

# BUILDING A CULTURE OF Psychological Safety:

FOSTERING INCLUSIVE AND ENGAGED WORKPLACES



# Executive Summary

Your organization's culture shapes employee perception, engagement, and retention from the frontline to the C-suite. One of the biggest elements of healthy workplaces is the presence of psychological safety. And yet, it remains an elusive concept to many leaders. **Why is that?**

Perhaps the non-tangible nature of psychological safety makes it harder to achieve. Imagine your office is going through some interior renovations. It is visually apparent that some areas may not be safe during construction and many employees may not feel comfortable in the office during the process. Similar feelings can occur when employees are dismissed, retaliated against, or isolated. To truly be a workplace of choice, psychological safety must be as important to the organization as physical safety. Now that we've set the scene, let's take a deeper look at what makes up psychological safety.



# Creating a Safe Haven

The term "[psychological safety](#)" was developed by Harvard Business School professor and *The Fearless Organization* author Amy Edmondson. She defines it as a collective understanding that it is okay to take chances, ask questions, present ideas, and address errors without retribution or judgment. Her research found that the most cohesive teams were the ones that made more blunders. Counterintuitive, right? But that's where psychological safety comes into play. These employees felt comfortable admitting their faults to their colleagues, allowing them to gain support in figuring out a solution.

Dr. Timothy Clark took things a step further and defined [four stages](#) of psychological safety:

## INCLUSION

This stage aligns with our fundamental human need for a connection and bond with others. This stage allows people to feel comfortable being their authentic selves.

## CONTRIBUTOR

Individuals now feel comfortable and empowered to help influence change.

## LEARNER

This stage is when curiosity peaks. People start to deepen their understanding by soliciting feedback, questioning others, and learning from their mistakes.

## CHALLENGER

In the final stage, people are secure enough to make changes and push back on norms to create lasting and actionable progress.

Now that we've defined what psychological safety is, let's also identify what it is not. Think back to basic algebra—remember  $X+Y=Z$ ? For our purposes, psychological safety is "Z." Meaning, without elements like trust and inclusion, psychological safety doesn't exist. Trust and inclusion (our "X" and "Y") are related but separate components of building a culture of psychological safety. Let's explain the differences.

Trust is a strong belief in someone or something. Most importantly, trust is built over time. Whether it's meeting deadlines, providing honest feedback, or being an equal contributor to a new initiative, consistency, and reliability are essential. Feeling confident that leadership and colleagues' words and actions align is critical for building trust and laying a simultaneous foundation for organizational psychological safety. Inclusion builds psychological safety by allowing employees to bring their full and authentic selves to work.

The other concept that is often wrongly conflated with psychological safety is a culture of niceness. While it sounds good on paper, a workplace that is “too nice” is often lacking psychological safety. How is that possible? When niceness is emphasized too heavily at the forefront, organizations begin to prioritize it over objectivity and transparency. That could lead to difficult conversations not occurring to avoid conflict.

When this happens, issues arise, such as underperforming employees not receiving the feedback they need to improve. Maintaining a culture of niceness can also impact an organization’s bottom line. If employees feel pressured to be agreeable instead of rocking the boat, innovation becomes stifled and the ability to become an industry disruptor is minimized.

Niceness cultures also hinder DEI efforts. If the focus is on pleasantries and not meaningful connections, opportunities for inclusivity are missed. Employees can mistakenly feel that just being nice to their marginalized colleagues is enough and thus dismiss the nuances in their lived experiences. While everyone wants to work in an environment that is positive and friendly, ensuring that there is also shared accountability, open communication, and debate will help drive psychological safety.

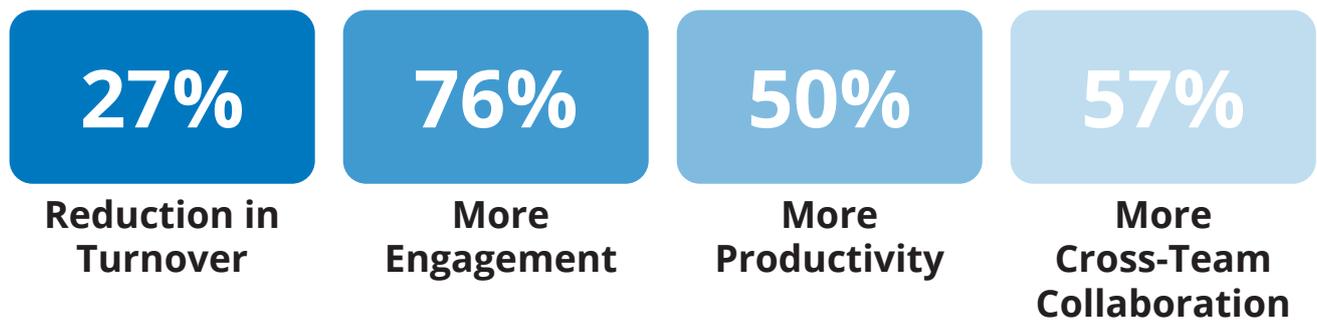
“If employees feel pressured to be agreeable instead of rocking the boat, innovation becomes stifled and the ability to become an industry disruptor is minimized.”



# A Win-Win Situation

When employees feel psychologically safe, they are more focused, empowered, and productive. They are more connected to the organization's mission and believe that their work makes a direct difference. This enables employees to feel confident in innovating, pushing the needle, and critiquing without retaliation. Psychological safety makes workplaces more inclusive and helps employees feel a sense of belonging. Bringing together people of varied backgrounds, skill sets, roles, and tenure in a safe space fosters diversity of thought and encourages employees to speak up and help make the organization better.

In case those reasons aren't compelling enough, let's look at some statistics. Gallup projects that disengaged employees will cost the economy \$8.8 trillion globally in missed productivity and performance. When employees feel ignored or fearful, they are less likely to try new things or voice their opinion. They're just trying to get their work done and head home. This is one of the many reasons why psychological safety is so important. [Accenture](#) reports that companies with high levels of psychological safety experience several benefits, including:



## Setting the Stage

Now that we've shared what psychological safety is and its benefits, let's discuss how to build it. As with most organizational initiatives, it starts at the top. Leaders (especially people leaders) are your organization's biggest asset in fostering psychological safety. Effective leaders set the tone for communication, productivity, and performance across their teams. They are skilled at modeling the behaviors that promote inclusion and safety and empower their people to do the same. According to a [McKinsey Global Survey](#), the most significant factor contributing to the psychological safety of a team is a culture in which team members value each other's contributions, prioritize each other's well-being, and have the authority to shape how the team functions.

Another aspect that contributes to psychological safety (or a lack thereof) is the team lead or director's primary leadership style. McKinsey's research also analyzed four styles of leadership (authoritative, consultative, supportive, and challenging) to study the impact each of these styles has on building psychological safety. It should come as no surprise that authoritative leadership hinders psychological safety. What may be less apparent is the difference between consultative and supportive styles.

Consultative leadership has the biggest influence as these leaders confer with their team, gather feedback, and consider their employees' feelings. These leaders are the most likely to foster inclusivity and minimize the impact of biases in their decision-making by including the opinions of their team. Supportive leadership, on the other hand, focuses on leaders that view their employees holistically by advocating for them personally and professionally. Challenging leadership has the potential to foster safety, but only if the leader builds a favorable and good foundation first. Establishing trust and rapport is critical for leaders to effectively lean into this style to avoid creating tension or fear.

## The synergy of training and psychological safety

Even though psychological safety is nuanced and oftentimes difficult to conceptualize, the good news is that it can build and expand over time. To improve psychological safety across your organization, you must understand your current landscape. Soliciting anonymous feedback from employees across all levels as well as calibrating results with leadership can help paint your baseline. Once you establish the starting point, L&D efforts can take center stage. Creating an ongoing learning program that spans the entire organizational ladder is critical for boosting buy-in. It is also important to select learning that meets employees where they are and grows with them. For some employees, this may be the first time they hear about psychological safety, while others may be actively fostering it.

## Enter in microlearning

Microlearning is your secret weapon for fostering psychological safety within your organization and building a culture of inclusion and belonging. The accessible nature of microlearning makes it a uniquely scalable solution. Microlearning also enables organizations to address varied learning styles. Effective microlearning combines several interactive modalities such as knowledge checks, videos, and imagery to engage learners throughout the lesson and boost retention.



As you start vetting learning vendors, a solution that offers flexibility is key. Employees are more likely to engage in a continuous learning journey that includes concepts that build psychological safety—think empathy, active listening, allyship, self-awareness, communication, etc.—versus an 8-hour training that is nearly impossible to retain. Microlearning helps make nuanced concepts more digestible by offering content in lessons that take 10-12 minutes to complete. This allows learning to fit into employees' flow of work.

Once the microlearning solution is in place, it's important to monitor how it's going. Ensure that your learning partner offers extensive reporting and analytics tools, allowing your leaders to measure engagement and provide a stronger argument for the ROI of employee development. An additional safety measure for boosting employee learning is ensuring they can access it. Think about your current learning platform – how well are employees engaging with it? Is your LMS utilized solely for annual compliance training? If so, employees may be less inclined to partake in self-directed learning there. Use this opportunity to analyze your learning ecosystem and adjust as needed. The key to creating learning that sticks is making it accessible, engaging, and actionable. That's when you can begin building a learning culture.

# Creating a Learning Culture

We've already established the important role of managers in setting the tone for psychological safety on their teams. When it comes to setting an organizational tone, that starts even higher. As your organization starts adopting microlearning for psychological safety, executives must be on board. This goes beyond just giving the go-ahead for HR/L&D to procure learning. When executives and senior leaders actively voice their support for the initiative, it reinforces that continuous learning is an organizational priority, and the entire leadership team is committed to the growth and development of all employees.

As you formulate your strategy, think about how your employees currently receive information. Are they best reachable by email or IM? Or are they frontline team members whose role regularly takes them away from a computer? Creating a culture of learning requires an emphasis on learning equity. Learning equity is the concept of making learning accessible for everyone. This means that an individual's role and technological access should not be a hindrance to their professional development. An adaptable learning provider can offer lessons that are accessible via email nudges, IM channels, mobile apps, etc., giving employees the ability to learn whenever and wherever they want.

Microlearning's scalability lends itself well to tailored learning. The right microlearning partner can help L&D and HR leaders effectively build learning journeys across multiple employee populations. The ability to put an emerging leader on a different track from a senior leader enhances the learner's experience and makes the content more approachable and actionable. The bite-sized nature of the lessons also allows microlearning to easily fit into broader organizational initiatives and goals for the employee. One of the best ways to build a learning culture is to bring everyone together. Incorporating elements such as gamification and leaderboards helps foster healthy competition and enables the company to recognize top learners.



Employee retention is a priority for **90%** of organizations, and offering **learning opportunities** is their **number one strategy** to address this concern.

-LinkedIn 2024 Workplace Learning Report

# Overcoming Barriers to Psychological Safety

Even the most well-intended organizations struggle to reach everybody. From employees that are solely focused on work to quiet quitters, your efforts will inevitably encounter some resistance. That said, it is important to remember that psychological safety benefits everyone, even those who haven't leaned into it yet. Writing for [Harvard Business Review](#), Amy Edmondson and Per Hugander offer a few ideas to help you stay the course:



## Center your efforts around performance

Remember our office renovations example from earlier? The lack of tangibility in psychological safety can make it harder for some people to engage. Edmondson and Hugander suggest reframing your organizational goals into “what psychological safety can do for you” vs “building psychological safety.” They make the case that prioritizing psychological safety is good for business as it encourages more ideas and thus increases innovation can help reluctant executives see the why behind the mission.



## Make room for workplace openness

It is imperative to recognize that everyone has different levels of comfort getting personal at work. For instance, some colleagues can't wait to share the exciting things their children are learning, while others won't tell you their children's names. This discomfort on low-stakes topics can translate into extreme angst about a deep conversation around psychological safety. How can you combat this? Don't send employees from stage 1 to stage 10 right away. Instead, work on building up psychological safety through ongoing and intentional discussions to organically build safety in the room.



## Curate learning for 1:1 and group discussion

Some of psychological safety's complexity lies within the idea that although it helps the group, it begins with individuals. Having learning moments where employees can upskill on concepts related to psychological safety allows them to see their skills gaps and how they are contributing to either the problem or the solution. From there, bringing the team together can help them gain new perspectives on the lesson, participate in role-playing scenarios, and strengthen their bond as a unit. Empower your leaders to facilitate these discussions with an agenda, safe-space declaration, and key takeaways to continue utilizing what they've learned.

Unfortunately, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to connecting with disengaged employees. Establishing your organization's top priorities for building psychological safety and equipping managers with learning that helps them guide, support, and hold their teams accountable can help bridge the gaps that will inevitably arise.

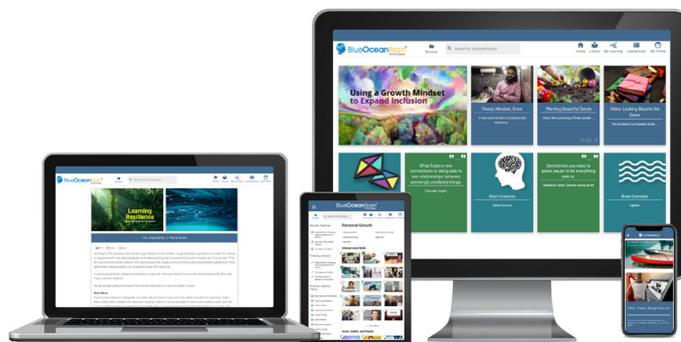
# Ready to take the next step? Blue Ocean Brain is here to help.

Developing a psychologically safe workplace is a gradual process, necessitating inventive leadership and wholehearted employee involvement. By weaving learning into every facet of work, you can inspire employees to embark on the path toward an inclusive culture. By purposefully constructing and safeguarding progress, you can achieve lasting change, while engaging and retaining top talent. One of the most important tools for successfully navigating this journey is selecting a robust and engaging learning partner.

Empowering employees to experiment, share insights, and learn independently is vital for fostering a culture where professional growth is self-driven.

**Blue Ocean Brain's award-winning microlearning solution helps clients of all shapes and sizes deliver actionable, approachable, and inspiring learning on the soft skills that matter most in today's workplace.**

With our flexible delivery options, you can harness our captivating platform or seamlessly integrate our content into your learning ecosystem. Regardless of the delivery method, your team can access actionable and comprehensive microlearning, tailored to the brain's optimal learning methods.



Our in-house content development experts create new lessons every business day, allowing us to stay as relevant as possible and provide just-in-time learning when your employees need it most. From topics such as psychological safety to DEI, leadership development, mental health and well-being, and more, we can help your organization achieve its people and culture goals.

On the next page, we dive into a sample psychological safety learning journey, providing you with a glimpse of the rich content that Blue Ocean Brain has to offer.

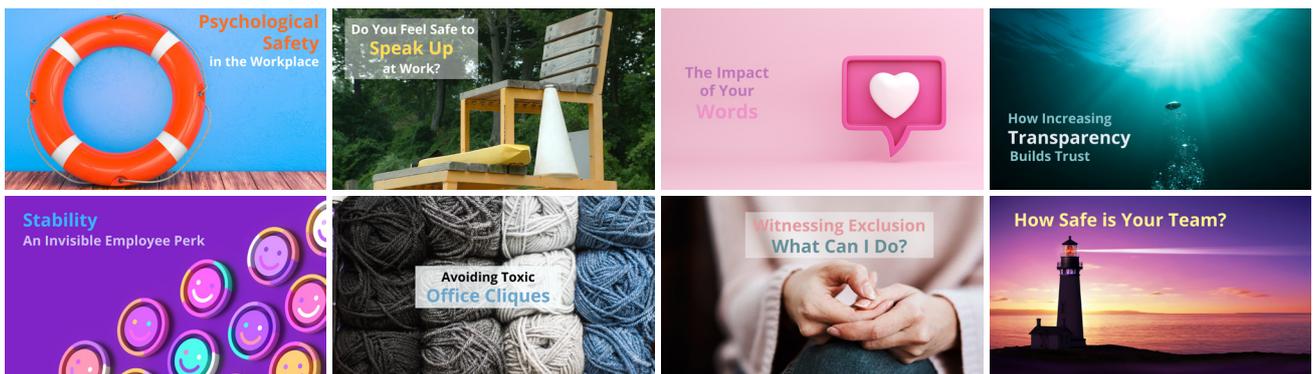
# Psychological Safety

## Sample Learning Journey

This sample Blue Ocean Brain microlearning journey illustrates how to guide your people through a learning pathway that will help foster psychological safety throughout the organization. Each 10-minute lesson is a step on the path, with actionable takeaways that leave employees inspired and prepared to take action.

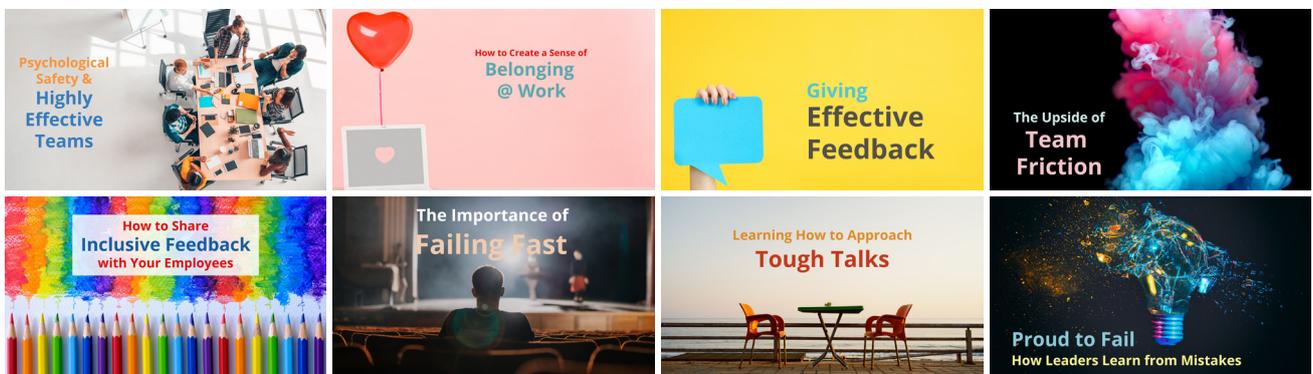
### Understanding Psychological Safety

In today's dynamic work environments, creating an atmosphere of psychological safety is paramount for fostering collaboration, innovation, and employee well-being. These lessons will equip learners with a fundamental understanding of psychological safety, its pivotal role in shaping organizational culture, and strategies to cultivate it effectively.



### Promoting Psychological Safety in Teams

Creating a high-performing team requires more than just skills; it demands an environment where members feel comfortable sharing ideas, addressing conflicts, and embracing growth. This series focuses on cultivating psychological safety, promoting open communication, constructive feedback, and a mindset that values learning from mistakes.



### Sustaining Psychological Safety

These lessons focus on critical aspects such as accountability, the importance of continuous feedback, and creating a culture of celebration and acknowledgment. Additionally, we explore the impact of a growth mindset on promoting resilience and evaluating psychological safety levels to identify areas of improvement. By the end of this series, learners will gain valuable insights and practical tips that will help sustain psychological safety in their workplace.





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## About **Blue Ocean Brain**

Grounded in neuroscience, Blue Ocean Brain, an HSI Company, is a pioneering microlearning firm that combines collaborative consultation, award-winning content, and flexible delivery options to help clients of all sizes and industries develop a culture of continuous learning and inclusion that supports strategic priorities and critical culture initiatives.

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