

April 13, 2021

The Importance Of Psychological Safety During Disruptive Times



At the heart of any business lies its people and for this reason it is essential that businesses create an environment of wellbeing in which change can be embraced, instability can be tolerated, and conflict can be resolved.

In the context of Covid-19, with organisations re-designed to meet new challenges, new approaches to workforce flexibility and a need to continue reacting to new challenges, psychological safety must play a key role in helping your people succeed.

Our willingness as an organisation to offer ideas and propose solutions to the various daily challenges our people face is dependent on how we believe those ideas will be received.

Psychological safe organisations and Covid-19

The idea of psychological safety was first introduced by organisational behavioural scientist Amy Edmondson. According to her, inclusivity, trust and respect are central, and valuing diversity, critical.

“The disruption of our lives, the loss of normal familial interactions, and the economic and financial fears of losing our livelihoods all become a bigger source of threat than the virus itself. That’s why going back to routines and doing things that were normal really helps counteract this defensive state” (Amy Edmondson on psychological safety during Covid 19 – www.mckinsey.com).

Organisations that have psychologically safe environments are characterised by the following:

- Leaders who openly share their own mistakes and failures, as well as what they learned from those experiences.
- Constructive questioning of other perspectives, and a willingness to challenge the majority view.
- Recognising those who are open about mistakes made and lessons learned.
- A willingness to ask for help.
- Low tolerance for finger-pointing and blaming.

(www.ehstoday.com/Covid-19)

What are the organisational behaviours to promote psychological safety?

Lead by example:

- Anyone in a position of responsibility should set the example for the rest of the company. This is applicable from senior management down to team leads and managers. If done properly, the set of behaviours should become a norm across the company.
- Ask for upward feedback.
- Acknowledge your mistakes.
- Be open to opinions that differ from your own.
- Be approachable and encourage your people to ask questions.

Employ active listening:

This is an important part of ensuring that people feel valued and are able to contribute to the team or organisation. Ideas to improve listening include the following:

- Switch off phones during meetings.
- Show understanding by repeating what was said.
- Encourage people to share more by asking questions.
- If certain individuals rarely speak during meetings, actively ask them for their opinion.

Develop organisational curiosity:

During Covid-19, companies with the strongest cultures started asking questions such as:

- What would happen if we told everyone to *work from home* tomorrow?
- How are our clients being impacted by this crisis and how can we help them?
- What are we best suited to do in this time of need?
- What do our people need to be able to *work effectively from home*?
- How do we elevate our communications at a time when people want to know what is going on?

Build adaptability:

Ask yourselves what you are learning and how you will apply those lessons to future challenges. This will ensure that you become the organisation that leads, not follows, in times of crisis.

In conclusion

A 2017 Gallup report found that if organisations increase psychological safety, it increases employee engagement and can lead to a 12% increase in productivity. To assist organisations in adopting a culture of psychological safety, *SERR Synergy offers a number of non-accredited, online management courses which address this crucial management and leadership tool, namely psychological safety.*

About the author: Anita Seydel joined SERR Synergy in September 2014 and is currently the National Manager: Training and Development. She obtained her Honours in Public Administration at the University of South Africa (UNISA) and also holds six qualifications in the Education, Training and Development environment. She recently completed courses in Corporate Governance and Knowledge Management (UNISA), and Instructional Course Design (Wits University).

Sources used:

(www.impraise.com/what-is-psychological-safety)

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