

Fostering psychological safety in Hybrid & Remote Work

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Introduction

Remote and hybrid workplaces offer unparalleled flexibility, but they also present unique challenges, especially when it comes to fostering psychological safety. Psychological safety is the foundation upon which trust, collaboration, and inclusion are built. In a virtual setting, the absence of face-to-face interactions can exacerbate feelings of isolation, hinder communication, and prevent team members from fully engaging in discussions. This guide provides practical strategies to mitigate these risks, ensuring that employees feel heard, valued, and included, regardless of their location.

Understanding the issue

As organisations increasingly adopt hybrid and remote work models, understanding and addressing psychological safety becomes more critical. In traditional office environments, psychological safety develops naturally over time, with spontaneous conversations, informal interactions, and shared physical spaces contributing to stronger interpersonal bonds. However, in remote work settings, these organic interactions are minimised, and teams often struggle with creating an environment where employees feel comfortable taking interpersonal risks (such as speaking up, sharing ideas, or admitting mistakes) without fear of judgment.

The shift to remote work has highlighted how essential psychological safety is to maintaining high-performing teams. Research by Lechner and Tobias (2021) highlights that remote teams face specific challenges that impact their psychological safety. For example, virtual team members often feel isolated, disconnected, and excluded from informal communication networks (such as hallway conversations), which can lead to a decline in trust and collaboration. Furthermore, psychological safety is linked to better team performance, increased innovation, and lower employee turnover. Without psychological safety, team members may withhold valuable insights, avoid providing feedback, or disengage from collaboration efforts, undermining overall team effectiveness.

What can be done to foster psychological safety in hybrid and remote work settings ?

To build and sustain psychological safety in remote teams, it is essential to adopt intentional, proactive strategies. Here are several actions that managers and HR professionals can implement:

-  **Foster Open and Transparent Communication**
Remote work can often lead to communication breakdowns, with fewer opportunities for informal exchanges. To mitigate this, remote teams should establish clear and regular communication channels, prioritise open discussions, and create opportunities for employees to share thoughts and feedback without fear of negative consequences. Leaders should model transparent communication, acknowledging challenges and mistakes. By doing so, they demonstrate that vulnerability is acceptable and that no one is expected to be perfect, thus reducing the fear of judgment.
-  **Establish Clear Behavioural Expectations and Roles**
Psychological safety thrives when employees understand their roles and expectations clearly. Leaders should communicate expectations for work processes, communication practices, and team behaviour from the start and make sure everyone on the team understands how to interact with each other, what behaviours are expected, and how to raise issues constructively.
-  **Encourage the Practice of Active Listening**
In remote teams, where body language and other non-verbal cues are often missed, active listening becomes even more important. Encourage team members to listen attentively, respond thoughtfully, and ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to speak during meetings. Leaders should be especially proactive in engaging quieter team members. Ask open-ended questions and create space for less vocal team members to share their perspectives, ensuring that all voices are heard.
-  **Empower Employees to Give and Receive Feedback**
A culture of feedback is essential for developing psychological safety. Leaders should encourage regular feedback loops, both positive and constructive. Feedback should be framed in a way that is supportive and solution-oriented. Creating an environment where employees feel comfortable receiving feedback without fear of negative consequences is essential. Additionally, team members should be encouraged to share feedback with each other to improve processes and relationships, fostering continuous improvement.

What is the role of Managers and Human Ressources ?

Managers



- Managers should encourage team members to voice concerns, share ideas, and ask for help without fear of negative consequences.
- By openly acknowledging challenges, asking for feedback, and sharing personal experiences, managers can create an atmosphere where vulnerability is seen as a strength, not a weakness.
- Actively involve all team members, especially those who may be quieter or less visible in virtual meetings, to ensure everyone feels heard and included.
- Offer regular, constructive feedback and check in on team members' well-being to prevent isolation and foster trust.

Human ressources



- HR should offer training programs on building psychological safety, addressing remote work challenges, and promoting inclusivity in virtual teams.
- HR should help mediate conflicts and provide tools to address interpersonal issues that may arise in remote work settings, ensuring a fair and supportive environment.
- HR can also serve as a bridge between leadership and employees, collecting feedback and identifying trends related to social isolation.

Conclusion

Developing psychological safety in remote teams is essential for fostering collaboration, trust, and a high-performing culture. By taking intentional steps to enhance communication, inclusivity, and connection, leaders can create an environment where all employees feel valued and confident in expressing themselves. Psychological safety is not a one-time achievement but an ongoing commitment to ensuring that team members feel heard, respected, and supported, no matter where they work.



Further Reading

- [Edmondson, A. C. \(1999\). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. Administrative Science Quarterly, 44\(2\), 350–383.](#)
- [Greenblatt, A. \(2023\). Loneliness Epidemic. CQ Researcher. CQ Press.
https://doi.org/10.4135/cqresrre20230505](#)
- [Lechner, A., & Tobias Mortlock, J. M. \(2021\). How to create psychological safety in virtual teams. Organizational Dynamics, 51\(2\), 100849.
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2021.100849](#)
- [Perry, R. \(2018\). Belonging at work: Everyday actions you can take to cultivate an inclusive organization. PYP Academy Press.](#)