



Psychological Safety: Safe, Supported, and Seen.

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Humans generally like to feel like we are in control—that there is an order and a predictability about the world in which we live. We like to believe that our actions result in expected outcomes. The pandemic of 2020 has changed our understanding of so many ‘truths.’ As such, we may be feeling a lot less ‘in control!’ The novel nature of this situation has understandably resulted in increased stress, insecurity, and doubt. We need to acknowledge this reality and work to build a resiliency. We also need to feel safe.

As we think about returning to the office, it is clearly important that we consider the tactical changes that are required to reduce the spread of illness - that the environment is physically safe. It is equally important that we provide an environment where employees *feel* safe.

Here we'll focus on **psychological safety** in the workplace, an individual's perception and individual, internalized assessment of their immediate surroundings¹.

Accounting for employees' psychological safety will allow for a more comfortable homecoming to the workplace, and the benefits will extend beyond our current reality. Psychological safety is essential to the creation of an environment that holistically supports employee health and wellness. Additionally, environments in which individuals feel safe, supported, and seen aid in collaboration, productivity, and workplace satisfaction².

In order to completely consider psychological safety, individuals need to experience three truths:

1. Psychological safety related to the **physical environment**
2. Psychological safety related to continued, **organizational support**
3. Psychological safety related to **social interactions**

Employers should regularly assess their strategy in supporting each of these elements to provide a safe and productive workplace.



Psychological Safety Related to the Physical Environment

“I am safe”

Employees need to trust that their physical work environment and work protocols are fostering health.

The environment must directly convey the precautions that are in place to mitigate germ spread. Companies should also explicitly communicate and educate on the protocols that are being implemented so that all understand what is expected of them. For instance, the installation of new or taller screens in individual workspaces is a physical and obvious visual of the changes that have occurred to protect employees. In addition to adding the barriers, companies should communicate protocols for use (e.g. they are not a replacement for physical distancing, but instead an extra precaution) and cleaning procedures. Although barriers may be an obvious indication of a company's commitment to health, the physical change needs to be supported by communication to aid understanding and observation of guidelines. Managing these tactical considerations will help to ease day-one anxieties for employees returning to the workplace.

Considerations for psychological safety related to the physical environment include:

- Visible cues of the precautions taken to promote health (e.g. partitions or barriers, designated pedestrian routes, recently sanitized areas)
- Clearly communicated and understood protocols, including reasoning – or ‘the why’ behind the protocols (e.g. how many employees can meet in each space, timelines of when employees are in office and where, proper orientation in break rooms)
- Communication of the resources that are being used to make decisions about safety (e.g. CDC guidelines). The sources should be reputable and convey authenticity. Employers should communicate that they are acting on most current health information and not guessing about what is needed and when.

Psychological Safety Related to Continual Organizational Support

“I am supported”

Uncertainty seems to be the only certainty in these times. Beyond their physical health, employees may feel anxious about their ability to maintain their position in the organization, to be considered a productive contributor by their peers and leaders, and to support themselves and their families. Obviously, employers cannot guarantee anything in this climate, or any, for that matter. What companies can do, however, is provide employees with a sense that decisions are not being made in an impulsive or arbitrary method. Communication and explicit dedication to employees' in a systematic effort may ease stress and apprehension

dedication to employees' in a systematic effort may ease stress and apprehension for employees. For example, when offices reopen to employees, many may struggle to find childcare if partial restrictions are still in place. The organization should clearly and thoughtfully communicate what is the expectation of this employee and employer in this situation? How will the company support productivity, encourage a sense of security, and adapt to meet specific needs?

Considerations for psychological safety related to the continual organizational support include:

- Clear understanding of the health resources that are provided to employee and dependents (e.g. insurance, telehealth, psychological support).
- Communication of flexible work options. Defining when employees are encouraged or able to work from home when needed (e.g. during outbreaks, need to be home with dependents, concerns about personal health, well-being).
- Fostering a culture of trust where, despite flexible hours and locations, managers and team members trust that work is being done as expected. Continued communication will be necessary to support and sustain.
- Transparency about decision making processes, modifications, and the current understanding of the path forward will allow employees to believe that future change will not send them or their company into a tailspin. Building peace of mind for employees to trust that their company is agile enough to respond to upcoming changes and unforeseen crises.

Psychological Safety Related to Social Interactions

“I am seen”

Employees need to feel comfortable voicing their opinions, ideas, and concerns. We must trust that we are not going to be judged, belittled, embarrassed, or penalized for ideas that are genuinely made with intent to contribute, progress, or improve. To feel heard is to feel seen. We must feel that we are heard in order to feel seen as a valuable contributor and meaningful participant among our peers and leaders. Without this security, it is impossible to express discomfort about the current environment or about a concept to advance an idea.

Before we left the office, we understood a catalog of social norms, or unwritten rules. Unwritten rules are informal guidelines about what is ‘normal behavior’ in a given situation. It is entirely possible, likely even, that many of these unwritten rules will need to be considered as we return to the workplace. For example, asking a coworker to back up give you more space would previously have been almost unheard of in a normal situation. In an environment where employees feel psychologically safe, having the bravery and graciousness to first express discomfort with proximity and then hear and act upon that comment without distress will make the transition back to the office less stressful and ultimately healthier.

Feeling safe enough to express ideas, fears, and vulnerability is one will be beneficial in this evolving climate. And, building a culture of acceptance in this realm will also foster collaboration, innovation, and learning³.

Considerations for psychological safety related to social interactions include:

- Feeling comfortable communicating peer-to-peer about needs, ideas, and challenges (e.g. “Can you please back up, I feel uncomfortable without appropriate physical distance”)
- Trust that employees are able to communicate discomfort or concerns with all levels of the organization, in an appropriate way. (e.g., many companies may rightfully implement a policy regarding face masks. Some individuals are fearful to wear masks because of potential discrimination (4). There needs to be an open communication to find an appropriate path forward)
- Fostering a culture that should support ideas and suggestions openly. Employees should be able to be vulnerable to express thoughts that are outside of the standard way of operating (e.g. off-brand, new techniques, innovative approaches).
- Employees should not be fearful to take risks in a responsible way. Failing should not be punished when the effort was made honestly, within the bounds of policy, and with the intention to meet organizational goals

Psychological Safety in the Uncertain Future

The importance of psychosocial safety is something that we may only be beginning to fully understand. Uncertainty, however, has always been and will always be part of our work lives. This conversation is one that we may start now, but it will continue to be relevant as the world never stops changing. We will undoubtedly have fears about moving forward, however, we should be confident that our workspaces fully consider us as humans: physically and mentally; at home and at work; now and into the uncertain future.

Check-In for Employers While Considering Psychological Safety:

Do employees feel safe?

- The decision-making process on how/why/when employees are being supported to return to the office has been communicated. Employees have been consulted on their personal needs and restrictions and these inputs have been included as serious considerations.
- The physical changes have been made and the protocols that are being instituted have been communicated to employees prior to their return to the workspace to minimize unease and uncertainty on day-one.
- Protocols have been created with trustworthy resources which have also been

- uncertainty on day-one.
- Protocols have been created with trustworthy resources which have also been given to employees either broadly or upon request. Protocols are adjusted as information is adjusted and recomunicated to all.
- Timing of the communication to employees has been given in advance of the return to the office and there has been an opportunity for questions or concerns to be voiced. When all concerns are not able to be fully addressed as requested, the rational and alternative approaches should be offered.

Do employees feel supported?

- Current portfolio of benefits has been reexamined in light of current environment to ensure that employees are being supported in a way that meet their need, to the best of the companies' ability
- Health resources are made available to employees. Employees are reminded of these resources and encouraged to utilize them when needed.
- Flexible work protocols have been communicated. Options for alternative work hours, locations, or expectations have been explored based on need. Availability of these options have been communicated appropriately.
- Managers and employees have been provided with insights and tools to foster communication, collaboration, and productivity, especially during execution of flexible work options.
- Communication continue past initial move-in day to further promote protocols and remind of expectations for use of spaces. Remind employees of the changing nature of the situation and the commitment to continued evaluation.

Do employees feel seen?

- Have a defined hierarchy of communication when issues arise, but do not be so stringent on the rules of engagement that employees feel restricted.
- When appropriate, ask employees for their open-ended feedback. Summarize feedback and report back with findings and any resulting action.
- Model vulnerability in expressing new concepts. Actively listen and respond when others do the same. Ensure that comments made sincerely, with the intention to contribute, progress, or improve are considered, not belittled or immediately negated.
- Practice patience and grace as we build new social norms, such as greetings (without handshakes and with smiles hidden by masks) and proximity (understand and comply without judgement if you are asked to back up or not physically attend a meeting).

SOURCES

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