Psychological Safety: How to build and ensure it!

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I'm currently facilitating a series of one day leadership programs for middle managers at a major Australian company. During a recent session, two (more) Senior Managers arrived, intending to observe from the back. I quietly invited them aside to share that the program is designed for active participation, not observation. I emphasised that everyone, regardless of title, is a leader in the room, and my priority is to ensure a supportive environment for all participants. One Senior Manager decided to join the session and fully participate, whilst the other chose not to attend.

Welcome to psychological safety! 'To create a safe space for people to speak up, make mistakes, and bring their full selves to work' *Amy Edmondson (Global thought leader and researcher on Psychological Safety).*

Leaders frequently ask me how to build and ensure psychological safety, a concept I wish we had discussed 25 years ago (in my rookie leadership days!). It's always existed in some form, we just hadn't named it. The real question is what it looks like in practice.

Psychological safety is felt, not just stated eg, eg, "trust me" or "don't worry everyone, this is a psychological safe space/team and we therefore encourage to share!". In my workshops, the morning tends to be quieter until participants grow comfortable. Once they do, the true value of psychological safety becomes evident as they openly share, ask questions, and clarify.

Psychological safety can also be misunderstood or even weaponised, such as when tough feedback is mistaken for bullying. Constructive feedback supports psychological safety, while poorly delivered feedback undermines it. This can be 'grey' and I am often asked to address such nuances in my workshops and coaching sessions.

Let's focus on fostering psychological safety. Here are seven key tips that I regularly practice:

1. **Genuinely greet and welcome people into your space** – remain consciously available to say hello and be present. Be organised so that you are physically ready to welcome them and ditch anything that will distract you. There is no truer way to
2. **Encourage curiosity**: Always welcome and validate questions, authentically. Use affirmations like "great question", "thank you for asking", "I'm glad you've raised that" and always invite group support for answers when possible.
3. **Implement 'Chatham House Rules'**: Use these rules as appropriate to maintain confidentiality and openness.
4. **Offer offline/private chats**: Let individuals know they can speak with you privately during breaks if they're uncomfortable discussing something in the group. Most days, I find that someone will reach out!

5. **Track and address Queries**: Record questions and topics for later discussion or provide additional resources. Make these visible for everyone to potentially come back to.
6. **Promote a culture of feedback**: Actively seek, receive and provide feedback. If working with a group over multiple days, I always invite feedback on each new day around what they might want more of/less of.
7. **Be Curious**: Be prepared to be intrigued and amazed by those around you! Listen actively and show genuine interest in others… their personal interests and experiences to build connections. My most recent and random learnings from participants have been around perfecting sourdough and paella!

Observing psychological safety (or lack of) can be anywhere. Whilst attending a recent workshop (as a participant), we were asked to create a team name. A late-arriving participant was told, very loudly, by the facilitator, "Because you're late, you can't join this first part—hope you're on time next time!" I was mortified for our fellow participant and chose to warmly welcome them anyway.

Situations such as this couldn't be more lacking in psychological safety. And such a wonderful reminder of Maya Angelou's poignant quote '*I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel*'.