ACTIVITY: Increasing Psychological Safety at Work

Purpose

The purpose of this activity is to:

- Understand what psychological safety is and its importance to high-performing teams.
- Learn steps employees, leaders, and teams can take to create a more psychologically safe work environment.

ESTIMATED TIME

5 minutes

MATERIALS

Optional:

A. Paper
B. Pen or Pencil

Background

The highest-performing teams have one thing in common: psychological safety — the belief that you won't be punished when you make a mistake. Studies show that psychological safety allows for moderate risk-taking, speaking your mind, creativity, and sticking your neck out without fear of having it cut off, can lead to organizational success.

However, psychological safety can be fragile in uncertain, interdependent environments. The brain processes a threat by a boss, competitive coworker, or dismissive subordinate as a life-or-death threat. The amygdala, the alarm bell in the brain, ignites the fight-or-flight response, hijacking higher brain centers. While that fight-or-flight reaction may save us in life-or-death situations, it handicaps the strategic thinking needed in today's workplace.

When people feel psychologically safe, teams become more open-minded, resilient, motivated, and persistent when we feel safe. Humor increases, as does solution-finding and divergent thinking — the cognitive process underlying creativity. While it may not always come naturally, there are steps teams can take to increase psychological safety to foster strong relationships and collaboration.

Activity

Ask team members to think about and identify a current difficult situation at work. Share the following strategies that they can use to create a psychologically safe environment for addressing the situation.

1. **Approach conflict as a collaborator, not an adversary.** When conflict arises, ask yourself, "How can we achieve a mutually desirable outcome?"

2. **Anticipate reactions and plan countermoves.** Skillfully confront difficult conversations by preparing for likely reactions. Identify the following before having the conversation:

   • What are my main points?

   • What are three ways my listeners are likely to respond?

   • How will I respond to each of those scenarios?

3. **Replace blame with curiosity**. Adopt a learning mindset, knowing you don't have all the facts by doing the following:

   • State the problematic behavior or outcome as an observation

   • Engage in exploration

   • Ask for solutions

4. **Ask for feedback on delivery.** Close difficult conversations with the following questions:

   • What worked and what didn't work in my delivery?

   • How did it feel to hear this message?

   • How could I have presented it more effectively?

Let's Try This!

Consider a challenging conversation you need to have. Select a strategy from above and use it to create a safe place to have the conversation to encourage a positive outcome for all.

Follow-up

1. Discuss as a group the strategies that you think may work best for the difficult situations your team is most likely to encounter.
2. Follow-up after a month or at your next meeting to discuss how employing these strategies created a more psychologically safe environment that led to better outcomes.

Sources/ More Information

"High-Performing Teams Need Psychological Safety. Here's How to Create it. Delizonna, Laura. Harvard Business Review. https://hbr.org/2017/08/high-performing-teams-need-psychological-safety-heres-how-to-create-it