



# PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY: WITHOUT IT, **YOU AIN'T** **GOT MUCH!**



**John O. Burdett**





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*“To embrace something bigger than yourself, you first have to give yourself permission to be vulnerable.”*

## Setting the Context

Assuming physiological needs are met, our next most basic need is to feel safe.<sup>1</sup> It's a survival instinct that runs deep. Being highly attuned to external threats owes much to our early, hunter-gatherer kith and kin. Know also that when we feel threatened, altruistic behaviour is quickly pushed aside. In today's environment, we are obviously not referring to physical danger. What dominates our immediate attention, what diverts us from creative or supportive ways to be, what ensures that our own concerns overwhelm the needs of the team is when emotional anxiety enters the picture. Simply put, if you want to derail future possibility, ignore psychological safety.

As we move beyond the second Elizabethan age, more than at any time in the past, leadership is about delivering change. Step one on that journey? To fully recognise that tomorrow will not be a replay of today. Uncertainty; emerging technology; the challenge of organizational and, with it, leadership agility; the ever-increasing speed of change; and the need to create work that matches capability with opportunity all add up to one undeniable reality. The organization that got us here, won't get us to where we need to be. Tomorrow's organization will be flat, fast, focused, flexible and fertile to new ideas. Hierarchy will,



1 American psychologist, Abraham Maslow, in his 1943 paper, “A Theory of Human Motivation.” Physiological need refers to the basic requirements needed for life to continue, examples being air, food, water, shelter and clothing.





of necessity, give way to the organization as a team of teams. And abandon any notion of there being a *return to normal*. Hybrid employment is here to stay. “Elvis has left the building.”

The twin thrusts of the organization as a team of teams and a workplace fashioned by hybrid employment, on their own, demand a very different mindset. A way to think and act influenced by the ideas reviewed below.

- i. We can assume that in many organizations new roles will emerge. Expect distance learning specialists, highly skilled team advisors and mental health professionals to be added to the roster. Also, assume significant investment in new technology: new ways to connect, digital tools that enable collaboration and significantly upgraded security features.
- ii. As many are discovering, at their own cost, merely adding the term “agile” to a well-established process or activity doesn’t, per se, make it agile. An agile team, for example, isn’t achieved by simply laying out new rules, revisiting established protocols and/or drawing creative lines and boxes on the organization chart. When you strip everything away, agility is about how people learn. Learning, in turn, is predicated on the quality of the questions asked. A great question meets three conditions. One: it asks for what you want, not what you don’t want.<sup>2</sup> Two: it makes the listener think differently about the issue on hand. Three: quoting a Japanese proverb, “It makes the silence in the room, louder.” In the quest to build agile teams, don’t expect much progress if psychological safety is found wanting.
- iii. Forget about saving money on real estate. To make hybrid employment viable, the in-house work environment will have to be a joyful experience.
- iv. We need to sharpen the selection tools such that new team members truly fit the “new workplace.” Culture fit becomes a make-or-break issue.
- v. For the leader, how those on the team work with and support each other (or not) moves centre stage. That is to say, team chemistry – a key characteristic of team success – can no longer remain a purely intuitive, abstract or esoteric issue. If you don’t measure it, you can’t manage it.
- vi. Middle managers and all of those who influence team behaviour will have to learn how to deliver diversity and shape inclusion at a distance. Diversity, in this context, means addressing not only those elements of difference that ensure fairness but behaviour that delivers “cognitive diversity.” If everyone on the team thinks – and,

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2 If your star player received a penalty, don’t dwell on what went wrong. You can’t change the past. Figure out what to do next time. If you lost a key sale, don’t spend all of your time trying to figure out what happened – outline what you will do next time.



as a result, in all likelihood, acts – in the same way, my suggested descriptor for such a team is “dis-agile.”

- vii. In an environment where leadership of the team embodies: (i) comfort with ambiguity; (ii) the need to move effortlessly across different organizational cultures; (iii) knowing when to lead and when to follow; and (iv) optimising the level of engagement – team members must feel free to speak up.



## **The Case for Psychological Safety**

Starting in 2012, a two-year study by Google, involving hundreds of interviews, looked at the factors that made up a successful team. “Project Aristotle” identified 250 team attributes. Five were discovered to have primacy: (1) psychological safety; (2) team members trust each other to achieve goals at a level of excellence; (3) clear roles and goals; (4) personal meaning in the work; and (5) overall purpose. Of the five, psychological safety was deemed, by far, the most significant.

The Google study found that team members who felt safe with each other – were willing to speak out, challenge one another, and take personal risk – admitted mistakes, were more likely to partner with each other, took on new roles, were open to new ideas and asked challenging questions. No less important, there was also a strong correlation with retention.



Psychological safety goes beyond the belief that you can speak up without being punished. It's the courage to speak to power. It's an invitation to be the stick that stirs the contentious pot. It's to fill the space when the silence in the room carries the message "step carefully." It's to nurture the maverick on the team. Psychological safety shouldn't be confused with complaint or disruption. It defines informed and respectful interruption. Those who make a difference not only state their concerns, but they also have an answer when someone else on the team asks, "What do you think we should do about it?" And the best way to ensure people take note of what you have to say? Pave the way by being a great listener. We are copying machines. When we listen, we facilitate listening in others.

Psychological safety is reinforced when the team leader lets others speak first; when new team members are effectively integrated; when the body language of the informal leaders in the room invite input; when those who prefer to stay on the periphery of the team are invited to speak; when provocative questions are affirmed; and when appropriate humour enters the picture. The right humour, at the right time, can defuse tension, stimulate people's more playful selves, reinforce recognition and lower the emotional temperature in the room. But it's got to be the right humour at the right time.

There is also considerable value in providing team members with a rich synopsis of the topics to be discussed at the meeting ahead of time. Ask Amazon. A six-page memo lays out the problem, the different approaches and how various solutions would serve the customer. Setting the scene ahead of time overcomes a common issue. If you give a typical team a problem, they jump right in. The outcome dominates everything else. It's a mad dash to a solution. Process, building on individual strengths, working together as a team, exploring different scenarios and/or learning from past experience are pushed aside. By comparison, successful leaders are readers. Challenge creates commitment. Information informs inclusion. Process prompts productive outcomes. Reflection realises richer results.

It's worth emphasising that psychological safety isn't just another way to say, "Be nice to each other." Teams that play together, stay together. That doesn't mean they are playing lawn bowls.<sup>3</sup> There are times, in a successful team, when it's more like rugby football – scrums, hard tackles passing the ball backward and kicking for touch. Once described as "a game of ruffians played by gentlemen,"<sup>4</sup> one of the enduring traditions of rugby is that, after the rough and tumble, everyone meets in the bar for a beverage. "Kiss and drink up."

In his book *Think Again* (2021), Adam Grant describes his research with hundreds of new teams in Silicon Valley. Building on the work of Australian psychologist, Karen Jehn, he studied two kinds of conflict: relationship and task. What he found was: (1) successful

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3 Bowls, or lawn bowls, is a sport in which the objective is to roll biased balls so that they stop close to a smaller ball called a "jack." It is played on a grass bowling green. Highly skilled, it tends to be a sport that attracts players who are in the Autumn of their life.

4 Now played at a very high standard by women and others.





teams had low relationship conflict and high task conflict; and (2) poor performing teams were held back by interpersonal conflict. If you are the team leader and “when” or “how” is the issue, let the team work it out. If it’s about relationships, however, address the issue *before* the conflict becomes entrenched.

## Moving to Action

If we want people to operate in the kind of organizations we need to build, unbridled curiosity and habitually looking beyond the ways things happen today have to become the default behaviours. Psychological safety kickstarts challenging the status quo. It also: (1) builds team resilience; (2) is a catalyst in inclusion and diversity; (3) lies at the centre of employee engagement; (4) encourages risk taking; (5) is the energy in innovation; (6) fuels personal growth; and (7) is a “must have” dimension of team chemistry.

When it comes to openness and candour, if the team leader isn’t on board, no one is onboard. And if you are the team leader, the following represent actions that will start to make psychological safety a reality.<sup>5</sup>



### 1. Psychological safety moves through four stages.

- i. *Knowing* – curiosity, being aware. Articulating the need for psychological safety. Creating the early road map. Discussing the meaning behind empowering language, e.g., humility, authenticity and openness. Establishing shared ownership. Avoiding the emergence of competing constituencies by uncovering the key questions around work-from-home that need to be answered at the outset.
- ii. *Sowing* – ploughing under outdated notions of followership, e.g., knowing your place. Seeding the ground. Taking the first steps. Navigating the way forward. Unlearning. Letting go of unhelpful behaviour. Introducing appropriate processes. Defining the leadership and team behaviours demanded. Personal example from the team leader. Positive reinforcement.
- iii. *Growing* – shared and collaborative practice. Appreciating that psychological safety is always a work in progress. Learning how to learn. Recognising and reinforcing the

<sup>5</sup> Research by McKinsey indicates that only a handful of leaders demonstrate the behaviours that instil psychological safety. And less than half (41%) of team members felt that there was a positive climate within their team. February 2021.



right behaviours. Quietly counselling any outliers. Defending/supporting risk taking. Shedding the mask. Building the confidence needed for the team to live in truth.

- iv. *Showing* – servant leadership. Continuing to learn. Allowing the road map to fully unfold. Taking pride in the team’s capacity to deal with the unexpected. Surfacing positive stories. Becoming a role model for others in the organization.
2. **Be context relevant.** To merely survive, the rate of learning inside the organization must be at least as great as the speed of change in the external environment. Make the customer’s voice ever-present. Strive to work with market leaders. The learning deficit that arises from working with middle-of-the-pack customers is a competitive handicap that will, sooner rather than later, put the business at risk. Frame team decisions and/or future action within the culture the organization needs to create. There are four interrelated pillars of a strong culture: (i) purpose; (ii) diversity; (iii) brand; and (iv) speed of action. Where psychological safety is missing, where speaking to power is silenced: (i) the purpose will not evolve; (ii) the biases that often inhibit diversity will remain unchallenged; (iii) the brand will start to slowly lack relevance; and (iv) the pace of change is destined to be calibrated against “This is how we have always done it.”
3. **Live the organization’s values.** Challenge those who don’t. Think of the team as you would a small community. At the centre of a thriving community are shared values. As important as shared values are in a traditional work setting, they take on even greater importance when members of the team work, at least part of the time, from a remote location. With agility, the great exit and hybrid employment in mind, there is a compelling case, in many organizations, for the organization’s values to be revisited. It’s probably fair to say that about a fifth of organizations don’t have values. As for the rest: (i) a high percentage have espoused values that aren’t really values – merely accepted common practices such as “integrity” that fail to differentiate the business; (ii) others have values that people don’t really believe in – little more than window dressing for the website; (iii) a different group of organizations have values that connect to some groups and not others; and (iv) organizations (in the minority) that do actually make their values work for them.
4. **Know, really know, why your best people stay.** When team members are truly open with each other, a sense of belonging emerges – the characteristic of team chemistry most readily identified with why top talent stays with the organization.
5. **Psychological safety isn’t an end in itself.** Ultimately, psychological safety is about shaping the team behaviour needed to achieve ever more challenging targets. Display a passion for results. No one on the team can be allowed to be “somewhat” committed. Commitment means to be all in. Leaders are dreamers with a deadline. Without stretch goals, “good” quickly becomes “good enough.” A journey without a destination





is a sentence without a full stop. Don't duck the tough conversation. Hold people accountable. Hold them accountable for playing a full role in delivering psychological safety. At the same time, celebrate success.

6. **Mindset matters.** Mindset, in turn, is shaped by the metaphors you use, the stories you share, the imagery you introduce, the bridge to the customer you build, the sense of urgency you instil, the best practices you take on board and the inspiration that the team leader provides. Inspiration comes from the Latin *spiritus*: to breathe life into. A successful team leader breathes life into psychological safety every day in every way.
7. **The manager-one-level-up.** You don't exist in a self-contained bubble. Recognise that the degree of openness and challenge displayed in the relationship with your manager-one-level-up imprints on what your team believes is possible. At one time, leaders got on by kissing up and kicking down. That era is long past. Moving forward, leadership success is about challenging up, collaborating across and coaching down.
8. **Team climate.** Research suggests that a positive team climate is a critical driver of psychological safety. Make affirmation a way of life. Go out of your way to "catch people doing it right." Model the behaviour you expect of others. Find ways to celebrate curiosity and openness. At the beginning of a project don't just set specific delivery goals – essential though that task may be – have a conversation about what the team can learn from the challenge. At completion, review both the more traditional goals and the nature of the learning that unfolded. Work with each member of the team such that they connect with their personal purpose. When people are connected to their purpose, petty concerns and meaningless disagreements quickly fall away. Promote self-awareness,







generally, especially as it relates to personal resilience. Recognise that resilience isn't simply "bouncing back." It's learning from the experience.

- 9. If you don't live in truth with yourself, you can't ask others to strip away their mask.** Be humble. Embrace your authentic self. Ensure that the real you turns up every day. Anything less is called "manipulation." People resent being manipulated. And know that, even though it be for a fleeting moment, when you seek to come across as the smartest person in the room, you have already lost the room. Ego is the enemy of empathy.
- 10. Be vulnerable.** To embrace something bigger than yourself, you first have to give yourself permission to be vulnerable. Vulnerability, in turn, means being open. Admit mistakes. "I screwed up" may be the single most positive contribution you can make to psychological safety. Be the first to apologise and the last to seek the limelight. Say "thank you" and mean it. Ask for input. "What should I do more of, start to do, stop doing, do differently?" Set the scene by reinforcing how invaluable such feedback has been in the past. Act on what you have heard. Without feedback you will never be able to get past your blind spots. Arrogance is the failure to recognise that we don't know what we don't know. Being vulnerable means that you don't always have to be present. In fact, it helps if, from time to time, that you're not. Create situations where the team have to figure it out on their own. That way team members will develop self-control, enhance their own problem-solving skills and learn how to navigate conflict.
- 11. Know both who you are and the journey you are on.** Your challenge is to be the best version of yourself that you can be. Listen to your own story. You probably haven't heard it in a while. The more connected you are to your story, the more meaning there will be in your life. Conversely, if you are not living your story, you are, in all likelihood, living someone else's. You will be unable to complete the journey you should be on if you are trapped in a story that isn't your own. Enable others on the team to surface their own story. It's one of the most precious gifts you can give anyone.
- 12. Display leadership balance:** (i) employ the head (Direction); (ii) empower the hand (Delivery); (iii) engage the heart (Development); and (iv) enrich the spirit (Day-to-Day Dialogue). Know that, engaging the heart and enriching the spirit is essential if top talent is to thrive in a hybrid environment.
- 13. Super teams are way more important than superstars.** Know that, no matter what you have experienced in the past, you work for the team. Agility demands it. That the overall level of expertise on the team is far greater than any team leader could even contemplate, makes it inevitable. It's called "servant leadership." Within that context, if you can't coach, you can't lead.



- 14. Make coaching a way of life.** Link desired coaching outcomes to the culture the organization needs to create. Ensure that role-specific leadership competencies frame future success. Make contribution to the team a performance imperative. Coaching doesn't always mean hitting the ball out of the park. Small steps that "nudge" performance quickly add up. Have team members coach each other. Utilise a shared coaching model.
- 15. Respectful conflict is an idea giving birth.** Invite the team to push back against what is being suggested. "How could this approach be improved?" "What unexpected consequences could emerge?" "If a world-class expert on this topic were to suggest changes, what would they be?" "Does anyone have any other ideas?" At the same time, nurture what it is that brought the team to where you are – what made you successful. Part company with the past only after the potential consequences have been fully thought through. Under the guise of change, many an organization/team has ploughed under what it was that made them special.
- 16. Don't ignore the stone in your shoe.** To reach for greatness, every team needs a maverick. Nurture the maverick on the team. If necessary, be the maverick on the team. At meetings, to the extent possible, be the last to speak. Once the team leader's point of view is expressed curiosity is curtailed. See #19.







- 17. Find ways to bring working from home or from a remote location to life.** Provide creative ways for team members to interact with each other, e.g., experiential learning, self-directed learning (give the team a budget and have them orchestrate their own learning), pursuing a worthy cause and/or watching, in virtual space, a sports event together.<sup>6</sup> As a growing consulting market suggests, the potential options are endless.
- 18. Go to bat for team members if they encounter resistance elsewhere in the organization.** Challenge bias. Be especially sensitive to the needs of minority and/or a member of a group that has been traditionally marginalised. Building trust and establishing psychological safety are two sides of the same coin.
- 19. Courtesy is the lubricant of leadership.** Psychological safety doesn't give people a license to be disrespectful. Caring matters. Challenge anyone on the team who displays unhelpful game playing and/or disruptive behaviour. In such instances, have the courage to be tough minded. Ultimately, a team can only be as successful as its most recalcitrant member. The research reveals that if only a single member is a negative force on the team, the performance of the whole team can drop by 30% to 40%.<sup>7</sup> To get a sense of what that really means, the next time you take a shower dial back the water flow by 40%. Note: the dysfunctional behaviour outlined should not be confused with, what is described under #16 as, a "maverick." Think of the latter as a critical thinker, a devil's advocate, someone who loves challenging the status quo – an individual who not *only* challenges the conventional way of thinking but who also has creative ideas.
- 20. What people don't know they will make up.** It's called human nature. Let the team know what's going on as soon as you know. Lack of knowledge breeds defensiveness and speculation. Before long it leads to resentment. Resentment retards resilience.
- 21. Develop team rules: four to six success criteria that describe how, ideally, the team should work together.** Developed by the team and reviewed regularly (e.g., at the end of an important meeting or when a new team member is added), the "rules" give team members permission to challenge behaviour that fails to adhere to the criteria agreed to. Know that when you add someone to the team you have, in essence, created a new team. To help them land successfully, a new team member should be supported by a mentor from the team.
- 22. Move beyond intuition and observation.** Use a robust assessment to take a deep dive into team behaviour. Do so regularly. Have a follow-up meeting where the topic is exclusively how to take the team to the next level.

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<sup>6</sup> A number of platforms make this possible.

<sup>7</sup> Will Felps, Associate Professor, UNSW Business School. See YouTube video: Groups and Teams - Will Felps (UNSW Business School).



- 23. If you don't grow the people in the business, you can't grow the business.** With that in mind, make the performance discussion, as it relates to delivered results and compensation, separate from the ongoing development conversation. Adding what are, at best, speculative assumptions around potential only serve to make the traditional performance management discussion even more contentious. The rigidity and, often perceived, unfairness of being handcuffed by the typical rating system shouldn't be allowed to pollute the "you must get it right," future-oriented, development dialogue.
- 24. Leaving a legacy.** Work to create tomorrow in the room, today. In support of that vision, repeatedly unlock the value in the team. Leadership in the face of uncertainty means accessing all of the paints in the development pallet. To that end, understand the lasting value of creative tension. Create a sense of urgency. Push, prompt and promote behaviour that moves team members to the edge of their comfort zone. Faced with a new challenge, if someone is struggling don't let them drown but, then again, don't be too quick to come to the rescue. Tough times don't last, growth-oriented people do. Assume that, given the opportunity, those on the team will get it right. Help them grow from the experience. Know that without reflection not much will change.
- 25. The ownership dilemma.** It might be assumed that psychological safety is exclusively a big-company issue. Nothing could be further from the truth. Arguably, where







psychological safety is most needed (and of unappreciated value) is within the plethora of small consulting companies around the world where ownership lies in the hands of the few. The latter are referred to in the text that follows as “the owner.” Nothing is more intimidating to the extended team than the “position power” that rests with the owner. Nothing inhibits speaking up more than the knowledge that the owner sets the rules and controls the purse strings. Were that not enough of a barrier to candour, it’s all too often the case that how the business is run and the owner’s ego are tightly entwined threads of the same DNA. Challenge the business practices and, by implication, you run the risk of criticising the owner.

## Conclusion

Employees who feel unsafe respond in one of three ways. First, they find ways to hide in plain sight. This takes different forms. Agreeing to things that the individual doesn’t really agree with. At meetings, sitting on the side-lines, looking on. When everyone meets face-to-face, “hiding” is problematic. And when part of the team is virtual, hiding separates, divides and eventually isolates.

Second, team members who feel unsafe look for a colleague to share their concerns with, and not necessarily someone on the same team. And the individual chosen? In all likelihood, it’s someone who is also, in some way, disillusioned. Fear looks for a “friend.” Concern loves company. If not surfaced and resolved, fear leads to criticism which, in turn, paves the way for contempt. Once contempt enters the picture, it’s a long way back.

Third, employees get angry. Anger, invariably, seeks someone to blame. It is often accompanied by a kind of behavioural truculence. “Why should I put myself out?” A mild form of anger, for example, is often expressed by turning up late for meetings. At a deeper level, anger leads to a team within the team. It eventually means dysfunctional “infighting.” And a fight introduces winners and losers. When there are winners and losers you no longer have a team.

If you have just joined the team, lack of psychological safety is pretty obvious. You don’t have to possess an advanced degree to realise that the appointed team leader isn’t the real leader, one or more team members spend most of their time on the side-lines, certain topics are avoided and/or a couple of people dominate the conversation. And if going along to get along is a common theme, the problem is probably bigger than it might appear.

Be aware. If you are the team leader, psychological safety is central to how you define success. Do people speak up? Do team members challenge the team leader? Regardless of role, are you authentic? Are you willing to be vulnerable? Do you embrace what it means to be a leader? Do you, from time to time, step outside of the ongoing conversation, metaphorically move to the corner of the room (step outside the virtual link) and become a dispassionate



observer? You can't thrive if you don't know who you are. You can't appreciate what you don't observe. You can't manage what you don't know. You can't change what you don't understand.

Practice is the best lesson of all, but if you still need to be persuaded, the academic research is overwhelming. "When people believe they can speak up at work, the learning, innovation and performance of their organizations is greater. Teams and organizations in which people believe that their voices are welcome outperform their counterparts." – Dr. Amy Edmondson, Professor of Leadership at Harvard Business School.

Psychological safety. Without it, you ain't got much!



Teams that play together stay together





*John O. Burdett*

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*- J. O. Burdett*

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Go to the TRANSEARCH International website to download John’s books and articles (gratis). The site also has a number of webinars.

