

# Psychological Safety Assessment and Action Framework

Informed by Amy Edmondson's 7-Item Scale and Timothy Clark's 4 Stages of Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is a critical group norm. Psychological Safety is the belief that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk taking.<sup>1</sup>

It allows team members to hold, and act upon, the following assumptions:

1. I can focus on achieving shared goals, rather than engaging in self-protection activities.
2. I will not be punished or humiliated for asking questions, sharing ideas or concerns, or admitting mistakes.
3. Candor is allowed and expected in my group.

1. Edmondson, A.C. "Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44.2 (1999): 350-83.

## Amy Edmondson's 7-Item Psychological Safety Scale

This 7-item scale, developed by Dr. Amy Edmondson, assesses psychological safety within teams. Each item aligns with one or more of Timothy Clark's Four Stages: Inclusion, Learner, Contributor, and Challenger Safety.

| Item                                                                                        | 1                 | 2        | 3       | 4        | 5                 |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|----------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 1. If you make a mistake on this team, it is often held against you. (Reverse-scored)       | Strongly Agree    | Agree    | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| 2. Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.                     | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree    | Strongly Agree    |
| 3. People on this team sometimes reject others for being different. (Reverse-scored)        | Strongly Agree    | Agree    | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| 4. It is safe to take a risk on this team.                                                  | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree    | Strongly Agree    |
| 5. It is difficult to ask other members of this team for help. (Reverse-scored)             | Strongly Agree    | Agree    | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| 6. No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.          | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree    | Strongly Agree    |
| 7. Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized. | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree    | Strongly Agree    |

### Interpretation:

- **High psychological safety:** Consensus scores  $\geq 4.0$
- **Moderate psychological safety:** Scores  $\sim 3.0$ – $3.9$
- **Low psychological safety:** Scores  $< 3.0$



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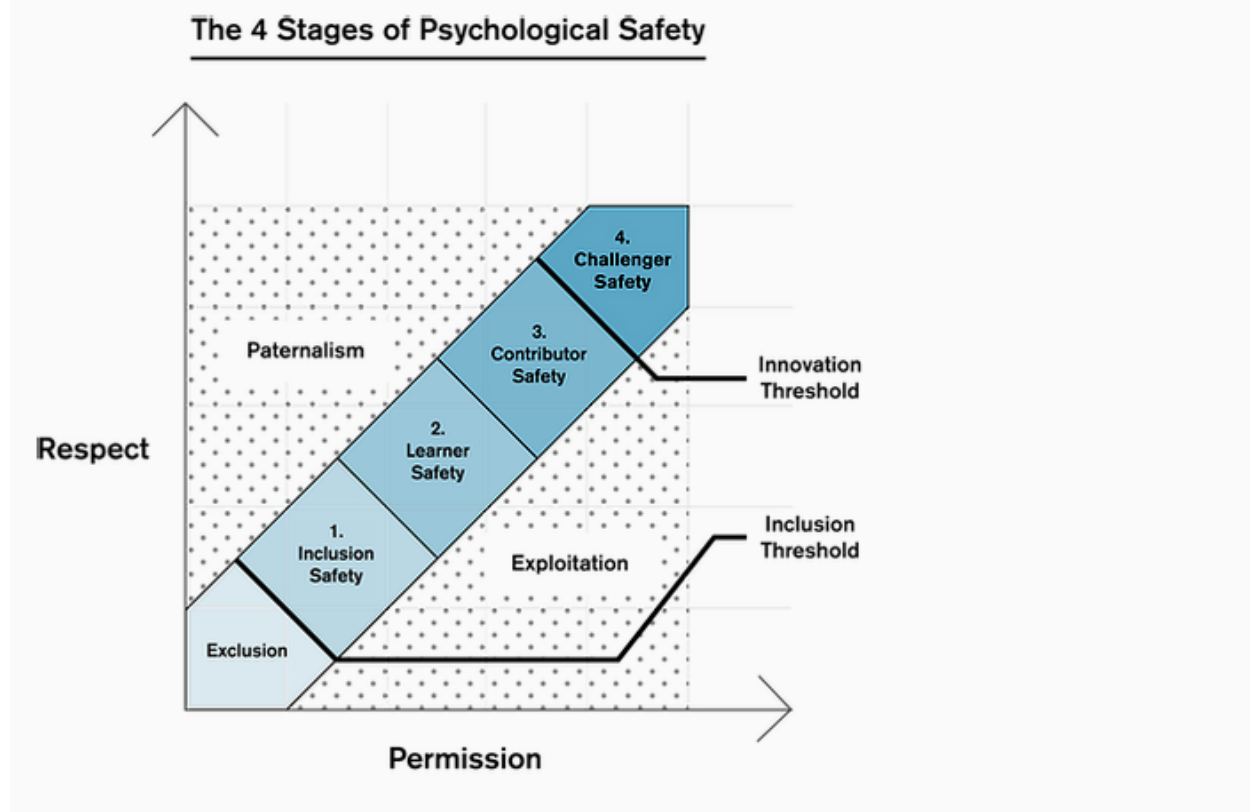
## Key Concept

Psychological safety is a condition in which you feel (1) included, (2) safe to learn, (3) safe to contribute, and (4) safe to challenge the status quo—all without fear of being embarrassed, marginalized, or punished in some way.

A leader's task is to simultaneously increase intellectual friction (task or process conflict) and decrease social friction (relationship conflict). The presence of fear is a sign of weak leadership. When organizations spend their time comparing and competing, the ability to connect is lost.

Psychological safety progresses through four stages as a function of two primary variables:

- **Respect**
- **Permission to participate**



Source: *LeaderFactor*, Timothy R. Clark



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## Drill Deeper: Assessing the Four Stages of Psychological Safety on Your Team

| Item                                                                                                  | 1<br>Strongly<br>Disagree | 2<br>Disagree | 3<br>Neutral | 4<br>Agree | 5<br>Strongly<br>Agree |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------|--------------|------------|------------------------|
| Inclusion Safety                                                                                      |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| I feel welcome and included on my team.                                                               |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| My team values diverse perspectives and backgrounds.                                                  |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| I can express aspects of my identity (e.g., culture, beliefs, personality) without fear of exclusion. |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| I believe my team genuinely wants me to succeed.                                                      |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| My input is invited and respected, regardless of my level or title.                                   |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| Learner Safety                                                                                        |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| I feel comfortable asking questions, even if they seem basic.                                         |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| It's safe to acknowledge when I don't know something.                                                 |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| Mistakes are treated as learning opportunities on my team.                                            |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| I receive helpful feedback that supports my learning and growth.                                      |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| My team encourages trying new approaches, even if they don't always succeed.                          |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| Contributor                                                                                           |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| I understand how I can meaningfully contribute to my team's success.                                  |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| My contributions are valued and appreciated by my team.                                               |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| I feel empowered to take initiative without needing constant approval.                                |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| I have the resources and clarity I need to do my best work.                                           |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| My unique strengths are actively used and recognized by the team.                                     |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| Challenger Safety                                                                                     |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| I feel safe challenging the status quo on my team.                                                    |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| My team encourages open debate and the exploration of new ideas.                                      |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| I can voice a concern or disagreement without fear of retaliation or judgment.                        |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| Leaders and peers are open to being questioned or constructively challenged.                          |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| Challenging conversations are handled with respect and a shared focus on improvement.                 |                           |               |              |            |                        |
| I feel safe challenging the status quo on my team.                                                    |                           |               |              |            |                        |



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## Team Reflection

### Inclusion Safety

Informal admittance to the team—members of the group accept you and grant you a shared identity. You are not an outsider; you are in the fold. The need to be accepted precedes the need to be heard. Being ignored is often as painful as being rejected. Inclusion safety is maintained through renewed admittance to the group and repeated indications of acceptance.

1. Do all team members feel they belong—without needing to conform or mask parts of who they are?
2. How do you ensure everyone feels seen, respected, and valued regardless of their background, identity, or role?
3. What signals (verbal or nonverbal) might unintentionally exclude or silence certain team members?
4. Whose voices tend to dominate in meetings—and whose are missing or unheard?
5. How do you respond when someone makes a biased or exclusionary comment, even subtly?
6. How do you model inclusive behavior as a leader or team member?
7. What systems or practices are in place to ensure psychological safety for new hires, introverts, or underrepresented team members?

### Learner Safety

Learner Safety indicates that you feel safe to engage in the discovery process, ask questions, experiment, and even make mistakes. Without learner safety, people will remain passive to avoid the risk of acting beyond a tacit line of permission. When the environment belittles, demeans, or harshly criticizes people in the learning process, learner safety is destroyed.

1. In what ways do you intentionally foster and protect learner safety within your team—both during onboarding and throughout the employee lifecycle?
2. How do you ensure team members feel safe to learn, ask questions, and make mistakes—especially when they're new to the team and over time?
3. What practices do you have in place to build and sustain learner safety during onboarding and as your team evolves?



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## Contributor Safety

Contributor safety invites the individual to participate as an active and full-fledged member of the team. Contributor safety is an invitation and an expectation to perform work in an assigned role with appropriate boundaries, on the assumption that you can perform competently in that role. As the individual demonstrates competence, the organization normally grants more autonomy to contribute.

1. Do team members feel confident that their contributions are wanted and valued?
2. How do you ensure everyone has clear opportunities to add value based on their strengths?
3. Are expectations clear enough for people to contribute without second-guessing themselves?
4. When someone offers a solution or idea, how does the team respond?
5. Do people wait for permission to contribute, or do they feel empowered to step in and help?
6. How do you recognize and celebrate meaningful contributions—both big and small?
7. Are there team members whose strengths seem underused? If so, why?

## Challenger Safety

Challenger safety allows you to challenge the status quo without retribution, reprisal, or the risk of damaging your personal standing or reputation. It gives you the confidence to speak truth to power when you think something needs to change and it is time to say so. People can only demonstrate creativity and innovate if they perceive high levels of respect and permission around them. When there is no tolerance for candor, there is no constructive dissent. Where there is no constructive dissent, there is no innovation.

1. Do team members feel they can challenge how things are done—even when it's uncomfortable?
2. How does the team respond when someone disagrees or offers a different perspective?
3. When was the last time someone raised a concern—and how was it received?
4. Are bold ideas and constructive dissent welcomed, or subtly dismissed?
5. What happens when someone questions a leader's decision—are they encouraged or shut down?
6. How do you create space for healthy tension and innovation?
7. Do team members believe raising tough issues will lead to improvement or backlash?



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**Action Items:** Practical, research-based interventions to guide improvement.

## **Stage: Inclusion Safety**

- Provide education on unconscious bias, microaggressions, and cultural humility
- Co-create team norms for inclusive behavior
- Use rotating roles in meetings to ensure all voices are heard
- Use collaborative, inclusive meeting structures to hear all voices ([liberatingstructures.com](http://liberatingstructures.com))
- Address toxic behaviors directly through coaching or facilitated conversations
- Set clear expectations for mutual respect and accountability
- Foster transparency in decisions and workloads
- Promote shared goals over individual performance-only incentives
- Gather inclusion feedback anonymously (e.g., short pulse checks or inclusion index scores)
- Audit team rituals (social events, communication styles, onboarding practices) for unintended exclusivity
- Provide mentoring or buddy systems for new/underrepresented team members and structured, consistent onboarding processes
- Use inclusive language (in communication, documents, meetings) consistently
- Celebrate diverse identities and milestones to reinforce belonging
- Ensure meeting accessibility (closed captions, inclusive scheduling across time zones)
- Have 1:1 check-ins with underrepresented or marginalized team members
- Demonstrate humility. Disclose failures and regrets about past situations to model vulnerability. Share stories of your failures and provide a link to the current situation. *"Here is what happened to me. Here is what I learned."* *"I am not pro failure; I am pro learning."* *"I rely on all of you to make us successful. I'll never have all the answers myself."*

## **Stage: Learner Safety**

- Create visible systems for collaboration (e.g., skill-sharing board, "Ask for Help" channel)
- Model asking for help as a leader
- Normalize help-seeking as a strength, not a weakness
- Normalize learning from mistakes in team meetings (e.g., "lessons learned" segment)
- Leaders share their own errors to model vulnerability
- Adopt a "fail forward" mindset—focus on what was learned, not who erred
- Ask explicitly for bold solutions: "What would we try if failure wasn't a concern?"
- Use non-punitive language (e.g., "What can we adjust?" vs. "Who did this wrong?")
- Host learning roundtables where team members share what they've recently learned
- Incorporate "beginner's mind" exercises in planning (e.g., "What might a new hire question here?")
- Offer just-in-time learning resources for skill gaps that feel psychologically risky to admit
- Use structured reflection templates post-project to reduce emotional judgment
- Coach leaders to respond with curiosity instead of critique (e.g., "Tell me more about your thinking")
- Establish peer coaching partnerships for lower-stakes feedback and support
- Express appreciation for well-intentioned input, regardless of whether it is good or bad. Say *"Thank you for bringing that to my attention"* or *"I appreciate you letting me know"* as an initial response to the person (they took a risk to share information with you). *"Thanks for the heads-up."*

Discussing the difference between preventable failures (deviation from known processes that produce bad results) and



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intelligent failures (experimenting with something new that carries acceptable risk).

*"I will never criticize someone for an intelligent failure."*

- *"I hope that all of you are willing to discuss our mistakes so that we can learn from each other's experiences."*

## **Stages: Contributor Safety**

- Acknowledge and reward team members who support others
- Use skills inventories to identify untapped talents
- Ask team members directly what they'd like to contribute more of
- Rotate project roles to diversify contributions
- Include a "talent spotlight" segment in team meetings
- Clarify roles and responsibilities so people know where and how they can contribute
- Encourage goal-setting that links personal strengths to team objectives
- Recognize contributions in real time, not just at reviews or retrospectives
- Offer autonomy on how work is completed, not just what is done
- Create space for team-led initiatives (bottom-up ideas and ownership)
- Invite people to lead based on interest/skill, not just hierarchy

## **Stage: Challenger Safety**

- Issue: Avoidance of conflict or sensitive topics
- Facilitate structured team retrospectives or problem-solving sessions
- Train on constructive conflict and courageous conversations
- Start meetings with a "real talk" round: What's one barrier we're avoiding?
- Use anonymous channels to surface sensitive issues if needed
- Celebrate experimentation and pilot efforts (even if they fail)
- Use a "safe-to-try" framework for low-risk initiatives
- Encourage "crazy ideas" in brainstorming with no evaluation during ideation
- Designate a "Devil's Advocate" role in team discussions to normalize dissent
- Use pre-mortems or red-team reviews to explore potential flaws or blind spots
- Practice idea escalation: "Here's a safe idea. Now let's stretch it."
- Train on separating intent from impact in hard conversations
- Celebrate examples where dissent led to better outcomes



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- Include “what are we not seeing?” prompts in decision-making processes
- Coach leaders to reward the behavior of speaking up—not just the outcome

## References/resources:

[Amy C. Edmondson](#)

Timothy Clark's book

Fearless Organization



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