

# NEURODIVERSITY @ WORK PLAYBOOK

Employee Engagement  
and Growth Series

ISSUE #5

## Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace

“Psychological Safety — the confidence that candor and vulnerability are welcome.”

— Amy Edmondson

### What is psychological safety in a neuroinclusive workplace?

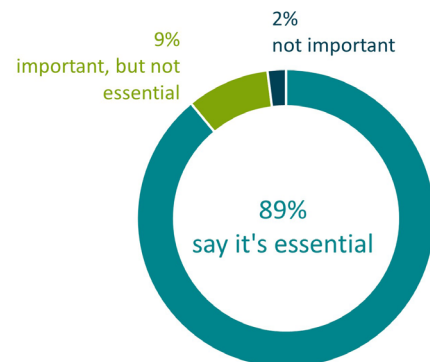
Psychological safety is a term coined by organizational psychologist Amy Edmondson in the 1990s. A psychologically safe workplace is one where employees feel they can speak freely, admit well-intentioned mistakes, explore ideas, take risks, and be themselves without negative repercussions. In her words, “Team psychological safety thus describes an interpersonal climate characterized by trust and respect, in which people are comfortable being themselves.” A psychologically safe workplace is a place where all team members are accountable for creating such an environment. For many neurodivergent employees, the workplace has not been a psychologically safe environment due to normative expectations of acceptable social interactions, communication styles, and environmental designs.

### Why is psychological safety especially important in the context of neurodiverse teams?

According to a Pew survey in 2018, 98% of U.S. adults believe that it is essential or at least important for organizational leaders to create psychological safety for employees. The changes to the workplace due to COVID-19, mass layoffs, racial inequity and social unrest, and the need for agility have placed even more emphasis on the importance of psychological safety. The presence of psychological safety is correlated with higher levels of team learning and innovation as it allows for individuals to take risks, share uncommon ideas, and challenge the status quo. In psychologically safe teams, members feel heard, empowered, and engaged. Teams with low psychological safety experience higher turnover, low engagement, burnout, and fewer innovations.

While neurodivergent people have long been key contributors to their organizations when employed, they have not always felt safe to be their authentic selves at work due to most workplaces and societies being built with only neurotypical/neuro-normative behavior in mind (exclusive of neurodivergent ways of being). Neurodivergent employees have often had to assimilate to their environment, taking on negative health and cognitive impacts. When neurodivergent employees assimilate (also known as mask), they conform to dominant cultural norms and often hide their talents, which makes their contributions inaccessible to the organization, reducing learning and innovation. Because of this, there is an increased need to create psychologically safe workplaces inclusive of the unique talents, needs, experiences, perspectives, and different ways of being of neurodivergent people. In a psychologically safe and neuroinclusive environment, there is understanding and appreciation for different needs and ways of being, which creates a community where both neurotypical and neurodivergent team members can thrive.

Americans say it's essential for business leaders to create a safe, respectful workplace



Source: Pew Research Center, survey of U.S. adults conducted June 19-July 2, 2018

### Benefits of psychological safety

- ✓ Increased satisfaction and sense of belonging among employees, leading to greater retention.
- ✓ Better information sharing and collaboration within teams, leading to greater productivity.
- ✓ Increased representation within teams, leading to products and services with broader appeal and profitability.
- ✓ Improved organizational brand, attracting diversity of talent.
- ✓ Accommodations are normalized, and the concept is reframed as success enablement.

## NEUROINCLUSIVE CULTURE CHECKLIST

- ✓ Emphasize the importance of psychological safety to organizational performance.
- ✓ Seek to understand the experiences of your neurodivergent employees.
- ✓ Integrate what psychological safety means to your neurodivergent employees.
- ✓ Reinforce and encourage experimentation, risk-taking, and alternative opinions from all members of your organization.
- ✓ Build your managers' capacity to create psychological safety.
- ✓ Cultivate a manager learning community focused on neuroinclusion and psychological safety.
- ✓ Foster a sense of humility and curiosity about neuro diversity.
- ✓ Measure psychological safety and address problem areas.

## How do you create a psychologically safe neuroinclusive workplace?

Creating a psychologically safe workplace is a complex task that requires intentionality and persistence. For neurodiverse workplaces, psychological safety is a critical dimension of a neuroinclusive culture that manifests on the team level. According to Edmondson, building psychological safety takes commitment and skills. In this brief, we have synthesized Edmondson's and other scholars' work to identify key steps toward building the right organizational environment for psychological safety. These steps are presented with an emphasis on neuroinclusion.

### 1. Frame psychological safety in relation to organizational performance — make the business case.

- Emphasize the importance of psychological safety for all employees, including neurodivergent individuals, as an essential dimension of your DEI strategy and focus.
- Socialize the benefits of psychological safety listed in the sidebar on the previous page.
- Normalize accommodations, make them discoverable, and reframe the concept as success enablement.
- Leverage celebration and acceptance campaigns (discussed in the issue on Cultivating Neuroinclusive Culture) to emphasize the importance of psychological safety-related behaviors.

### 2. Build the capacity of leaders, managers, and employees at every level.

- Train all employees to collaborate with candor and respect.
- Train managers to model behaviors and reinforce norms that create psychological safety in their teams.
- Encourage executives to model and reinforce vulnerability, empathy, and compassion publically.
- Focus training on specific behaviors by using experiential techniques such as role play to learn behaviors.
- Emphasize visualization of desired outcomes in your training.

## CHANGING EXPECTATIONS

Amy Edmondson emphasizes that to produce psychological safety, it is critical that employees and managers be able to experience different ways of operating from the norm. This can be accomplished in a two-step process:

- ✓ Demonstrate small wins relevant to key team challenges by leveraging behaviors conducive to psychological safety.
- ✓ Use storytelling to spread such behaviors to other teams by sharing the progress of others.

As more people experience progress practicing candor and vulnerability and share their success with others, these behaviors increasingly become the norm and psychological safety grows. See the resources for more on these practices.

### 3. Build the capacity of your key operational functions.

- Build the capacity of HR and accommodation teams and practices to encourage employees to ask for what they need.
- Provide accommodations and make them discoverable to enable individual success.
- Normalize accommodations as success enablers for individuals and teams by removing barriers to workplace adjustments.
- Emphasize the relevance of psychological safety in mental health and well-being in training and supports.

### 4. Encourage curiosity toward differences and promote vulnerability relating to work.

- Train employees and reinforce collaboration to resolve conflict.
- Design processes that encourage alternative building and perspective taking.
- Highlight and resource neurodiversity ERGs to present alternative perspectives.
- Question and challenge evaluation metrics grounded in normative expectations for those at the executive level and throughout the organization. Redefine professionalism to be neuroinclusive.

### 5. Create neuroinclusive organizational controls (rewards and measurement) relevant to psychological safety.

- Measure psychological safety, burnout, and sense of belonging systematically to identify areas for improvement.
- Create feedback loops with neurodivergent employees to understand their experiences.
- Reframe annual performance metrics to recognize different forms of contributions.
- Emphasize people management goals and hold managers accountable for building psychological safety.

For psychological safety to exist, all team members must leverage behaviors conducive to creating neuroinclusive psychological safety. Developing psychological safety is everyone's responsibility.

## What role does the manager play in creating psychological safety?

Edmondson stressed that psychological safety is a team-level phenomenon and must be cultivated with intention and persistence by team leaders. She has also been clear that all team members are critical in developing the right team context. Managers play a critical role in supporting their employees and setting the right psychologically safe environment. Below are key practices gleaned from the work of Edmondson and Laura Delizonna for managers to leverage to develop psychological safety in their teams. These practices were observed in various studies, though scholars acknowledge that team composition, leader style, and some finesse and creativity is also in play. Also note all team members must exhibit these behaviors for psychological safety to grow. Regardless, the behaviors listed on the next page, if incorporated authentically and with intentionality, will engender psychological safety.

## BEHAVIORS TO INCORPORATE

- ✓ Focus on the performance benefits of respectful candor and disagreements relating to the different ways people think, process information, learn, communicate, and socialize.
- ✓ Encourage and model a culture of vulnerability.
- ✓ Normalize asking for accommodations and make the resources, tools, and support people need to work at their best discoverable for all employees regardless of disclosure.
- ✓ Make roles, responsibilities, and expectations clear.
- ✓ Insist on respectful candor and feedback and hold employees accountable for these expectations.
- ✓ Ask for feedback and respond constructively.
- ✓ Model and expect collaboration to resolve conflict.
- ✓ Share vulnerability and struggles but in constructive ways. Do not dump on your team.
- ✓ Have and encourage an open-door policy while also honoring the need for focused uninterrupted time, privacy, and boundaries.
- ✓ Connect with the team to get a sense of their state of mind, e.g., morning huddles or checkpoints.
- ✓ Surface differences in cognitive styles as a strength, and facilitate open dialogue about ways to create room for healthy debate and problem solving.
- ✓ Be intentional about developing mutual agreement for ways to interact, communicate, and honor a balanced way for meeting members' needs and preferences.
- ✓ Proactively provide information and resources to help members get the support they need.
- ✓ Protect employees' privacy related to their neurodivergence or accommodation. Set the tone and environment for them to share their identity if and when they choose.
- ✓ Emphasize curiosity toward differences and seek understanding of them.
- ✓ Model and encourage assuming positive intent/benefit of the doubt/assumption of good intentions within the team.
- ✓ Allow multiple modes of collaboration and interaction, and clarify expectations of what works for individuals.
- ✓ Pay attention to and address behaviors that are counter-productive to psychological safety. Balance a growth mindset between when individuals are learning such behaviors and when there is a need for no tolerance.

### LESSONS LEARNED

## Psychological Safety

- Do not make assumptions. Trust good intent. Be open. Seek to understand.
- Creating psychological safety requires iteration. Stay committed to the work, get feedback, assess your progress, refine, and repeat.
- Psychological safety has to be built at all levels of the organization, but recognize that the manager is the key instrument to build or break psychological safety.
- Recognize long-term learning and the need for change. Emphasize humility and growth, but be honest about the complexity and the continuous learning necessary.

## Resources

This brief only scratches the surface related to best practices to create psychological safety in the context of neuroinclusive workplace. Below are some additional resources that will help you dive deeper into the topic of psychological safety.

- Amy Edmondson, the scholar who coined the term psychological safety, offers many resources to build understanding of psychological safety. Below are a few of our favorites:
  - ❑ Check out her course on the LinkedIn Learning platform, which provides a comprehensive overview and actionable knowledge for team leaders: <https://www.linkedin.com/learning/psychological-safety-clear-blocks-to-innovation-collaboration-and-risk-taking>
  - ❑ Her article titled “Leveraging Diversity Through Psychological Safety” is especially relevant to neuroinclusion: <https://hbsp.harvard.edu/product/ROT093-PDF-ENG?Ntt=psychological%20safety>
  - ❑ Her practical advice distilled in the “4 Steps to Boost Psychological Safety in Your Workplace” is another one we recommend: <https://hbsp.harvard.edu/product/H06FBS-PDF-ENG?Ntt=psychological%20safety>
  - ❑ For those of us who conduct our work virtually, Edmondson and Daley provide a guide to creating psychological safety in virtual meetings: <https://hbsp.harvard.edu/product/H05TAJ-PDF-ENG?Ntt=psychological%20safety>
- Amy Gallo provides a recent and comprehensive review of psychological safety, how the concept evolved, and ways to develop and measure it: <https://hbr.org/2023/02/what-is-psychological-safety>
- McKinsey Quarterly curated a number of interesting resources and measures around psychological safety that you might find interesting here: <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/leadership/five-fifty-is-it-safe>

## About this series

The Neurodiversity @ Work Playbook: Employee Engagement and Growth Series is the product of a series of focus groups led by Dr. Hala Annabi, an associate professor at the University of Washington Information School. Dr. Annabi facilitated discussion in five focus groups, including participants from the Neurodiversity at Work Employer Roundtable, addressing best practices related to five key areas of opportunity represented in these briefs. The facilitators distilled best practices and developed these guides for other organizations to use to continue to advance neurodiversity employment with input from focus group participants.

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