

# IMPROVING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY



INTERNATIONAL SAFEGUARDS  
FOR CHILDREN IN SPORT

## Improving psychological safety

The purpose of this resource is to help you develop a clear action plan for improving this area.

Each resource follows a common structure:

- What we mean by this area
- Why it matters
- What good looks like
- Common traps to avoid
- Possible first steps
- Links to additional resources (where applicable).

### What we mean by psychological safety

Psychological safety is the extent to which people feel that speaking up will be welcomed and not judged negatively. It means feeling safe and having no fear of negative repercussions - whether it relates to asking questions or asking for help, sharing ideas that might only be half-formed, sharing concerns, disagreeing, or challenging the status quo.

It is very situational, meaning, how safe you feel can change significantly depending on the group, the discussion, who else is in the room and what's going on for us that day.

### Why it matters:

In any interaction between people there are two conversations going on. The conversation in your head, and what you actually decide to share.

People filter what they say all the time. It's natural to want to avoid seeming to be disruptive, negative, or incompetent.

The problem is that the conversations you're **not** having will be some of the most important.

In any organisation:

- People will be aware of potential concerns they are not raising.
- Important mistakes or 'near misses' will be hidden, stopping you learning from them, and making much needed changes to reduce the chance of it happening again.
- There will be people with game-changing ideas they're not sharing, or which you're not hearing.
- Within your team, if you line-manage people, there are bound to be people who could do with some further support, who are not asking for it.

In addition to what you lose through people not speaking up, a lack of psychological safety also has a significant impact on people's motivation and ability to think creatively.

Social pain, or even the fear of it, has a very similar impact on our brain to physical pain – triggering our emotional brain to go into the protective mode of fight, flight, or freeze. This shuts down the creative part of our brain; negatively affecting the quality of our thinking by up to 30%.

It's easy to overestimate how much psychological safety people have. Even in organisations that work really hard at this, people hold important insights back. There is always room for improvement.

Increasing psychological safety can have a very significant positive impact on performance. Google spent 3 years studying the key ingredients of the highest performing teams, and found that the level psychological safety between team members was the single most important factor for success - more important than intelligence or experience of team members, and more important than clarity of purpose. Why? Because having talented people only works if they feel safe enough to bring those talents to the table.

Benefits of working on increasing psychological safety include:

- Innovation. More people share more ideas, increasing diversity of thought. Because challenge is welcomed, people contribute to and help each other to evolve and improve their thinking. They also test more ideas due to less fear of failure, and learn more from this testing.
- Highlighting problems early, so you can do something about them.
- Motivation and productivity. When people feel welcome, valued, and included, they focus more energy and creativity into performance.
- Retention. Psychological safety is a key driver of team member happiness within an environment.

## What good looks like:

Read the following description, and make notes on where you most want to improve psychological safety in your organisation.

- **Individuals voicing opinions**, speaking up knowing it will be welcomed. Meetings are high energy with contributions from everyone.
- **People seek out feedback and challenge** - and thank people for giving feedback.
- **Giving feedback at all levels** regardless of status or hierarchy.
- **People admitting mistakes**, knowing they will be supported.
- **People asking for help**, and being open about where they're struggling.
- **Feeling trusted to act on our initiative**, and try things in the moment.
- **Focusing on learning**, not blame when things go wrong.
- People feeling encouraged to **bring their full selves to work**, not 'covering' any aspects of themselves they think might not be welcome or acceptable.
- **People respond with curiosity** and ask follow-up questions when they come across a different perspective to their own, or to the current convention.

## Common traps to avoid:

Again, read through these traps, noting which you recognise a need to work on.

- **As leaders you forget how scary you are.** By which we mean you forget how scary your position is. Even though your behaviour may not change, just by taking on a role with more authority, you can become less approachable. When you move into a position of authority, you need to put more effort into making it easy for people to speak up.
- **Mistaking a lack of challenge for agreement.** Challenging perceived authority does not come naturally. You need to go out of your way to mine for challenge. E.g. by asking direct questions like 'what should we be paying more attention to?'
- **Not questioning your list of 'who counts'.** When you have an issue or challenge that arises you typically go to the same people to seek advice. This reinforces a sense of who is in the 'in group' and who is in the 'out group.' Been in the 'out group' negatively affects psychological safety.
- **Thinking that encouraging people to speak up will be enough.** In the early days of building it, you need to go out of your way to create opportunities for people to speak up.
- **Non-inclusive behaviours** that hinder psychological safety and that go unchallenged.
- **Not investing time and energy to get to know people as individuals,** and focusing only on work. People will be at their best in an environment that cares about them as people, and not just what they can contribute to performance.
- **Lack of transparency and poor communication.** This creates a sense of distance between you as leaders and people you want to hear from, which discourages open communication from them.
- **Assuming the environment is psychologically safe** because you or some others feel very safe. A team is only as psychologically safe as the least safe person on the team, and those with least safety tend to be those who would identify as marginalised, under-represented, and/or at risk.
- **Fixed mindset** and defending your position rather than demonstrating curiosity and asking open questions.
- **Creating a blame culture,** anxiety, or fear of failure. This becomes more of a risk when the organisation is under pressure to perform. Whilst it's important to share challenges so you can tap into people's ideas, you want to avoid anxiety which will shut down creativity.

**Beyond the areas covered in the questionnaire, here are some further questions it might be worth reflecting on to help identify opportunities for improvement**

**Hierarchy** - To what extent does status inhibit people speaking up?

**Mechanisms** - Do you have systems that provide opportunity to, and encourage people, to speak up?

**Inclusion** - Who are you hearing less from? Does everyone know the big strategic questions you're thinking about?

**Sacred Cows** - What are the perceived 'no go' areas?

**Feedback** - What important conversations are you avoiding?

**How actively are you leading it** – What are you doing to promote Psychological Safety?

## Possible actions to improve psychological safety in your culture

As leaders you can promote it by:

1. 'Framing' – Setting out the behaviours you want to encourage and normalising it.  
*E.g. "We are going to make mistakes. They will enable us to learn fast and stay ahead."*
2. Modelling good psychological safety in what you share ourselves, including:
  - Sharing your vulnerability around what you're not sure about.
  - Challenging or raising concerns. Upwards within the hierarchy, to other functions and to the teams you put your trust in.
  - Asking for help and highlighting where you're struggling.
  - Admitting mistakes and owning issues.
3. Seeking feedback and encouraging others to seek it.
4. Praising people when they take risks and speak up.
5. Giving people who are new or less confident, status in the group. *E.g. 'I'm delighted to have.... Joining us because....'* Ask for their input and ask follow-up questions. Thank them for it.
6. Encouraging cognitive diversity by getting people to gather their thoughts on a question individually, before you discuss it as a group. This prevents people falling into group think.
7. Reframing failure and mistakes as learning opportunities.
8. Investing time in relationships to increase people's sense of belonging:
  - Set yourself up to be welcoming by assuming any interaction or relationship is going to be productive. Rather than waiting for someone to prove themselves - assume they are going to be of value. This will increase the chance they will be.
  - Show an interest in the person, and their story. This will not only increase their sense of belonging, but encourage them to bring their full selves – unfiltered.
  - Make time for people. People take this as an indicator of how much you value them.

## Additional Resources – further insights from some of the world’s leaders in this space

- How you as leaders unintentionally silence people by Megan Reitz:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sq475Us1KXg>
- The Fearless organization. Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth. By Amy Edmondson. [Ted talk video](#).
- Solider vs Scout mode – two approaches to conversations which have big impact on learning. Listen to this 22-minute podcast with Author Julia Galef to explore this idea in more depth [link](#)
- Take a short self-score questionnaire exploring how candid (honest) feedback is in your culture. One of the most striking characteristics of high performing organisations is the openness of their conversations. The purpose of this survey is to help you take stock of the quality of candour in your culture. On average the survey takes 4 to 5 minutes to complete. You will receive an email of your free, personalised feedback report with recommendations: <https://managementfutures.typeform.com/to/APIzUO?typeform-source=www.managementfutures.co.uk>