

Psychological Safety in the Workplace

TIMED OUTLINE

Abstract: Physical safety in the workplace is regulated and ensured by OSHA; however, psychological safety in work environments is largely self-governed. The ability to take interpersonal risk is a crucial component of psychological safety- and studies show this ability is lacking in most in most work environments. Employers who provide a psychologically safe environment enjoy higher staff retention and better productivity. This course details the importance, components, and establishment of psychological safety.

Learning Objectives:

1. Identify the key brain functions/structures that regulate human behavior.
2. Understand the meaning of psychological safety and it's components.
3. Recognize behavior patterns of individuals with high sensitivity to each safety component.
4. Identify the steps necessary to create a psychologically safe work environment.

- I. What is Psychological Safety? 5 minutes
 - a. Ability to take interpersonal risks without fear of punishment or humiliation.
 - b. Phrase coined by Dr. Amy Edmondson
- II. Why is Psychological Safety important? 5 minutes
 - a. Without it, employees will not fully engage, or bring their "full abilities" to work.
 - i. Both the Challenger and Columbia disasters occurred because NASA did not foster a psychologically safe environment.
 - ii. The Volkswagon "diesalgate" scandal occurred primarily due to a psychologically unsafe environment.
 - b. When humans feel physically- or psychologically- unsafe, the brain switches into a "threat-avoidance mode."
 - i. The amygdala is responsible for detecting threats and provoking reaction.
 - ii. The pre-frontal cortex is responsible for regulating our threat responses.
 - iii. A continuously perceived threat will eventually wear the PFC down and allow the amygdala to trigger generally negative behaviors.
- III. Components of Psychological Safety. 30 minutes
 - a. Predictability – the need for security and consistency
 - i. The human brain is a prediction machine- this allows us to run on auto-pilot most of the time.
 - ii. Unpredicted occurrences draw attention and can be perceived as threatening- especially to individuals with a high sensitivity to predictability.

- iii. To provide the perception of safety, recognize the sensitivity to change when implementing new processes and procedures. Also, manage with consistency.
 - b. Approval – the need to be well-regarded and belong
 - i. One of the primary human needs is to be accepted in their social group.
 - ii. Studies show individuals who feel themselves to be alone or ill-regarded suffer decreased intellectual, emotional, and even immunity capabilities.
 - iii. To provide the perception of approval, recognize accomplishments and employ discretion when providing constructive criticism.
 - c. Control – the need for autonomy
 - i. Studies show when a mammal (including humans) perceives a lack of control over their environment, the resulting symptoms mirror those of clinical depression.
 - ii. Conversely, when subjects feel in control, their perception of the environment is more positive (e.g., post-surgical patients who are in control of their own pain-killers tend to use less).
 - iii. To provide the perception of autonomy, limit mandates on behavior and allow employees to recognize and embrace policies on their own.
 - d. Equity – the need to feel the environment is fair
 - i. The insula is the part of the brain that reacts with disgust to bitter tastes (to protect humans from eating potentially poisonous foods). The insula reacts the same way to perceived unfairness.
 - ii. Although humans develop a reaction to unfairness directed towards themselves by the age of 4, by the age of 8 the brain reacts to unfairness directed towards others.
 - iii. To provide the perception of fairness, ensure everyone in the environment has a voice, and avoid favoritism.
- IV. Creating a Psychologically Safe environment in your workplace. (15 minutes)
- a. Start with yourself- understand the components of Psychological Safety to which you are most sensitive.
 - b. Understand the others in your environment and their unique sensitivities to Psychological Safety.
 - c. Manage potential threats to Psychological Safety as a team.
 - d. Create a culture of continuous Psychological Safety.
 - i. Create a baseline measurement of the perception of Psychological Safety in your environment.
 - ii. As a team, create actionable items to address shortfalls in any are of Psychological Safety.
 - iii. Take action, and constantly remeasure to evaluate the Psychological Safety of your work environment.