#1 Attribute of High Performing Teams
By Mark Breslin

Psychological Safety: A Foundation for Teamwork

Ask people you work with what they are afraid of. You might hear answers like heights, snakes, public speaking, failure or the dark. The most dishonest will tell you they are not afraid of anything. The truth is that the deepest fears, and ones that impact us most, are ones we would find it hard to reveal or describe.

This reluctance to be honest with ourselves or others plays a big role in our security and happiness in life – and at work. And **the tendency of most leaders to ignore these fears in the workplace has a significant impact**. Now some very compelling research backs it up. It turns out that for teams to best work cooperatively, collaboratively and creatively, there is **one attribute above all others that contributes to success**. This attribute is **psychological safety.**

Thus, with that word, safety, we address a set of fears that not only limits teams, but limits individuals in their personal growth and evolution. What would be these fears that can only be soothed by psychological safety? How about these;

- Fear of being vulnerable.

- Fear of being rejected.

- Fear of being judged. And listening to the whispers of insecurity many of us hide with great skill.

- Fear of failure, and thus of risk. Of taking that hit to our self-image and esteem.

Minimizing this fear impact truly has extraordinary power and the reasons behind it are important for leaders to account for. Safety for and with each other builds bonds that enable people to stretch, risk, trust and open up. They also allow people to be authentic and bring their best selves to both others and the workplace. For learning, coaching, mentoring and motivating this is essential.

In many, if not most workplaces this safety does not exist because it is not valued as it should be. What takes its place are politics, gossip, negativity and conflict which are direct results of people acting out of their own insecurities and fear-based emotions. Many leaders accept this because that is what they are most accustomed to. **But those with courage and vision will put in the work to create safety and mutual commitment which combine to create one driving force pushing the team forward**. That force is contained in the words of those team members to one another and they might sound like this;

- I accept you and don't judge you

- If you bring your best, and meet the team standards, you don't have to prove anything to me

- We share in success and failures together

- We are not negative or destructive with one another, no matter if we like each other or not

- Everyone owns what they do or say

- Honesty is our default at all times

- I've got your back

For leaders it can be a challenge to prioritize psychological safety. It doesn't seem to pay the bills. People will test the limits. And truthfully there are a lot of people who don't have the security and internal maturity to act like adults. But none of that matters. The leader sets expectations. The leader sets limits. The leader sets the tone. The leader sets consequences. For me as a CEO, it happens in an employee's first staff meeting. And it is in front of everyone on the team. I lay out what constitutes the safe zone at work. I tell them that if anyone gossips, shit-talks or character assassinates anyone on our team, they are fired that day. And don't test me because I have done it. And those who test it express their guilty outrage. They said you can't fire me. I say I told you upfront, now pack your shit in this box and be out of here by noon. I am HR's nightmare. I am the team's protector.

My zero tolerance approach is certainly not for everyone. But that is how seriously I take psychological safety and team acceptance. I don't hope people are coming as their best selves. I encourage it, support it and in truth I demand it. People cannot do their best work operating out of fear. And what I find is that when an individual feels this and embraces it, they bring a level of commitment and productivity that you cannot pay for. Performance rises, retention increases, risk tolerance expands and positive group norms get set in stone.

Here are three ways to lead your team through a workplace foundation of psychological safety;

1. **Own your own emotions**, behavior and insecurities. A leader that shows authenticity, vulnerability, and empathy gets loyalty and buy-in in return. You don't have to be the hard ass 24/7. Some people think it might look weak – and that is most insecurity talking in your head. Being your best self no matter what others think is real strength.

2. **Communicate your expectations**. Recognize and praise openness and team risk taking. Treat failure as a team learning experience. And give people the time, coaching and resources to grow and change. Internal change, especially when it comes to going beyond fear, can take time and courage.

3. **Do not compromise, rationalize or ignore any destructive behaviors** of your team. Not because they make you money. Not because they've always been there. Not because you are afraid to directly confront it and solve it. When you let it go, you let down your team and yourself.

Who knew that psychological safety could make such a difference at work? But really isn't it obvious? What makes a healthy person; a healthy family or a healthy child? What helps them grow and thrive as they should? Yeah. Same thing. Psychological safety – it's worth the time, effort and commitment.

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