



BUSINESS ADVICE, LEADERSHIP, WELLBEING

Six ways leaders can boost psychological safety to drive high performance

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SOURCE: UNSPLASH/BROOKE CAGLE

Healthy, high performance has wellbeing firmly at the core. Wellbeing is a key enabler of the energy, focus, motivation, and engagement necessary for sustaining productivity and long-term success. [Wellbeing at work research](#) consistently demonstrates that employee wellbeing is closely linked to productivity, job satisfaction and overall organisational performance.

People that are well, do well

Put simply, people that are well consistently do well, and will sustain that performance over time. That is not to say that people who aren't well can't perform well. During the disruption and uncertainty of the pandemic, we saw both high levels of productivity and increasing numbers of people experiencing chronic stress, burnout and mental health problems. Which is neither healthy nor sustainable, so promoting wellbeing is critical.

Safe at work includes psychologically safe

When people are living from their stress response, wired and overtired, they can't bring their best selves to work. When stressed or feeling unsafe, the brain prioritises survival at the expense of less essential functionality like problem-solving, perspective taking and innovating.

Then for leaders, when you leave those who are unwell to struggle without help, allow interpersonal conflict to fester, or accommodate underperformers, you undermine the psychological safety, health, and performance of your overall team.

Psychological safety is when there is a shared belief amongst all team members that it is safe to express themselves, share diverse ideas, debate different opinions, and take interpersonal risks without fear of negative consequences. It takes positive and consistent leadership for a team to trust that they can share when they are struggling, ask questions when they don't understand, make mistakes, and speak up when they notice something is wrong, without it being held against them.

Know the signs

You have psychological safety when your team uses descriptors like accepting, listening, appreciative, clear, connected, debating, empowering, constructive, fair, flexible, inclusive, positive, respectful, trustworthy, valued, welcoming and rewarding.

You know your team needs work when you hear labels like inconsistent, confusing, conflict, unmanageable, disrespectful, draining, ignored, micromanaging, negative, overwhelming, stressful, toxic, uncaring, unfair, unsafe, unsupported, and combative.

Psychological safety exponentially boosts performance

The good news for leaders is that while providing a psychologically safe and healthy working environment takes upskilling and effort, it also brings a range of performance benefits. People who feel valued and supported at work perform better, are more engaged and stay longer.

Google's Project Aristotle research that they conducted across countries and cultures found that the number one success factor with their highest-performing teams was psychological safety.

Amy Edmondson, a professor at Harvard Business School, has over 20 years of research that consistently shows that psychological safety fosters learning, innovation, and high performance within organizations.

Psychological safety in teams encourages open and authentic interpersonal behaviours, increases job engagement and satisfaction, supports coping with pressure and stress on the job, and creates a supportive and inclusive team climate, all key elements that contribute to healthy high performance.

A psychologically safe and healthy environment is one where leaders protect, respond to, and promote safety and wellbeing for their people.

Six tips to consider for your team

Create a positive and inclusive work environment

Encourage teamwork, idea sharing, the debate of multiple options, positive and constructive feedback, and offers of help.

Foster open communication

Create rituals in meetings where people can discuss concerns and challenges and get help. Schedule regular individual check-ins to discuss workload, progress, and any wellbeing issues.

Encourage breaks and boundaries

Take regular breaks for yourself, encourage the team to take breaks, set reasonable expectations for workload and deadlines, and provide support to prevent regular overwork.

Support social and self-care

Prioritise lunch breaks – and not meetings with lunch. Support time out for exercise, be flexible with time for personal appointments and organise team social catchups.

Promote mental health and wellbeing

Upskill your mental health and wellbeing literacy and develop the team's literacy, engage the team in wellbeing activities that all can take part in, and support the public and company health messages and awareness campaigns.

Give recognition

Express appreciation for individuals and the team on a regular basis.

Acknowledge effort, experimentation, learning, helping out and progress.

Celebrate achievements both large and small.

We are well overdue to put health back into high performance. Providing a culture of psychological safety is an important first step in creating an empowering environment where people can bring their best both individually and collectively to achieve strong and sustainable results.

Fleur Heazlewood is the author of Leading Wellbeing – A leader's guide to mental health conversations at work and founder of the Blueberry Institute.