# Psychological Safety

"a belief that **one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up** with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes, and that **the team is safe** for interpersonal risk-taking"

-Amy Edmondson

**Routes [more than] Coaching**

# What is Psychological safety in the workplace, looking at the work of *Dr Amy Edmondson*

Dr Edmondson codified the concept of psychological safety, namely: the belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes, and the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking.

*Psychological safety* is a term referring to the belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with concerns, questions, ideas or mistakes. *Psychological safety in the workplace* refers to the perception that individuals can freely express their thoughts, ideas, and concerns without fear of negative consequences, ridicule or retaliation. At work, it is a shared expectation among team members and leaders, that sharing of ideas, taking risks or making mistakes, and soliciting feedback will not be met with embarrassment, rejection or punishment.

> "Psychological safety means an absence of interpersonal fear. When psychological safety is present, people are able to speak up with work-relevant content."
>
> —Amy Edmondson

## Amy C. Edmondson

NOVARTIS PROFESSOR OF LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Amy C. Edmondson is the Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at the Harvard Business School. A chair established to support the study of human interactions that lead to the creation of successful enterprises contributing to the betterment of society.

Edmondson has been recognized by the biannual Thinkers50 global ranking of management thinkers since 2011, and most recently ranked #1 in 2021 and 2023; she also received that organization's Breakthrough Idea Award in 2019, and Talent Award in 2017. She studies teaming, psychological safety, and organizational learning, and her articles have been published in numerous academic and management outlets, including Administrative Science Quarterly, Academy of Management Journal, Harvard Business Review and California Management Review. Her book published in 2019, The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation and Growth (Wiley), has been translated into 15 languages.

# The global evidence: Google's Project Aristotle

In 2012, Google embarked on an initiative — code-named Project Aristotle — to study hundreds of Google's teams and figure out why some stumbled while others soared. Dubey, a leader of the project, gathered some of the company's best statisticians, organizational psychologists, sociologists and engineers. He also needed researchers.

**Project Aristotle's researchers** began by reviewing half a century of academic studies looking at how teams worked. Questions were asked to establish trait patterns that all high achieving teams shared. Based on those studies, the researchers scrutinized the composition of groups inside Google as a benchmark. They drew diagrams showing which teams had overlapping interests and which groups had exceeded their departments' goals. They studied how long teams stuck together and if gender balance seemed to have an impact on a team's success.

No matter how researchers arranged the data, it was almost impossible to find patterns — or any evidence that the composition of a team made any difference. ''We looked at 180 teams from all over the company,'' Dubey said. ''We had lots of data, but there was nothing showing that a mix of specific personality types or skills or backgrounds made any difference. The 'who' part of the equation didn't seem to matter.''

Then, they stumbled over Psychological safety and what that meant.....

Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson defines Psychological safety as ''a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up.'' Edmondson wrote in a study published in 1999, ''it describes a team climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves.''

When the Google researchers encountered the concept of psychological safety in academic papers, it was as if everything suddenly fell into place.

*For Project Aristotle, research on psychological safety pointed to norms that are vital to success. There were other behaviours that seemed important as well — like making sure teams had clear goals and creating a culture of dependability. But Google's data indicated that psychological safety, more than anything else, was critical to making a teamwork*.

# The evidence and consequences of reduced / lack of Psychological Safety

In the absence Psychological safety within an organisation, people are prone to work from a place of fear.  Whether this fear is perceived or real is a moot point; as the position of fear will influence the person in every aspect of their work lives.  The reason that the perceived vs real point has been made, is that we often challenge the fear within a person in coaching or leadership and typically the source of the fear is not easily identified or even down-played or denied by leadership.

When an individual operates from a place of fear, their anxiety (the Routes interpretation of anxiety is fear with energy) is increased.   This leads to a host of behavioural, productivity and even mental health issues.

Through our coaching interactions within the Firm, we submit the following evidence and consequences of a lack of Psychological safety:

**Increased anxiety:**  This leads to a host of issues from hypersensitivity to situations / conversations, to the longer-term burnout and mental health struggles.

**Decreased performance:** When hi-jacked by fear, procrastination, reduced concentration, productivity, lack of motivation and taking longer to complete tasks is evident.

**Withholding information / not speaking up:** problems and possibly mistakes are not admitted to and discussed.  This compromises the entire firm's quality of work and increases exposure to risks.

**Increased staff turnover:**  Losing key talent and higher than acceptable attrition rates is a huge red flag.  This is clear evidence of the 'flight' stress response.

**Reduced creativity and innovation:** A work environment that lacks psychological safety hinders the team members from sharing unconventional ideas and reduces new and creative solutions.

**Poor communication:** Team members find it difficult or even impossible to have difficult conversations or to even communicate openly, which leads to misunderstandings and unnecessary conflicts.

**Inadequate problem-solving:** Without psychological safety, team members don't feel compelled to raise concerns, which creates an attitude of wilful blindness. This leads to problems being overlooked and not addressed adequately, causing negative consequences in the long term.

**Decrease in employee engagement:** When employees feel that their voice doesn't matter or that their workplace culture isn't open for two-way feedback exchange, it can lead to low engagement levels.

**Reduced trust:** When team members cannot trust their colleagues or leaders/managers, it leads to a negative or even toxic atmosphere in the workplace, which makes it difficult to work together effectively. Mistreatment whether observed or experienced will likely not be addressed in this environment.

**Noise in the system:**  When team members feel they are unable to speak to leaders about their concerns, they speak to each other, or worse still, external people. We are all aware of the detrimental effects of gossip / corridor talk.

# Who is responsible for creating and maintaining a Psychologically Safe environment?

> " While leaders and managers play a significant role in fostering psychological safety, every team member also has a responsibility to contribute to the overall atmosphere of trust and openness. "
> - Rita Cincotta

## Let's start with leaders and how the Partner / Director Body can promote psychological safety in their teams?

According to research, leaders can foster psychological safety among their teams using these four steps:

### 1) Reframing Mistakes:

**Vulnerability and Transparency:** Openly share your own journey and learnings regularly, fostering a culture of transparency. Remind the team consistently that our work is challenging and that making mistakes is an expected part of the journey. Normalise owning up to and taking responsibility for mistakes, and the rectification thereof.

**Learning Opportunities:** Frame mistakes as essential steps in a continuous learning process. Emphasise the value of receiving feedback and data to improve, turning errors into opportunities for growth, to mitigate against making the same mistakes again.

### 2) Encouraging All Voices:

**Constructive influence:** Actively prevent the "sunflower" effect, encouraging diverse perspectives beyond the leader's view. Remind the team that everyone holds a unique and valuable part of the answer in our complex world.

**Neutral Participation:** Invite participation in non-threatening ways, asking for viewpoints.

**Transparent Decision-Making:** Fill silences with answers, explaining the rationale behind decisions transparently. Share the decision-making process with the team to enhance understanding.

### 3) Appreciating Contributions:

**Recognition Norms:** Make recognition an integral part of team language and norms. Give special thanks for addressing difficult issues, recognizing contributions to group dynamics and problem-solving.

**Specific Acknowledgment:** Be specific in celebrating actions and their impact. Acknowledge points made during meetings, fostering an environment where every contribution is valued.

### 4) Mentoring and coaching team members:

**Creating the team ethos:** Establish norms that encourage team members to express their views. Coach individuals to support each other, urging them to ask profound questions to understand their teammates better.

**Feedback and mentoring:** Provide constructive feedback and mentoring to team members on their contributions to psychological safety, ensuring a supportive and collaborative atmosphere.

# When the Psychological Safety tone has been set by leadership, it becomes everyone's responsibility to uphold.

While there is clear accountability on leaders, the responsibility needs to filter down to all levels within the firm. Making it a collaborative effort to establish and maintain psychological safety within the firm. Adopting practices that promote psychological safety in teams, helps to protect us all from psychologically unsafe practices. Making our workplaces more engaging, enabling people to do great work in an environment where they are can be their authentic selves.

In order to create a sustainable Psychologically Safe Firm, at an individual level the following strategies need to be considered:

## Self-awareness:
Understanding the self is at the core of our Routes Coaching ethos.  Knowing your own emotions, triggers, and reactions is vital to regulate your behaviour.

## Set boundaries:
Clearly communicate  boundaries to others. This includes expressing specific expectations for communication, interactions, or any other aspects that contribute to your well-being.

## Open-minded to feedback:
Engage in the feedback process.  Being open minded will facilitate learning.

## Express thoughts and feelings:
Understand the correct channels to express thoughts and feelings for a constructive outcome. Open communication fosters understanding and connection.

## Ask for help when needed:
Seek support when facing challenges, rather than struggling and increasing anxiety.

## Learn and grow:
Embrace a growth mindset. View challenges as opportunities to learn and develop, rather than as threats. This perspective can contribute to a sense of autonomy and mastery.

## Cultivate a positive mindset:
Focus on the positive aspects of situations. This doesn't mean ignoring challenges but rather finding constructive and optimistic ways to approach them. This can be a difficult mindset to achieve in South Africa currently, so building a support network of people who uplift and support each other is essential. Having a strong support network can provide emotional support during tough times.

## Take breaks and practice self-care:
Prioritise self-care activities, including breaks, exercise, and relaxation. Taking care of physical and mental well-being contributes to overall psychological safety.
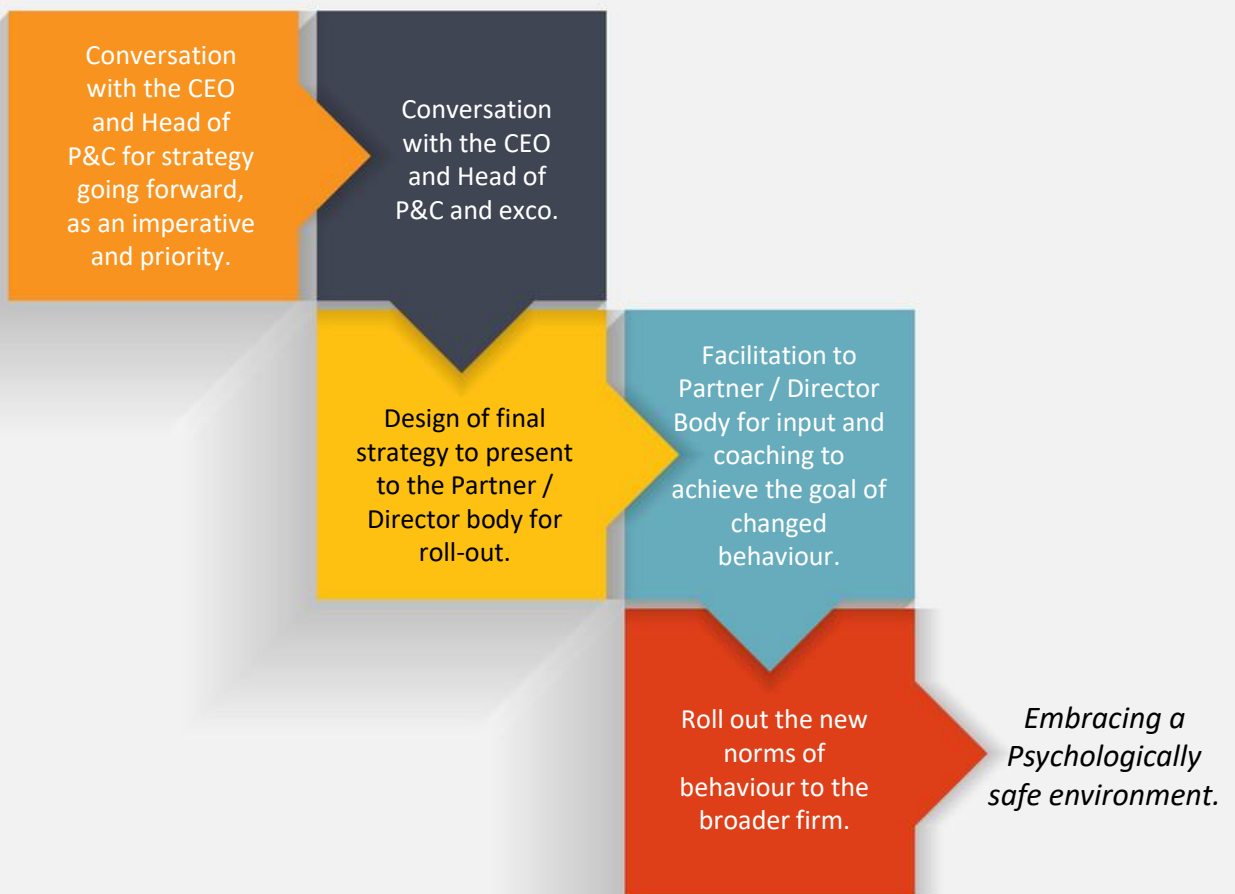
## Practice self-compassion:
Self-compassion is often a difficult practice to attain, especially in challenging situations. Understand that making mistakes is a part of learning and growth.

# Where to start?
# It starts with acknowledgement, conversation, engagement and commitment.

The overarching objective is to see behavioural change within the organisation.  To achieve this, the

Conversation with the CEO and Head of P&C for strategy going forward, as an imperative and priority.

Conversation with the CEO and Head of P&C and exco.

Design of final strategy to present to the Partner / Director body for roll-out.

Facilitation to Partner / Director Body for input and coaching to achieve the goal of changed behaviour.

Roll out the new norms of behaviour to the broader firm.

*Embracing a Psychologically safe environment.*

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