

HUMAN SYSTEMS SAFETY

Emotional and Cognitive Capacity for Organizational Resilience

WORKING SCARED:

Why Creating Psychological Safety is a Fundamental Leadership Skill

By Dr. Martha Acosta

December, 2020

It's a stressful time, no doubt about that. The entire world is living through the uncertainty of a global pandemic. Different countries are experiencing social unrest and economic pressure of various types and degrees based on their history and situations. Industries and organizations are reeling, either from loss of business or immense pressures to produce and innovate. Business units, work teams, crews, families, couples—every size of human organization— are addressing how to interact when the context of being together has changed. And in all this, our minds go first to safety, whether the threat is illness, violence, loss of livelihood, or social isolation. It reminds us that safety isn't something we either have or don't have, it's something we actively create. No other form of safety more so than psychological safety.

SAFETY ISN'T SOMETHING WE EITHER HAVE OR DON'T HAVE, IT'S SOMETHING WE ACTIVELY CREATE.

Professor Amy Edmondson of Harvard Business School coined the term *psychological safety* to describe a group psychological phenomenon where people share the belief that it is safe to take emotional risks. What kind of risks are we talking about? The risk of being seen as different; the risk of being seen as difficult; the risk of not belonging; the risk of being rejected—these are fundamental existential human fears. E.O. Wilson, Professor Emeritus at Harvard University and "the father of sociobiology" says human beings are not just social creatures; the social group is the unit of evolution, not the individual human organism. In other words, living and operating in groups isn't just how we survive, it is who we are. Humans, like mole rats, ants, and termites are Eusocial—we can't exist without each other.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IS A SHARED BELIEF AMONG A GROUP OF PEOPLE THAT IT IS SAFE TO TAKE EMOTIONAL RISKS.



Marc Yeston, retired as a chief Ranger, United States National Park Service

So it shouldn't be too difficult to understand that when group dynamics change—for example, when new adhoc teams are assembled to respond to schedule changes and other shifting demands, or when existing teams are interacting with each other over a different medium such as Zoom—people feel psychologically unsafe. Uncertainty, ambiguity and volatility in social structures are emotionally threatening. So we can assume that right now, most people feel psychologically unsafe. However, only in an environment of psychological safety can we actually improve the conditions we are working in.

Some teams are always formed in an environment of uncertainty, ambiguity and lack of familiarity, like the incident response flight crews that form to execute emergency and search and rescue operations at the Grand Canyon. Marc

Yeston spent the bulk of his career as a rescue ranger at Grand Canyon National Park in the United

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States. He describes how helicopter flight crews are assembled: pilots, medics, rangers, firefighters and other emergencies specialists—many of whom have never met— come together from different agencies and organizations to address unique situations. Critical to the success of these teams are the pre-job briefings Yeston conducted as the Incident Commander following a process described by Professor Karl Weick at the University of Michigan. In these he would say: "Here's what I think we face, here's what I think we should do, here's why, here's what we should keep our eye on... now talk to me!"

The most important part of the briefings, as Yeston recounts them, is the last part: "now talk to me!" Research in the field of organizational and human performance tells us that creativity, problem-solving, decision-making and physical safety all require candid dialog, open inquiry, dissenting views, and openly admitting mistakes and misconceptions. This is what Yeston was inviting, but he didn't always get it. All of these behaviors require individuals to be emotionally vulnerable, and vulnerability requires psychological safety within the group and throughout the organization. Google's Project Aristotle, which spent 2 years studying 180 teams and analyzing 250 team attributes, found that the single most important attribute of high-performing teams is psychological safety.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IS THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT ATTRIBUTE OF HIGH-PERFORMING TEAMS

Okay. We know that individuals need it and that it is something that happens in groups, but how do we create it? The answer from Amy Edmondson and her colleagues is resounding and singular:

IT IS THE LEADER'S RESPONSIBILITY, IF NOT PURPOSE, TO BUILD PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

leadership. It is the leader's responsibility, if not purpose, to build psychological safety within the teams, groups and organizations they lead and influence. Professor Linda Hill of Harvard Business School has identified four levers that leaders use to influence team actions and attitudes: roles, processes, communication and measurement. Amy Edmondson describes four leadership behaviors that she has observed to promote psychological safety: Setting boundaries, expectations and social norms; being approachable curious and open; accepting fallibility in yourself and others; engaging and empowering others to speak-out and take ownership. If we integrate the scholarship of these two professors, we can build an action plan for creating and maintaining psychological safety.

S Structure: boundaries, expectations, norms
A Approachable: curiosity, openness, inquisitiveness
F Fallibility: emphasize learning over being right
E Empower: speak-out, stand-up, take ownership

ROLE
how we identify
status, power, role definition

PROCESS
how we do things
purpose, procedures, policies, tools

COMMUNICATION
how we interact
when, how, why and who with we communicate

MEASUREMENT
defining success
what we monitor, reward and punish

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ROLE

First let's consider how leaders define roles to build identity in teams and individuals. We tend to think that a job title and a list of tasks and responsibilities is enough to define a role. But roles, like identity, aren't just about how we define ourselves, but how others see us and how others respond to us. As people move from one team to another or work in different contexts, roles shift—especially now in conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity—therefore, leaders must continuously define roles and this creates an opportunity to build psychological safety.

Although crews like those at the Grand Canyon use Crew Resource Management (CRM) to reduce communication failures, poor decision making and poor task allocation, people respond to implicit social cues more readily than explicit communications. We are better observing the unspoken



United States National Park Service rescue operation

rules and subtext than listening to the actual words uttered by leaders. So Yeston would often devise a "teaching moment" for newly formed crews to help them understand that feedback was indeed an expectation of their role. He would propose an outlandish approach to the incident—one which clearly violated the safety envelope defined for the operation—then he would look for who might

speak up. He called this the *eyebrow-test*; because he would look for puzzled faces and directly ask them what they thought was wrong with his idea. Dissent and challenges would be openly praised and rewarded, alleviating the interpersonal fear of speaking up against the Incident Commander.

Much of the fear of speaking-out can be attributed to not knowing what the consequences of doing so might be. Yeston's eyebrow-test provides immediate feedback, but it is also important to be clear that there are limits to endless debate, to being questioned and to being challenged. Discussing how roles work together to achieve the team's shared purpose and addressing how role conflicts will be resolved, are vital to pre-job briefings.

PROCESS

A process just describes how we do things. It could be a formal process that is written down or a regular pattern of doing work that everyone takes for granted. Processes and the tools used to make them efficient may unintentionally inhibit psychological safety by discouraging dialog, inquiry, dissent, and reflection on mistakes or unexpected outcomes. Therefore, leaders must cultivate curiosity about processes and tools and openly challenge the assumptions they are built on.

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At the Grand Canyon, emergency and search and rescue operations were immediately followed by after action reviews. Flight and ground crews asked themselves: what was planned versus what



U.S. Navy aircraft pilots conducting an after action review

actually happened?

Participants reflected on where they had to adapt processes and procedures and considered what they learned from doing so. And perhaps most important, the After Action Review identified what needed to be shared with others. Without psychological safety, After Action Reviews would be shallow and meaningless, and yet the practice of these reviews cultivates and reinforces

psychological safety.

Even if work is routine, or perhaps especially when work is routine, it's important to assess processes and tools as they are defined or intended to be used versus how they are executed. To ensure psychological safety ask these questions: 1) Does this process lead people to believe there are limits and boundaries that are in fact unnecessary? 2) Does this process create blind spots and keep people from being open to other more effective alternatives? 3) Does this process create a false sense of "being right" and therefore discourages learning? 4) Does this process keep people from taking ownership of a situation or create an expectation that they and others should not "get out of line"?

COMMUNICATION

Psychological safety promotes open and honest communication, yet how we interact and speak to each other in a team strongly signals whether or not is it safe to be vulnerable in this way. That's why leaders cannot just let communication happen—and when it breaks down blame those involved as being poor communicators. Leaders must explicitly define expectations on how the team interacts.

One difficult communication, which Yeston admits challenged him, was admitting that he was wrong. The eyebrow-test worked so well that crew members were eager to question what he calls his "cockamamie ideas". Sometimes those ideas were not deliberately flawed, but were in fact sincere and enthusiastic proposals. It would have been a simple face-saving device to say: "Ha ha, fooled you once but I can't fool you twice. Well done!" But as a leader, Yeston knew it was important to admit: "You are right. My idea violates the safety envelope we established. This is why these conversations are so important, because if you had followed me blindly I would have taken you someplace neither of us should have gone."

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To build psychological safety, modelling candor is key. Engage the team in conversation. Demonstrate genuine curiosity by asking questions and actually listening to the answers without judgment. Seek out diverse perspectives and contradictory opinions—don't expect them to come to you. Talk about what you don't know and what you might be mistaken about. Be courageous and speak out to those with power over you and take ownership on issues that affect your team, even if you don't have full control over the outcome. All of these behaviors will signal to team members that it is safe to take similar risks.

MEASUREMENT

What leaders measure is what gets done. Measurement signals what success looks like and if the only thing leaders focus on is outcomes, people will take any path to achieve those outcomes, even if it undermines safety, psychological or physical. Creating and emphasizing predictive and progress measures can help build psychological safety.

Emergency and search and rescue operations don't always have good endings. According to National Park Service chief spokesman Jeremy Barnum, in any given week, an average of six people die within the United States' 61 National Parks. The success of Yeston's incident response crews at the Grand Canyon could not be evaluated on how many lost hikers were reunited with their families. Doing the right thing, such as not putting crew members lives unnecessarily at risk to save a life, can feel more like a failure than a success. So measures of an effective operation must focus more on how it was executed rather than what happened in the end. Attention to adaptation and resilience is critical to improving emergency operations, both of which require high levels of psychological safety.

Consider how you might find indicators of learning and innovation, which are excellent predictors of improved performance in any area. Candidness, debate, experimentation, inclusiveness, inconsequential failures, questioning the status quo, and generating multiple possibilities are all observable predictors of increased learning and innovation. Framing these activities as "what success looks like" will not only increase their frequency but also foster psychological safety—because all of them require emotional courage.

Psychological safety is an essential attribute of successful teams and other human organizations. One cannot assume it exists without active cultivation and management. Leaders can create psychological safety through their conscious actions and interactions with their teams and the organizational systems and structures they work within.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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