunity for growth or as a personal attack?
- How do I respond to mistakes or errors in judgment?
- Do I create a safe space for others to share their ideas without fear?
- How do I show up in a way that invites brainstorming, ideation, and collaboration?



The hidden costs of an unsafe work environment

The impact of a lack of psychological safety is profound, though often hidden. When people are too afraid to voice their ideas or challenge the status quo, innovation grinds to a halt. Creativity takes a backseat to the need to fit in and avoid conflict. Opportunities for growth slip by unnoticed because everyone is too busy playing it safe.

Moreover, mistakes tend to resurface in more damaging ways when they are swept under the rug instead of being openly addressed. Errors that could have been minor learning experiences [become costly missteps](#). Meanwhile, employee morale starts to erode. People who feel undervalued or unsafe withdraw, doing only what's necessary to get by. This disengagement creates a cycle of mediocrity, where passion and commitment are replaced by apathy.

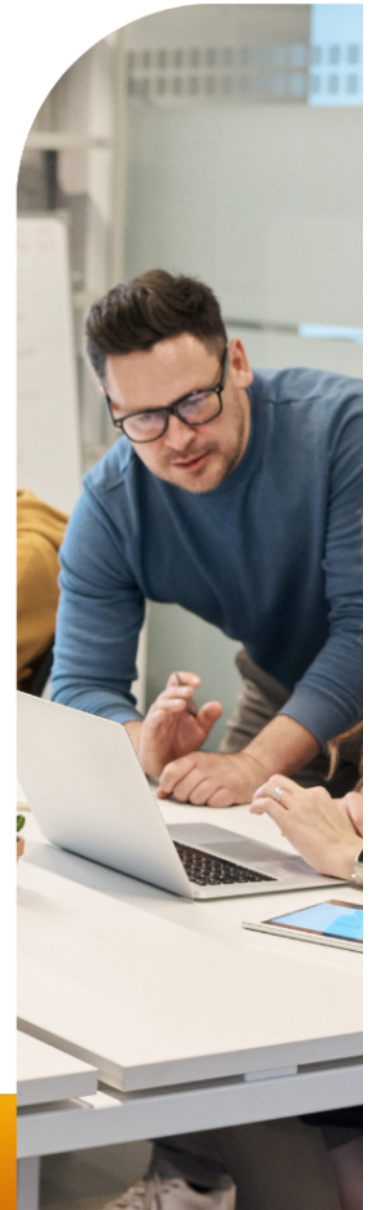
Over time, turnover rates climb. Talented individuals won't stick around in an environment where they feel their contributions don't matter or, worse, they feel they're walking on eggshells. As they leave, they take their skills, knowledge, and the potential for future growth with them.

It's often only after employees leave that organizations realize the value of their contributions and the depth of the issues they faced. I can remember a few times when I spent more time thinking about what I was going to say in my exit interview than on the projects I was working on.

It's common for employees to leave, only for HR to later identify critical issues that could have been addressed earlier. This often highlights a lack of psychological safety in the workplace. When employees feel comfortable speaking up about concerns and challenges, organizations can proactively address problems and prevent them from escalating.

Hidden costs of a lack of psychological safety

- Stifled innovation
- Missed opportunities
- Damaged morale
- Reduced productivity:
- Negative reputation
- Lost talent



Creating a culture of psychological safety at work

So, how do you begin to break this cycle and start fostering psychological safety in the workplace? It starts with self-awareness and a willingness to embrace vulnerability. You must recognize your role in shaping the team's environment. This means being open about your own mistakes and the lessons learned from them. Leading from a place where you don't need to be seen as better than others and are not afraid of someone

realizing you are not perfect is the starting point. This idea is scary to many people, especially those who are suffering from self-proclaimed “imposter syndrome” and have been promoted to roles they have never been in before.

Equally important is fostering an environment where feedback is not just welcomed but actively encouraged. I invite my team to share their thoughts, including the critical ones. By doing so, I demonstrate that every voice matters and that constructive criticism is not an attack but a pathway to improvement. Sometimes I throw out crazy ideas, just to get the ball rolling! Making it fun to ideate instead of intimidating is critical.

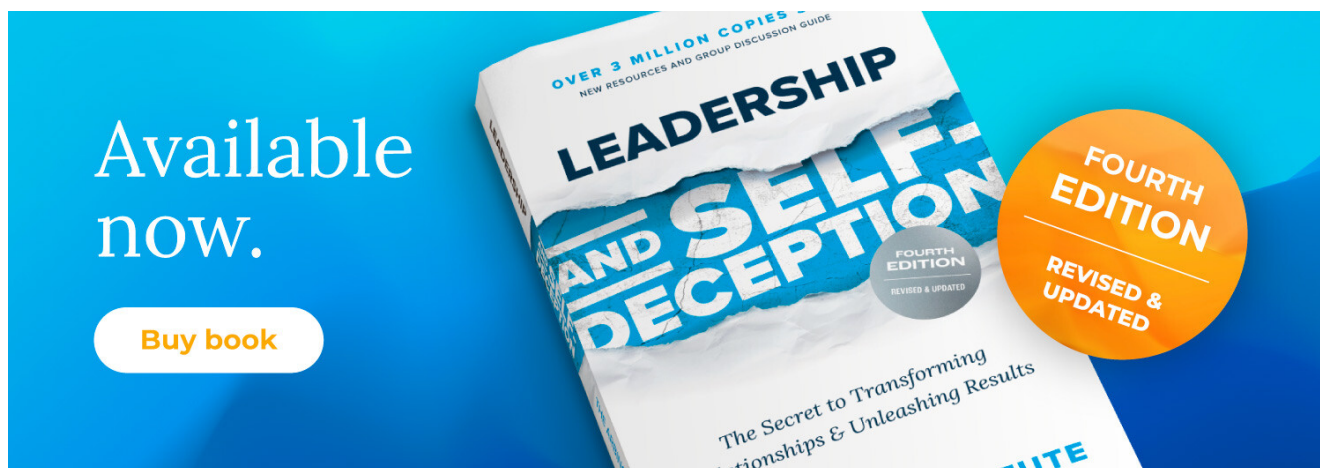
Recognition also plays a key role. When I celebrate the team’s successes and acknowledge individual contributions, it reinforces the value of each person’s role. This isn’t about grand gestures but simple, consistent acknowledgment. It’s about saying, “I see you; I hear you, and your work matters.” Or “you did really great, I appreciate your hard work on that,” or simply, “Thank you!”

Looking ahead at the benefits of psychological safety

Psychological safety is more than a buzzword; it’s a fundamental need for any team striving to reach its highest potential. I realize that I have contributed to an environment of fear and insecurity simply because I hadn’t been introduced to the concept of psychological safety. However, as research and my own experience have shown, creating a space where people feel safe to express themselves is crucial for innovation, [engagement](#), and growth.

Leaders who make the effort to understand psychological safety at work and actively foster it will see their teams transform. They’ll move from a culture of fear to trust, where open

communication becomes the norm and taking risks is seen as a step toward success, not a gamble with one's career. In this environment, teams not only survive; they thrive. They become more innovative, engaged, and resilient, capable of confidently tackling the challenges of today and tomorrow.



This blog is published as part of Arbinger's Leadership Faux Pas series. Have you ever wondered what not to do as a leader? This series dives deep into the common missteps that can derail even the most promising leaders. Learn from these pitfalls and elevate your leadership game. New blogs released weekly!

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