Creating a COVID-19 recovery culture: psychological safety in uncertain times

Psychological safety, the perception that one's working environment is a safe place for interpersonal risk taking, is vital for organisational cohesion, growth and resilience. It allows colleagues to trust and respect one another and ensures that people feel able to speak up without being shut down.

Right now, that's more important than ever; society is more fearful and remote working means less 'natural' human interaction to assuage those fears.

In addition, many of us will be looking to design innovative new approaches to our projects; a sense of safety is a prerequisite for creativity.

As CEOs we need to be deliberate in our communications and our leadership in order to build psychologically safe workspaces.

A. Fundamentals of psychological safety

The table below, outlining a leader's toolkit for building psychological safety, is taken from *'The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation and Growth', by Amy C. Edmondson.*

The Leader's Tool Kit for Building Psychological Safety

	Setting the Stage	Inviting Participation	Responding Productively
Leadership Tasks	Frame the Work • Set expectations about failure, uncertainty, and interdependence to clarify the need for voice Emphasize Purpose • Identify what's at stake, why it matters, and for whom it matters	Demonstrate Situational Humility • Acknowledge gaps Practice Inquiry • Ask good questions • Model intense listening Set Up Structures and Processes • Create forums for input • Provide guidelines for discussion	Express Appreciation • Listen • Acknowledge and thank Destigmatize Failure • Look forward • Offer help • Discuss, consider, and brainstorm next steps Sanction Clear Violations
Accomplishes	Shared expectations and meaning	Confidence that voice is welcome	Orientation toward continuous learning

Source: *The Fearless Organization*

Edmonson gives three pillars; setting the stage, inviting participation, and responding productively that help us frame our overall approach to developing greater psychological safety in our organisation

1. Set the stage for psychological safety

As we move through the phases of crisis and recovery, many of us will need to try new approaches, experimenting with what works and embracing a 'fail-forward' approach.
One of the most common barriers to psychological safety is the fear of failure, or the fear of reporting 'failure'. Our teams must feel that it is safe to fail, through our regular communication of expectations about risk, opportunity and uncertainty. We need to be explicit that the 'rules of the game' have changed and so have our ways of working. Talking of a new 'fail-forward' culture, of curiosity and experimentation, and of 'aims' or 'targets' in lieu of 'outcomes' or 'results' can be helpful.

2. Invite participation

To find creative fresh solutions to problems, we must demonstrate that we as leaders are embracing not-knowing, a learning mindset of curiosity and humility, and acknowledge gaps in our knowledge and invite contributions. We can be open to regular feedback and clarify that different opinions are encouraged for learning and growth. We can set up forums for feedback and input, giving guidelines for these discussions, asking thorough questions and listen intensely.

3. Respond productively

When people believe that the outcomes of their work indicate their ability, value or intelligence, this prevents them from taking risks. Therefore, it is important to make sure our team understands that we see performance as reflective of context, effort and tactics.
This is particularly important in uncertain environments such as now, when perfectly good efforts may not generate the desired results. So, we praise all efforts, regardless of their outcomes. In cases where people do not meet a target, we offer opportunities for learning, discussion and support.

This overall approach moves our culture towards continuous learning and higher psychological safety.

B. Understanding the components of psychological safety and application to individuals

'SCARF: a brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others', by David Rock is helpful for understanding components of psychological safety at the individual level. Awareness of these drivers can help us attend to both our own needs and guide our internal comms, improving team well-being and reducing feelings of anxiety. The components are

> *Status* =   Importance in relation to others
> *Certainty* =   Ability to predict the future
> *Autonomy* = Perception of having control over our own environment
> *Relatedness* = Feeling of security in relationships with others
> *Fairness* =   Transparency, clear expectations and fair rewards

Applying the SCARF analysis to the current context, allows us to identify helpful actions:

Status - importance in relation to others

We can keep in contact with any furloughed workers to reassure them of their importance to the organisation. Build status by requesting them to undertake training to gain skills for the benefit of the organisation; a great place to start for many will be upgrading digital skills. As an incentive you can set a date for them to present / report what they have learned to you or the team.

Many people will judge their value (a proxy for status) by their self- perceived productivity. Explain that adjusting to remote working is as difficult as settling into a new job (even before the household distractions!) and that has been factored into your expectations.

Certainty - ability to predict the future

As a CEO, It can be very hard to lead with a dearth of data, but one way of helping our team to keep faith in us can be to send an informal 3-5 minute video message each Friday, saying what we know, what we don't, and being as transparent as we can in a human and relatable way.
We can give 'process' timelines; such as 'when we know X and have Y we will make the next decision about Z' or 'the next date I will contact you will be X'.
A regular structure for team meetings will ensure a sense of predictability; they should be held at least once a week, at a consistent day and time, with agenda and expectations for input outlined in advance. We want to minimise surprises.

Autonomy - Perception of having control over our own environment

We should be careful about the checks on people whilst working from home, highlighting your trust and the autonomy that they have; avoid trying to replicate the usual working environment with too many video calls. Having said that, it is important to acknowledge that when there is a silence, our fearful brains can start to make up worst case scenarios... Therefore, review the approach with the team often as the phases of the crisis and recovery unfold.

Relatedness - feeling of security in relationships with others

We can provide the opportunity for informal socialising so that people feel they are valued socially as a member of the group beyond their role as employee. Ask the team to support you, and each other, in actively looking for changes in individuals' work behaviours, which may be harder to pick up on when working from home e.g. changes in tone, personality, voice or appearance.
Understand that offering downtime to process stress and anxiety may be more useful than directly asking people to talk. For any difficult or potentially sensitive discussions, consider conducting these via phone as opposed to a video call. This can provide a greater sense of privacy, enabling individuals to open up or discuss emotional issues more easily.

Fairness - transparency, clear expectations and fair rewards

As best we can, we need to ensure people feel the decisions that are being made reflect their own perceived value to the organisation. If taking away employee benefits due to the current financial uncertainty, we should be clear about the rationale (document the whole process for this.)
Explain we are asking them to be 'heroic' for the greater good of the communities that we serve and to allow the organisation to exist in future.

C. Into practice

Think of three of your team members in different areas of the organisation and list, the positives and negatives you think that they may be experiencing related to status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness and fairness. What could you do differently for them?
Repeat the exercise for yourself. What could you ask of others?

If you would like to have an informal chat about this, or any aspect of leading your organisation through the current uncertainty then do feel free to drop me an email: jane@omnianda.com