

# Ombuds Insights

Quarterly resources to communicate clearly, disagree productively, and connect authentically.



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**Contents:**

[Psychological Safety](#) | [How to Schedule an Appointment](#)

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## **Psychological Safety**

“Psychological safety” is a crucial but often misused term that has become a catch-all to describe many workplace dynamics. Research confirms that psychological safety is a critical competency for a workplace, school, or clinic — a “need to have,” not a “nice to have.” In this issue of Ombuds Insights, we’ll define psychological safety, explain why it matters, and share practical advice for implementing it.

### **Psychological Safety Underpins Collaboration**

Amy Edmondson, the scholar who popularized “psychological safety,” explains that psychological safety refers to a team’s shared belief that it’s ok to take risks, to express ideas and concerns, to speak up with questions, and to admit mistakes — all without fear of rejection or punishment. [1]

When leaders in a work environment encourage team members to ask questions and share ideas, good things happen. Mistakes are reported quickly, allowing prompt corrective action; seamless coordination across groups or departments is enabled; and potentially game-changing ideas are shared. “[W]hen people have psychological safety at work . . . they know they can ask questions when they are unsure about something. They tend to trust and respect their colleagues.” [2]

Psychological safety does not protect against the temporary emotional discomfort often necessary to share conflicting views thoughtfully or name a mistake respectfully.

## **Authorities Agree: Psychological Safety Is a Health Care and Workplace Competency**

Promoting a work environment where team members can express ideas is a documented means to promote workplace excellence. Indeed, the Joint Commission Journal unequivocally states that psychological safety is “a particularly critical teamwork competency in health care due to the high stakes and complex and dynamic setting.” [3]

At the same time, speaking up is not license for unfiltered speech. Insulting a colleague because “that’s my truth” does not create a psychologically safe environment. One guiding question to ask is: “Does my behavior help my teammates solve problems and originate ideas?”

### **Three Practical Steps to Implementing Psychological Safety**

To support the practice of psychological safety, we offer the model: **Value, Notice, Act.**

**(1) Value:** To build a team culture that allows for healthy risk-taking, leaders must value the open discussion of ideas, concerns, and failures. A team that values and prioritizes all members’ participation benefits from the innovation, collaboration, and well-being of all. The Google study [Project Aristotle](#) found in 2015 that the number one factor supporting team effectiveness was psychological safety. [4]

Additionally, an environment that encourages questions without the risk of being dismissed or belittled is critical to team members’ well-being, level of distress, burnout, turnover, and resilience. [5]

**(2) Notice** Assessing whether or not a team’s culture is psychologically safe is often straightforward. Healthy teams treat each other with respect; there’s high participation; challenges, questions, or gaps are treated as learning and clarification opportunities; and the experience of working or learning is one of trusted colleagues. Alternatively, a lack of psychological safety is characterized by people blaming other team members for making mistakes, discouraging others from speaking up, speaking rudely to or about other team members, or belittling another team member’s idea.

To assess the level of psychological safety, ask:

- If you make a mistake on this team, will it be held against you?
- Are the members of this team able to bring up problems and tough issues?
- Do members on this team sometimes reject other members for being different?
- Is it safe to take a risk on this team?
- Is it difficult to ask other members of this team for help?
- Would anyone on the team deliberately act in a way that undermines efforts?
- Are unique skills and talents valued and utilized?
- Does criticism result in someone withdrawing from participation? [6]

Team members may experience different levels of psychological safety based on their individual experiences.

A final consideration is the impact of psychological safety on group dynamics. Seeing how one person is treated will influence what others are willing to say.

**(3) Act:** Behaviors that promote sharing mistakes and ideas include: inviting input from all team members, encouraging team members to contribute, promoting active listening, acknowledging the limits of one's own knowledge, celebrating failures as learning opportunities, and providing positive reinforcement for innovations even though they don't always work. [7]

Simple phrases that anyone on the team can use to engage constructively include:

- "Let's go around and hear everyone's reaction."
- "It's fine to disagree. That's why we're talking about this together."
- "Maybe someone has a different perspective. I'd really like to hear some other views."
- "We're not here to find fault. We're here to see how we can do better next time."
- "Thanks for pointing out my mistake. You just saved me from a big blunder."

AHRQ's two-pager "[Creating Psychological Safety in Teams](#)" is an excellent resource with sample phrases that promote an inclusive workplace.

Another way to encourage psychological safety is to follow the [PRIDE Principles](#): Professionalism, Respect, Integrity, Diversity, and Excellence.

## Repair

If you notice yourself acting in ways that don't allow others to engage, you can apologize, explore options, ask for help, and be willing to work on improving your behavior. An effective and authentic apology recognizes the gap between your behavior and how you could have acted. It commits to acting differently in the future and avoids blame statements (e.g., "I'm sorry you took it that way."). [8]

If you notice others acting in ways that don't allow for constructive engagement, you can bring it up privately, allowing the other person to save face. Having a problem-solving conversation that focuses on understanding both perspectives and setting the expectation that problems and tough issues are addressed openly in the team can model the behavior you require. This strategy is best employed when there's not an emergency, and you can take the time for a thoughtful, productive conversation.

Addressing the behavior in the moment demonstrates a commitment to PRIDE principles and the team's well-being.

For more assistance in establishing a norm of psychological safety in a team or for consultation and coaching, please reach out to the [Office of the Ombuds](#) at (415) 502-9600.

## References:

- [1] Edmondson Amy C *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*. John Wiley & Sons, 2018; Kahn W. A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33(4), 692–724.
- [2] Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization*.
- [3] [Understanding Psychological Safety in Health Care: A Qualitative Investigation and Practical Guidance](#), *Joint Commission Journal on Quality and Patient Safety*.
- [4] ["What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team,"](#) New York Times Magazine, Feb. 28, 2016.
- [5] Franklyn P Cladis, Mark Hudson, Joel Goh, "[Psychological safety in the perioperative environment: a cost-consequence analysis](#)," BMJ Lead. 2024.
- [6] American Psychological Association, "What is psychological safety at work? Here's how to start creating it," Mar. 4, 2024.
- [7] AHRQ, "Creating Psychological Safety in Teams: Handout."
- [8] For additional tips for delivering authentic apologies, consider reading our handout on the Anatomy of an Apology.



Image: A person passes through a breezeway with a wooden ceiling and warm lighting. Credit: Susan Merrell and Andy Laushman.

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**For appointments, call:** (415) 502-9600. If we are unable to take your call, we will return it within one business day.

**Office hours:** 8:30 AM to 5:00 PM, Monday through Friday.

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