

Psychological Safety: The Secret Behind Highly Effective Teams

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in-vis-i-ble dis-a-bil-i-ty: noun

According to the Invisible Disabilities Association, an invisible disability is, in simple terms, “a physical, mental, or neurological condition that is not visible from the outside, yet can limit or challenge a person’s movements, senses, or activities.”¹ Symptoms of the condition are invisible, which can lead to misunderstandings, false perceptions, and judgments.

As an executive, leadership development, and business coach (and someone who lives with a constant pain in the neck—no, it is not my husband), I began thinking about how organizations are like humans who suffer with chronic conditions such as invisible disabilities.

Like humans, organizations are living, breathing organisms that can experience invisible disabilities of their own. A culture of low psychological safety is a chronic condition and a type of invisible disability within an organization. Typically, this is localized at the team level, where it can be referred to as a *team invisible disability*. Although a team invisible disability may be localized, the effects can be felt throughout an entire organization, whether large or small, and across all industries, including engineering organizations.

The most common symptoms in teams with low psychological safety are silence and poor communication. These problematic symptoms are debilitating and wreak havoc on a team’s performance. Productivity, engagement, and decision-making abilities are also affected. Heightened tensions and personal attacks become more frequent. Concerns and errors are often punished

or ridiculed, or they go unreported. Participation, creativity, and innovation decrease. Stress and turnover increase.

What Is Psychological Safety?

Amy C. Edmondson, professor of leadership and management at the Harvard Business School and author of the best-selling *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*,² describes psychological safety as a “shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking; one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes.”

Through years of research to better understand what is behind the success of highly effective teams, Edmondson found interpersonal risk-taking to be a key factor. Effective teams felt encouraged, supported, and comfortable speaking up with ideas for improvement, experimenting, giving and receiving candid feedback, reporting mistakes and errors, and voicing differences of opinions.

Psychological safety is *not* about promoting a peace, love, and puppies, everyone-be-nice-to-each-other-all-of-the-time environment. Silence in terms of head bobs and agreeing to and going along with everything is neither a sustainable nor effective model. Decision-making and innovation languish in such teams.

Research has found employees are reluctant to speak up when fear and intimidation are present. Long-term effects such as stress, anxiety, burnout, and higher mortality rates are

by-products of continuous exposure to volatile environments. Symptomatic teams with low psychological safety suffer from silence and poor communication, and subject their organizations to disruptive, costly, and tragic side effects.

The Cost of Ignoring “Silence” to See if That Works Better

Imagine working in an environment where the fear of bringing bad news to leadership heavily outweighs sound judgment. Remember “Dieselgate,” the Volkswagen scandal? A team at Volkswagen, fearing explosive backlash from leaders for not being able to produce a “clean diesel” system, decided instead to equip millions of vehicles with a “defeat device” making them appear cleaner during emissions tests. Stock prices plummeted in the days following the scandal, and by June 2020, Dieselgate had cost Volkswagen \$33.3 billion.³ Although it may be considered an extreme case, this scandal is an example of how a culture of fear and silence strongly influences behaviors, and severely affects the bottom line. This also places a company’s reputation at risk.

Employees who voluntarily exit a job are typically disengaged, are burned out, or received a better offer elsewhere. According to Gallup, 51% of those who voluntarily exited their company reported that in the months leading up to their departure, no leader had approached them to discuss their satisfaction or future with the organization.⁴ This avoidable mistake causes significant impact to the bottom line and may potentially harm a company’s reputation, making it difficult to attract and retain top talent.

Consider the following employee turnover data:

- The annual turnover rate in the United States as of September 2021 is 25%. For the latest data, see the “Job Openings and Labor Turnover” news release from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.⁵
- Turnover and replacement costs for a 100-person company with an average salary base of \$50,000 can cost that company \$600,000 to \$2.6 million a year.⁶

Ouch! These numbers are staggering. However, when you take into account the fact that the average replacement cost of an employee can range from one-third to two times their annual salary, the expenses add up quickly.

How to Adopt a Culture of Psychological Safety

Much of the groundwork in adopting a culture of psychological safety falls to leadership, who must develop and nurture an environment where employees feel safe to express and be themselves, and to share ideas and information without fear of embarrassment, punishment, or damaged reputation.

Use the “BE WELL” tool to help your team start developing a psychologically safe culture of their own:

- **Bring** your team together regularly for a health check. Set time aside to meet with them both individually and as a group. Celebrate wins and learn from setbacks. This step helps members feel valued and significantly impacts performance and retention.
- **Expectations** set your team up for success at the beginning of each project. Clarify the vision, mission, and goals. Prepare members for potential challenges or obstacles.
- **Welcome** constructive feedback, candor, and different points of view. The intention should always be to focus on helping team members understand their errors, improve performance, or consider how a different approach might positively affect results.
- **Encourage** ideas, brainstorming, and experimenting! Innovation happens when members feel comfortable sharing their “it’s crazy,

but it just might work” ideas.

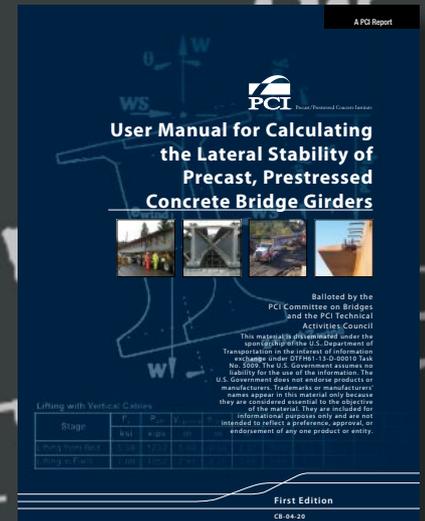
- **Listen** with curiosity. Listen to understand what is working and what is not. Ask questions to elicit opinions, suggestions, and concerns.
- **Lead by example** and learn to show your human side. Leaders are fallible, too. Own your mistakes, and let others know that you know you do not know everything. Learning is an essential part of growing. You are never too old or too high up in the ranks to learn something new.

Effective communication is key to treating the symptoms of low psychological safety. Highly effective teams tend to outperform other teams in productivity, innovation, problem-solving, and decision-making. These teams also enjoy higher rates of retention and lower levels of stress.

References

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The First Edition of



User Manual for Calculating the Lateral Stability of Precast, Prestressed Concrete Bridge Girders FREE PDF (CB-04-20)

This document, *User Manual for Calculating the Lateral Stability of Precast, Prestressed Concrete Bridge Girders*, PCI Publication CB-04-20, provides context and instructions for the use of the 2019 version of the Microsoft Excel workbook to analyze lateral stability of precast, prestressed concrete bridge products. The free distribution of this publication includes a simple method to record contact information for the persons who receive the workbook program so that they can be notified of updates or revisions when necessary. There is no cost for downloading the program.

This product works directly with the PCI document entitled *Recommended Practice for Lateral Stability of Precast, Prestressed Concrete Bridge Girders*, PCI publication CB-02-16, which is referenced in the *AASHTO LRFD Bridge Design Specifications*. To promote broader use of the example template, PCI developed a concatenated Microsoft Excel spreadsheet program where users may customize inputs for specific girder products.

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