The 4 Stages of
Psychological Safety™

Behavioral Guide

A Practical, How-To Guide to
Help You Increase Your
Team's Psychological Safety

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leaderfactor

Overview

What is psychological safety?

Psychological safety is a social condition in which you feel (1) included, (2) safe to learn, (3) safe to contribute, and (4) safe to challenge the status quo--all without fear of being embarrassed, marginalized, or punished in some way.

All teams register some level of psychological safety. That level is based on a combination of two factors: (1) respect and (2) permission to participate as perceived by the members of the team. Not surprisingly, psychological safety is a dynamic and delicate variable that is hard to build and easy to destroy.

Why does it matter?

The level of psychological safety on a team is the central measure of that team's culture, health, and vitality.

What is the Behavioral Guide?

The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety Behavioral Guide is a practical resource designed to help you increase the psychological safety of your team. It is a companion to the *4 Stages Team Survey* and a "how-to" guide that includes a set of concrete behavioral steps that you can apply in each of the 4 stages.

What steps should I take?

1. Take the *4 Stages Team Survey* to measure the levels of psychological safety on your team.
2. Review your results and the recommendations for each stage.
3. Select a small number of recommended steps to work on that would have the biggest impact in your efforts to elevate psychological safety.
4. Retake the *4 Stages Team Survey* after 60-90 days to track progress.

Review your progress each week, ask for feedback from the members of your team, and make adjustments as necessary.

Additional Material:

This behavioral guide is based on Dr. Timothy R. Clark's book, *The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety*, published by Berrett Koehler, March 2020.

Stage 1: Inclusion Safety
How do you make others feel included?

1. **Teach inclusion as human need and right.** Teach your team members to approach each other with the understanding that we all have a human need to be included and we're entitled to it. It's a human right. We long to belong and we deserve to belong. In that connecting process we exchange emotional, social, intellectual, and spiritual value. Inclusion isn't something we earn; its' something we're owed. We are hyper-social creatures who need each other.

2. **Introduce yourself at the first opportunity**. Be proactive to introduce yourself to those who are new or you don't know. Once you break the ice and display warmth and acceptance, a sense of inclusion forms rapidly.

3. **Learn peoples' names and how to pronounce them**. Nothing is more personal than a name. When a new person joins the team, learn his or her name immediately. If you don't know how to pronounce it, ask.

4. **Physically face people**. Nothing communicates validation more powerfully than when you turn to face directly the person with whom you're talking with upright and forward posture. Finally, look them in the eyes. This applies when you are speaking as well as when you are listening.

5. **Listen and pause.** Listen with intent to comprehend rather than the intent to respond. Do this by listening, pausing to reflect, and then responding thoughtfully. Have you ever been talking to someone and you can tell that they're simply waiting for you to finish your sentence so they can jump in? That's not always a problem, but if that's the pattern, it does become a problem.

6. **Ask twice as much as you tell.** When you ask someone a question, it's an invitation to engage and a form of validation. Telling can be fine too, but if you tell too much, it's self-serving and it signals selfishness, arrogance, and dominance, all of which are off putting.

7. **Meet a person in their physical space**. Don't make them come to you. This sends a clear message that you value them, their time, and their input because you are extending yourself on their behalf. It's a gesture of respect and people appreciate it. And

you'll notice that people feel more comfortable to engage in their own space. Chances are that you'll have a higher quality interaction--both intellectually and emotionally--if you meet them in their personal space.

8. **Conduct hop on, hop off tours.** Have you visited a big city and done a hop on/hop off tour on one of those buses? Apply the same practice when someone joins your team or organization. Formally assign a member of your team to be that person's personal guide. Have the personal guide conduct social tours during the first week to accelerate relationship-building. The personal guide can do short, 10 minute hop on/hop off tours around the office. Ensure that those interactions are meaningful enough to move the relationship beyond the acquaintance stage. Don't accept the normal pace of building a social network. You can double, triple, or quadruple the pace at which that would happen on its own.

9. **Move to mutual discovery quickly**. Ask your team members questions to discover their personal interests and find common ground. This is a natural bond-building skill that you can practice and improve. In fact, you may even want to write down some questions to ask before you engage in a conversation. Once you move out of the obligatory and perfunctory mode of social exchange into mutual discovery, the relationship building accelerates. Don't probe into personal or sensitive topics. Just ask some natural questions about background and interests.

10. **Avoid comparisons and competitions.** When we compare and compete with each other, we lose the ability to connect. As a leader, focus your efforts on making meaningful connections with your team members. Identify and recognize the strengths, talents, and abilities of each person and point them out. Avoid the temptation to be jealous or resentful about the strengths of others, especially when they are strengths you may not possess. In fact, if you can rejoice in the strengths of your team members, you become a more genuine and authentic leader and the connections you make become deeper and more real.

11. **Create deep bonding opportunities**. Only through sharing experiences and building relationships do individuals develop a sense of belonging to a team. When a new team member arrives, that individual requires warmth and civility to feel comfortable. But the real task is to move from creating mere comfort to creating a deep sense of belonging. Find projects, tasks, or assignments that allow individuals to spend significant time together. Out of that familiarity, deep bonding normally occurs.

12. **Define and communicate the purpose and values of your team**. To feel a part of the team, the individual must understand why the team exists, how it works, and what it stands for. The team must first define its values, purpose, and goals and continuously communicate those things to team members.

13. **Identify negative bias**. A bias is a preference for or against a human characteristic, individual, or group of people. As humans, we all have them. Sometimes they are hidden. Sometimes they are obvious. For example, I once worked for a boss who like to recruit team members from a certain university. Now that may be ok to a certain point, but if everyone is from the same school, it becomes a problem. Some biases are

inherently good. Some are inherently bad. Some are good to a point. Organizations and teams often develop hidden negative biases that are destructive to the sense of inclusion team members feel. For example, I worked with an organization that had developed a bias not to promote women into a certain management role. That bias became deeply embedded in the culture of the organization and people just took it for granted and perpetuated the bias. That's not a good thing. So what do you do? Periodically ask team members if they can identify any patterns of negative bias in the team. Then act to remove them. This is something you should do on a regular basis. If you're humble and open-minded, you will often see what were previously hidden biases become obvious.

14. **Check alignment.** Both the sense of belonging that each individual feels and the sense of alignment the entire team feels is never a permanent thing. Now before we go any further, let me define alignment. First, alignment means that we have a shared understanding of our direction. Second, alignment means that we share a commitment to that direction. Both must be constantly reinforced. Pull members of the team aside informally and ask them how well they understand the vision and direction of the team and how committed they are to achieving them. And if it helps, have them use a scale. You might ask, "using a scale from 0 to 10, how well do you think you understand the vision and direction of the team?" And then you can ask, using that same scale, how committed do you feel to the vision and direction of the team. Once the individual gives you his or her ratings, you can have an honest conversation about alignment. Remember, alignment is perishable. It requires constant reinforcement. A team that feels aligned is normally a team that feels included.

15. **Create connecting rituals**. Sometimes it helps to develop distinctive patterns of communication and behavior to help team members connect. We call these rituals. For example, you might develop a ritual for having a team member start every meeting with an inspirational thought, institute a team lunch every Friday, or showcase a team member each month to recognize his or her contribution. Some teams have a short standing huddle at the beginning of the day instead of a sit down meeting. Rituals become routine and humans like routine. It gives them a sense of belonging and predictability. Figure out what fits your team's vibe and personality. Rituals also create security and familiarity for unsettling times of change, contrast, and surprise. Part of what an inclusive team can do is buffer the team from the jarring and highly disruptive aspects of change. Rituals reinforce inclusiveness. Remember to create connecting rituals.

16. **Share your story, learn their story .** Build rapport by sharing appropriate background and experiences about yourself. Be the first to expose yourself a little emotionally. Then ask the other person, "Tell me your story." Most people are excited to share their story if they have someone who is genuinely interested. Here's a suggestion. Simply ask yourself right now. How well do I know the stories of each of my team members beyond a few superficial facts? Why is this important? If you haven't noticed, most people want you to understand what makes them tick, how they are wired, and what they care about. When you understand that, you really start to understand the person. We're not suggesting that you understand the intimate details of a person's life. Not at all. But I am suggesting that you understand their values, vision, and motivation. If you can get to that level with your team members, it will transform your relationship because they will feel

included on a deeper and more significant level.

17. **Make yourself available and interruptible**. Everyone's busy, but if you make an effort to make yourself a little more available and interruptible, it sends a strong message that you value people more than tasks.

18. **Don't flaunt perks or status symbols.** Reinforce an inclusionary norm by avoiding status symbols that create difference and division. People are sensitive to differences such as office size, parking privileges, or compensation structure. There will always be differences. Just don't call undue attention to them for your own adulation.

19. **Follow through on small commitments**. If you make a commitment, follow through, especially if it's a small one. Sweating the small stuff is an expression that you respect and value others.

20. **Create opportunities to socialize outside of work**. When we remove the work agenda from our conversations, we come to know and appreciate each other much better, which allows us to collaborate more effectively when we return to work.

21. **Never hide behind title, position, or authority**. These are simply artifacts the organization gives you to get work done. Don't confuse these things with your own identity. If you hide behind these things out of insecurity, it creates a barrier to inclusion.

22. **Avoid exclusive patterns of social interaction.** Assess your patterns of interaction with the members of your team. Beyond what is necessary in your role, avoid interacting with the same people on a social basis. This creates invisible social barriers and a sense of exclusion. Deliberately reach out to the members of your team for whom you may not have a natural affinity. Be democratic with your time and attention.

23. **Forbid personal attacks**. People make mistakes, fail, and often get things wrong. But they are still entitled to respect and the permission to participate. There is never a justification for a personal attack. Call out even marginal comments or behaviors that could make a person feel marginalized or disrespected.

24. **Respond to messages promptly**. In part, the timeliness of your response communicates your respect for that person. Although there are times that justify a delayed response, try to respond promptly to those who leave you inquiries. When you are consistent in your response pattern, you communicate inclusion.

25. **Control nonverbal cues**. You communicate more nonverbally than verbally. Be careful that you don't send nonverbal cues that communicate exclusion. Examples include rolling eyes, fidgeting or drumming your fingers, looking bored or away, or allowing yourself to be distracted in the middle of a conversation. Your team members will read your body language as much as they listen to what you say.

26. **Avoid self-serving references to status**. In any hierarchy, there are differences in roles and responsibilities. Those differences can also imply differences in the value and importance of individuals based on status. Be careful to avoid elitist or self-serving

references to yourself if you occupy a position that is higher in the status hierarchy. Instead, make an effort to minimize those differences and create a feeling of equality between you and other team members.

27. **Use appropriate humor as a relief valve**. When the pressure mounts and people are feeling the stress, look for ways to relieve that stress with humor. Pointing out silly or ironic things, your own mistakes and inadequacies in a humorous way can relieve pressure in a healthy way while still affirming the value of people.

28. **Ask about needs and challenges**. Your team members will often not say anything when they are experiencing a problem or challenge. At the right time, be explicit in asking your team members what needs they have or challenges they are experiencing. Sometimes those needs are job-related. Sometimes, they are more personal. People often simply need to be asked before they open up and give you the opportunity to offer your support.

29. **Ask for feedback and help.**. When you run into a problem or challenge, don't be afraid to ask others for help. This does two things: First, it acknowledges the fact that you're human and you need help. Second, gives others a legitimate opportunity to help you in a meaningful way, which always serves to strengthen your relationship. We often fail to ask for help because we are too proud or embarrassed. Don't make that mistake.

30. **Express gratitude and appreciation**. When team members perform well, express genuine gratitude and appreciation. When they try hard, but fail to meet their goals, recognize their efforts with empathy.

31. **Avoid digital addiction and overdose**. In the digital age, we're flooded with ways to connect. Some of those bring a sense and real inclusion. Others leave us feeling alone. If we connect unwisely and too frequently on social media, it can lead to harmful addiction and overdose. As yourself and the members of your team: Which connections leave you feeling depleted? Which connections leave you feeling energized with a real sense of inclusion?

32. **Reinforce inclusion daily**. The sense of inclusion that people feel on the team is fragile. It can be broken very quickly. Even when it's not broken, it will fade away with time, if it's not strengthened. The perishable nature of inclusion requires constant reinforcement. The easiest way to do this is with daily greetings and saying thank you.

33. **Conduct frequent, brief touch points**. Humans are hyper-social creatures, born to connect. Short, frequent interactions are far more effective than long but infrequent ones. It's the frequency that builds and strengthens the connection. Here's an example: If your boss approached you with these two coaching options, which one would you choose--a one-hour in one session once a month, or three 5-minute informal coaching sessions every week? Both options include 60 minutes of total coaching time per month, just different time allocations. What would you choose? The first option is a long-cycle, traditional coaching pattern, while the second a short-cycle, microcoaching pattern. We recently surveyed employees from over 50 organizations and asked this very question. 80 percent of millennials preferred the three 5-minute coaching sessions option. They

reported feeling malnourished in the coaching interactions they have with their bosses and consider the traditional pattern a contrived, check-the-box formality. Overwhelmingly, your team members will prefer frequent, brief tough points. Evaluate your own pattern of interacting with your team members. There's probably a chance for you to follow this pattern a little more closely.

Stage 2: Learner Safety

How do you make others feel safe and motivated to learn?

1. **Make learning a collaboration, not a competition.** Learning shouldn't be a divisive competition. Yes, you can create good-natured learning competitions that are fun, but don't allow the learning process to divide people and pit them against each other in unhealthy ways. If learning becomes a win/lose competition on your team, if people perceive it that way, the highly competitive people will be anxious to play, but those who don't will opt out. That can have a devastating impact on your team's overall ability to perform. Help your team understand that learning is a both an individual process and a collaborative process. Create the expectation that they have a responsibility to help their colleagues learn. A simple way to cultivate this norm on your team is to invite the members of your team to intentionally help one person learn each day. You can reinforce this expectation every time you have a team meeting. After you get some momentum and experience doing this, ask your team members to share examples of how they helped or were helped in the learning process. Remember, make learning a collaboration, not a competition.

2. **Adopt a learning mindset.** The concept of a student implies that we are learning and never arrive at a place where we have learned it all. This is the mindset we want to adopt so that we don't get arrogant or complacent in our learning. A learning mindset implies a certain humility in our attitude about learning. When you adopt this mindset, even though you may be an expert in your field, you're eager to learn from others. Some people have the opposite attitude. They develop a superiority complex and real arrogance because they are good at what they do. Isn't that irritating? Who wants to collaborate with an expert whose chief impulse is to tell the world how smart he or she is? Those are the people you don't want on your team. They want credit and they want air time. It's exhausting! Help your team members understand that although they may become skilled and develop expertise in their domains of responsibility, we are always learning and will never arrive at a place of permanent competency. As yourself these questions: Do you embrace a humble, learning mindset? Do you show an ability to learn from anyone, regardless of rank or influence? Do you model this enthusiasm for learning to your team?

3. **Assess the learning style and disposition of each person**. Each of the members of your team has a different learning style and disposition. Some are visual learners. Some like to learn alone. Some like to learn out loud. Some are self-directed. Some hate classrooms, but love to learn on the job. Your task is to understand the learning patterns of each individual on your team. You can do this by observing them and also by

interviewing them and asking them about their learning preferences. Remember, part of your stewardship as a leader is to encourage and enable the learning of each member of your team. You can't do that effectively with a one-size-fits-all factory approach. People have vastly different learning styles and dispositions. To help each member of your team accelerate his or her learning, you need to know how they learn best. Sometimes, they don't even know, so you may be on a journey of joint discovery with them. Once you find out how the members of your team learn best, help them set some learning and development goals and personalize their learning as much as you can. For example, I had a member of my team who couldn't focus long enough to get through some of the books that I had recommended that he read. Ten minutes was about as long as he could go. But I also learned that he loved video. He could really focus when he was learning from instructional videos. When I learned this, we sat down and identified some learning goals in a couple of areas and then I had him build his own video-based curriculum. He built this magnificent curriculum of carefully curated short videos. Well, do you think he was motivated to learn at that point? Here's the call to action: assess the learning style and disposition of each member of your team. Then have them personalize their own learning journey.

4. **Help people one-on-one in *their* space**. You may have some team members that are reluctant to "learn publicly" in a group setting. If you sense that reluctance, try to help those team members learn by working with them one-on-one in their space or in a neutral space that is comfortable to them. Remember, you're trying to take away the inhibition and anxiety that is so often associated with learning. Some people learn primary through social interaction. It's their source of fuel in the learning process and when you take them away from a social learning environment, they get bored and can't concentrate. Other people are just the opposite. They want quiet, focused, isolation. That's how they get into their groove or what we call flow state.

5. **Share what you are learning**. One of the most powerful ways to encourage others to learn is to share what you are learning. Share the topic, the insights, and most importantly the joy and satisfaction you have gained in the learning process. Your optimism and enthusiasm for learning is contagious.

6. **Invite your team to learn**. Some members of your team will be aggressive in their learning habits. Others will be tentative and will feel that they need to ask permission to engage. Sometimes all a person needs is an invitation to be a part of the learning process. Identify questions, problems, or challenges that you can give to your more tentative team members as learning assignments.

7. **Invite others to share their roles**. Because people take pride in what they do, it's almost always true that people like to talk about their individual roles. Invite the members of your team to explain their roles or share something they've recently done in their role and how it influences the other team members You might do this as part of a weekly meeting. This can encourage all team members to appreciate each other as well as learn something new about each role.

8. **Share past mistakes**. It's hard to learn from mistakes if a team has a culture that hides its mistakes. Take the opportunity to mention some of your mistakes, laugh at them, and

share what you learned from them. This will encourage others to be more comfortable sharing their mistakes and trying to learn from them. Talking about failure and showing vulnerability are crucial to encourage others to learn.

9. **Ask for help from those of lower status**. Find ways to ask for help from those who are lower than you in the hierarchy. This is a way for you to model humility in learning. It also gives the other person the chance to teach and be helpful which leads to increased confidence and engagement.

10. **Frame problems before you solve problems**. Teach your team to frame problems before they solve problems. When we don't do that, we often end up solving the wrong problem. Find a problem and say, "I'd like you to help me frame this problem, not solve it. I want to make sure I'm defining the problem correctly before I try to solve it."

11. **Share your personal learning goals**. Set the example by setting and sharing your own learning goals with your team. Think about technical and non-technical learning goals. Your example will often motivate other team members to set and pursue their own learning goals.

12. **Help team members set learning goals**. Some members of your team may set their own learning goals, but you will find that many will not. Individuals learn more effectively and consistently when they have set clear goals about what they want to learn. Encourage each of your team members to set concrete and time-bound learning goals. Help them think through what learning goals might be appropriate given their roles, responsibility, and goals.

13. **Reinforce learning potential**. The potential of your team to learn is unknown and unknowable. Consistently remind your team that to earn their living is to learn their living. Ask members of the team what new thing they learned during the week that they are now implementing in their work.

14. **Formulate questions**. We often think that asking the right questions is somehow easy or natural. It's not. Asking thoughtful questions requires tremendous thought and preparation. In fact, it's part of the learning process itself. The next time you tackle a problem with your team, ask them to take 10 minutes to formulate a set of questions to ask about the issue before you begin discussing the issue itself. This will accelerate the learning process for everyone.

15. **Ask questions to activate learning**. Asking a question is the activator that starts the learning process. When we ask a question, we catalyze the learning process for ourselves and those whom we ask. Encourage team members to ask meaningful questions to push their thinking, skills, and experience.

16. **Implement rotating mentoring**. Rotating mentoring is a system in which members of the team have a monthly 45-minute mentoring session with a different individual outside of the team. This provides a concentrated learning opportunity for the individual to learn from someone with a different perspective, skills, and experience.

17. **Assign action learning projects**. Assign a small group or sub-team a real and meaningful problem to solve. Provide clear objectives, timeline, resources, and ground rules for solving the problem. Have the team present their recommendations in a formal setting. Adopt the suggestions if it makes sense. Recognize those who participate in the process.

18. **Celebrate failures**. A failure is evidence that an individual is learning through trial and effort. As long as team members fail within defined limits, you should encourage this behavior. In fact, failure is not the exception; it's the way forward. We often learn more from failure than success. When a team member fails and learns from it, celebrate it. Communicate the accomplishment to the entire team. Destigmatize failure by celebrating failure.

19. **Dedicate time and resources to learning**. If you talk about the importance of learning but don't dedicate any time or resources to it, it's really not a priority. Formally allocate some budget and dedicate some time to learning. It might be online learning, collaborative team learning, on-the-job learning, individual or team learning. There's no perfect approach. Just make sure that you do it consistently.

20. **Admit your own ignorance and say "I don't know**." We all have areas of skill and knowledge where we feel comfortable and confident. When we step out of our areas of competency, we often feel insecure. It's refreshing to your team if you can confidently acknowledge your ignorance in areas that go beyond your know-how. If you gracefully acknowledge your own limitations, that will encourage others to learn without fear. Learning how to confidently say, "I don't know."

21. **Demonstrate patience and empathy**. People often stop learning when they meet a harsh, critical, indifferent, or sarcastic response in the learning process. Avoid any demeaning, belittling, or disrespectful behaviorThose response patterns increase personal vulnerability and shut off the motivation to learn. Show patience and empathy as others learn. Recognize that they will never learn on your terms, but only on their own terms.

22. **Challenge your team with hard problems**. It's essential to customize the learning process based on the needs of each individual. For team members who are confident, capable, and aggressive learners, challenge them with hard problems--problems they may have no idea how to solve. Find tough, thorny problems that you haven't been able to solve yet, and let them take a crack at solving them. Based on your priorities and the individual's capability, choose a problem that best fits the situation. Delegate the learning and then check in regularly to provide appropriate coaching and guidance.

23. **Establish a book/video/podcast club**. To create incentives for additional learning, create a book/video/podcast club and provide monetary and non-monetary incentives for team members to read books, watch videos, and listen to podcasts on topics that are relevant to the work of the team. Have team members share their insights and lessons

with the rest of the team.

24. **Incorporate a daily learning segment**. Learning doesn't have to take long. In fact, micro-learning segments can take as little as five minutes. Make it a habit to do short learning segments in your regular meetings. Rotate the assignment to teach among all team members. Have learning segments include a single-point lesson on a particular topic.

25. **Communicate a vision of potential**. People often can't see their potential when you can. Help them see what they can become if they will maintain a learning disposition of continuous learning. If they keep learning, their vision of themselves will catch up with yours.

26. **Explain formal vs. informal learning**. Most of the learning we do in life is informal. Once we get out of school, we spend very little time in structured learning environments. Help your team members understand that in the long run their personal informal learning habits will make all the difference.

27. **Model an example of taking notes.** Taking notes is perhaps the most obvious outward sign that a person is actively learning. Whether on paper or an electronic device, take notes. Capture facts, insights, and observations that you want to remember and ponder later. This habit will influence others to do the same.

28. **Remove learning obstacles.** Analyze the learning environment and situation of your team members, both individually and collectively. Identify any potential obstacles that they face in the learning process. Maybe the working environment is too noisy. Maybe a person isn't working with the right colleagues. Maybe a person needs better resources. Try to figure out how to enhance the learning conditions for each person.

29. **Embrace quality feedback**. Demonstrate a pattern of embracing quality, actionable feedback from any direction. When it comes to feedback, you should be agnostic to a person's title, position, or authority. Instead, you care about the substance of the feedback. If it's worthwhile, embrace it and let others see you do that. Of course if the feedback is not helpful, you must be gracious and appreciative to the person who gave it.

30. **Identify and share what you unlearn.** In a dynamic environment, our knowledge, skills, and experience can become obsolete. Identify the times when you see this happening to you. Point it out to others. Acknowledge that you are in a cycle of unlearning and relearning.

31. **Ask for feedback at the moment of need**. It's normal to encounter questions, problems, or challenges in the course of normal workflow. What do you do? Unless it's an obvious solution, teach your team to formulate a learning response (not an answer) to the problem and then ask a colleague to give feedback (not an answer). This habit will create a team norm of collaborative learning which increases learner safety.

32. **Provide unwavering support through the low points**. As your team members

progress through learning cycles, they will often encounter points of discouragement and low confidence. Assess these points and provide extra support to keep their morale up and their efforts moving forward. Find evidence of progress, even very small milestones, that you can point out to them, however small they may be.

33. **Journal your learning observations**. As you lead your team, you naturally observe their work patterns. Give yourself another lens to observe their learning patterns, both individually and as a team. Write down your observations. Your observations will serve as a benchmark upon which you can take steps to improve. If you maintain this habit, you will be more deliberate and purposeful in your efforts to enhance the learning patterns of your team.

34. **Don't go on educational welfare**. Some people stop learning when they leave school. And yet the most important thing you can learn in school is how to learn when you leave school. Never become dependent on an organization or other people to tell you what to learn, why, or how. Always set an example of aggressive, self-directed learning by having personal learning goals and a personal learning plan. And don't be afraid to share it.

35. **Teach the concept of learning agility**. Learning agility is the ability to learn at or above the speed of change. If you teach, emphasize, and model this concept, you gradually reduce the sense of risk your team members feel when they engage in the learning process. Ultimately, your team members must be convinced that not taking learning risks is, in fact, a greater risk than taking them because standing still is career suicide.

Stage 3: Contributor Safety

How do you make others feel safe enough to contribute and make a difference?

1. **Rotate the conducting of meetings**. One of the most powerful ways to empower others to contribute is by allowing them to conduct team meetings. Traditionally, the leader conducts the meeting, but if you rotate that assignment, your team members will gain greater confidence to contribute. Simply giving them the assignment acknowledges their ability to do the job. Of course you will need to help them prepare the agenda and coach them through the process.

2. **Clarify roles**. More complexity requires greater teamwork, and yet more role ambiguity causes people to make assumptions about how to contribute. Clarify roles at the beginning to reduce both anxiety and ambiguity. You will need to do this periodically to ensure role clarity.

3. **Recognize accomplishment**. Certainly accomplishment is its own reward, but receiving genuine recognition from your peers makes it all the sweeter. As a leader, recognize the successes of your team quickly. Never delay and never resent the opportunity. the successes of others and show genuine excitement for their accomplishments.

4. **Don't correct with anger, blame, or shame**. Things won't always go right. People make mistakes, and sometimes those mistakes are due to complacency and carelessness. Even in that situation, don't correct with anger, blame, or shame. Any kind of public ridicule is off limits. Instead, coach the person to see his or her mistakes and help them take responsibility for them. Even candid, corrective feedback can be given respectfully.

5. **Identify stall points.** There are times when your team members don't know what to do or how to proceed, and they may be embarrassed to ask what to do. Try to anticipate and identify when this happens. Rather than making them feel poorly about it, engage with them, ask them what they think the next steps should be. Make it safe for them to be in this stalled situation.

6. **Celebrate small wins.** Small wins increase confidence and build momentum. When your team members see a series of small wins, it creates a sense of forward motion. Ultimate success may be a way off, but small wins represent success at intervals and progress toward your goal. It's the small wins that fuel the team members' efforts to continue contributing at a high level.

7. **Shift from tell to ask.** A leader's coaching continuum ranges from telling at one end to asking at the other. A good leader uses the entire continuum. Too much telling breeds dependency and learned helplessness. Shift as much as you can to the ask end. Lead through questions more than answers.

8. **Share your values.** Your values define you and what's important to you. They always define the way you want to work. Share your values with your team and have them share theirs with you. This is the first important step in defining the ground rules and terms of engagement for a team.

9. **Share your workstyle and communication preferences.** Beyond your values, share your workstyle and communication preferences with your team. Have your team members share theirs as well. We each have a different workstyle and communication preferences based on our individual personalities. Most of these styles and preferences aren't wrong; they are just different. The better you understand the styles and preferences of your team members, the more effectively you'll be able to work together.

10. **Set ground rules.** After sharing your values, set practical terms of engagement with your team tied to your values. Once team members know the ground rules, they will be more likely to engage because they know what's expected.

11. **Create conditions for peak engagement**. We've all had peak engagement experiences in professional life, times when we're in the groove and doing our best work. When did this happen to you? Share this with your team. Have them share their peak engagement experiences with each other. As you try to create peak engagement conditions for each other, it will foster greater contribution by team members.

12. **Align work with passion**. Passion is an intense desire or enthusiasm for something. Where do you find passion in what you do? Have your team members share the sources of their passion. To increase and sustain contribution, try to make work assignments that align with the individual passions of your team members.

13. **Shape the experience**. There are of course limits and constraints, but help shape the team experience for each member as much as you can. Customize, personalize, and tailor the experiences based on the preferences of the individual. There are real limits, but there are often neglected opportunities to shape work and worklife to boost contribution.

14. **Give stretch assignments**. Move your people out of their comfort zones. We build more capacity to contribute when we're stretched and out of our comfort zones. Of course you can stretch too much and then it becomes destructive. But stretching is the way that we grow and develop. Give your team members stretch assignments, but so that the exhilaration outweighs the discomfort.

15. **Avoid boredom and burnout**. Boredom and burnout are the two ends of the engagement spectrum. Both are destructive and unsustainable. As a leader, it's your job to monitor the contribution of each of your team members and help them avoid both boredom and burnout. High and sustainable contribution is to be found in the middle of

the spectrum where team members can work hard, reap the rewards, and find renewal in the process.

16. **Distinguish ability vs. motivation problems.** When contribution begins to lag, your first task is to understand why. As you do your root cause analysis, your first question should be: Is this an ability problem or a motivation problem? The corrective action for an ability problem is very different from that of a motivation problem. Ability problems require increased skills, knowledge, and experience. Motivation problems require understanding, confidence, self-efficacy, and accountability. If you don't know the root of the problem, you may well address it in the wrong way.

17. **Own your own contribution**. Teach the members of your team that they have primary responsibility for their own contribution. Emphasize that you will do everything in your power to provide direction, resources, and support, but your role is secondary. Help them understand that each team member has three choices when it comes to contribution: (1) Accept what you've been given, (2) Change and improve what you've been given, (3) Leave what you've been given. These three choices are always available.

18. **Help others see their strengths**. Many team members deliver mediocre performance because they don't realize their strengths. They don't know themselves. When someone points out their contribution and strengths, they're shocked and accelerate to a higher level of performance. Do that. Identify the hidden or undervalued strengths that your team members have and bring them to their attention. Ignite the desire to contribute more.

19. **Give people the why**. Research shows that the strongest driver of engagement and performance is when we find meaning and purpose in the work we do. Team members often have a hard time connecting the work they are doing with a larger and more significant purpose. Help them find the deeper why about what they do. Help them understand that they are contributing to something significant that goes beyond self.

20. **Paint the vision.** When you create a vision for your team, you're creating the deep and sustained why. A vision is a portrait of the future, a seedling of reality, a destination that has not yet been achieved. A compelling vision can create enormous forces of attraction to that future state. It provides excitement, enthusiasm, and line-of-sight understanding that connects our personal contribution with a desired end state.

21. **Keep focused with tradeoffs**. If your team is chasing too many priorities, it will lose it's steam and desire to contribute. Teams that lack a clear focus become confused and dilute their efforts. Eventually, team members become disillusioned, disengage, and then quit. Your job is to keep the team focused by saying no to other options and priorities. Remember, your success is based on the intelligent allocation of scarce resources. You can only protect your team's focus by making these important tradeoffs.

22. **Remove a sense of entitlement.** Ironically, perhaps, the most entitled team members are generally not contributing all they could. Their sense of entitlement gets in the way and leads them to believe that others should be doing more for them than the other way

around. Implant in the minds of your team members that we owe each other psychological safety, but there is no such thing as job security or entitlement to other perks in the 21st century.

23. **Make the team customer-centric**. Every team has a customer--some individual, group, stakeholder, or market whom they serve. When a team loses sight of its customer, it often becomes careless, jaded, cynical, and loses pride in its work and contribution. Keep the customer in front of the team. Communicate and collaborate with the customer's goals and satisfaction in mind.

24. **Let them do it their way.** Human beings want to make a difference. That's a basic human need, but they also want to make a difference in their own unique way. They want autonomy. Delegate with clear expectations and parameters and then get out of the way. Don't go away because they will still need feedback, encouragement, and even correction along the way. As you manage risk prudently, allow your team members the latitude, creativity, and independence to approach things as they see fit. If you're too paternalistic, if you micro-manage them, you will extinguish their motivation to contribute.

25. **Measure performance**. Human beings are naturally motivated to improve, but when our contributions are not measured we get discouraged or lose interest in what we're doing. Make sure you have meaningful metrics for the areas of contribution that really matter. At the same time, you can discourage your team if you're measuring too many things, which causes you to lose a sense of priority. It's never true that every measurement is equally important, so identify and prioritize your key performance indicators.

26. **Approach failure with curiosity rather than criticism**. When performance falters, it means our inputs are not producing the outputs we expected. Something is wrong in what we thought the cause and effect relationship would be. When this happens, approach your team members with curiosity rather than criticism. Engage them in a root cause analysis. This will often diffuse the stress and emotional tension that often surrounds poor performance.

27. **Clarify the decision-making process**. There are three basic ways to make a decision with a team: (1) Unilateral: The team leader makes it without anyone's input. (2) Collaborative: The team leader enlists the feedback of the team members but makes the final decision. (3) Consensus: The team leader distributes decision-making authority to each member of the team. The team makes a decision when each member can agree with a certain course of action. Option one is dangerous and option two is inefficient, so most teams operate based on a collaborative decision-making model. Ensure that your team members understand their roles in the decision-making process so they know how to contribute appropriately and confidently.

28. **Compliment participation from quiet team members**. Somet team members are less comfortable participating in a formal group setting. And yet the team needs their real-time input to solve problems and create solutions. The magic often happens in the moment. When those who are less inclined to give public input do, compliment and encourage that behavior. Don't overdo it to bring an uncomfortable level of attention to them, but don't ignore the chance to thank and acknowledge them. It's often helpful to

give them private feedback after a meeting to reinforce the behavior.

29. **Avoid shutdown statements**. Some team leaders use statements such as, "Bad idea," "Nice try," or "I told you so." Those statements are borne of ego and insecurity and quickly trigger the self-censoring instinct of team members. Avoid any statement that would shut down rather than draw out the discretionary effort of your team members.

30. **Report your own mistakes and errors**. It seems like an unnatural act to voluntarily report your own mistakes and errors, but the leaders that do earn deep trust with their teams and discourage team members from hiding errors. We all make mistakes and commit errors in the course of doing our jobs. The leaders who have the courage to share their mistakes are simply acknowledging what we all know--that humans make mistakes. The more a team follows this behavior, the faster it corrects mistakes and increases its contribution.

31. **Ask people what they think.** It may be true that the four most beautiful works you can ask a team member are, "What do you think?" Those four simple words invite contribution and increase confidence in the process. Never use these words gratuitously, when you don't really mean it. At the same time, don't move to a decision or action without asking, even when you think you know the right answer.

32. **Check skills and resources.** For your team members to contribute the way you expect, they will need the skills and resources to do the job. Remember that it's your job to ensure that they can do their job. This means that you will need to check in on them regularly. Sometimes, team members don't have the skills or resources to do the job when there's a ready solution to solve the problem.

33. **Accept bad news**. Bad news is part of the experience of every team. Show your team that you want to hear bad news because it's a measure of performance, and performance can't improve until we know and accept where we are today. You may be disappointed, but express appreciation to those who bring bad news.

34. **Reward those who accept additional responsibility.** To take on additional responsibility always means the performance of more work and the absorption of more stress. But the person that does it also has the opportunity to make a greater contribution. Praise and reward your team members who willingly step up to take on more responsibility. Recognize when they are taking on too much and give them opportunities to rest and renew.

35. **Create outcome accountability.** Accountability happens on three levels: (1) task level, (2) process or project level, and (3) outcome level. There's a natural progression from the first to the second levels, and from the second to the third levels. Create a cultural expectation on your team that you would like team members to move to outcome accountability, a place where they have maximum autonomy and ownership for what they do, how they do it, and the results they get.

36. **Teach the compounding principle**. Often your team members may not think their contributions are amounting to anything. Help them understand that the right efforts

directed in the right direction create a compounding effect over time. Big contributions take time, and often you can't recognize their effects early on. Praise their consistent efforts, especially when there are no visible signs of success. In the end, the little things become the big things. Delayed gratification pays off.
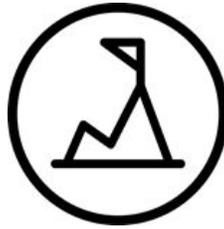
Stage 4: Challenger Safety

How do you make others feel safe enough to challenge the status quo, innovate, and make things better?

1. **Take your finger off the fear button**. Fear triggers the self-censoring instinct and causes people to retreat into silence and personal risk management. When a leader uses fear, it's normally a punitive response borne of frustration and insecurity. More importantly, it's an abdication of leadership.

2. **Assign dissent**. If you assign specific members of your team to challenge a course of action or find flaws in a proposed decision, you remove much of the individual's personal risk and replace it with institutional permission. This allows intellectual bravery to become the norm rather than the exception. Be explicit in telling the members of your team that you have given them a license to disagree and you expect them to use it.

3. **Encourage others to think beyond their roles**. Inviting your people to venture out of their tactical and functional silos creates more opportunity for divergent thinking, allowing them to connect things that aren't normally connected. Of course you must manage the process carefully and discern when constructive dissent is giving way to destructive derailment.

4. **Respond constructively to disruptive ideas and bad news**. Your positive emotional response to disruptive ideas and bad news is a clear signal that you have a high tolerance for candor and will protect your people in their right to dissent.

5. **When you reject feedback, explain why**. When you reject a team member's input or suggestion, explain why you didn't adopt it . Your considerate response will embolden the individual to continue giving feedback.

6. **Weigh in last**. Speaking first when you hold positional power softly censors your team. Listen carefully, acknowledge the contributions of others, and then register your point of view.

7. **Display no pride of authorship.** Make it clear to your team that your ideas are no better than anyone else's. Sometimes team members are too deferential to the ideas of the leader because he or she is the leader. Don't let that happen, and don't overvalue your own ideas. Welcome criticism of your own ideas. Reinforce the fact that just because you are the team leader doesn't make suggestions inherently superior. In fact, admit that many of your own ideas in the past have led nowhere.

8. **Model vulnerability**. Remember that vulnerability is exposing yourself to the possibility of harm or loss. If you model and reinforce a pattern of vulnerability, others will do the same.

9. **Reward vulnerability.** Remember, challenger safety must project the individual and the team at the highest point of personal and interpersonal vulnerability. Challenger safety is about generating and then harnessing diverse perspectives and even disagreement without emotional escalation and destructive social friction. If you reward a pattern of vulnerability to challenge the status quo, that will become the norm. Use your positional power to escort them through the vulnerability by encouraging them.

10. **Reward shots on goal.** This means rewarding your team members with recognition and enthusiasm when they attempt to challenge the status quo. Not all ideas and suggestions will have merit, but if you encourage the attempts (shots on goals), those shots will increase and you will be more likely to have some successful challenges (goals) that add value and move the team forward.

11. **Mandate a no-interruption rule**. As the leader, you must model and mandate a respectful and collaborative temperament and set of behaviors to make them everyday behaviors. Mandate a non-interruption rule in group discussions. That rule will empower team members with the respect and permission they need to challenge the status quo.

12. **Define what is in and out of scope**. Define what can and should be challenged based on the team's defined scope of activity. This will avoid needless frustration that results when team members challenge out-of-scope or irrelevant issues.

13. **Create diverse teams**. Assign diverse people with diverse perspectives to work together on assigned projects. Diverse teams possess cognitive diversity and naturally produce divergent thinking. If you don't have a diverse team, take inventory of the demographic and psychographic attributes of your team today. Identify your gaps and then deliberately shape your selection and hiring strategy to fill the gaps.

14. **Break before breakdowns**. When interpersonal dynamics start breaking down, immediately take a break. Don't allow the social friction, which is the destructive force, shut down the intellectual friction, which is the destructive force. When the team gets tired, it's easy for social friction to increase. Take a break when you see this happen. Refresh the team before you come back together.

15. **Identify and avoid defensive routines**. Team members often get defensive when their ideas are challenged. Teach team members the concept of a defensive routine. These are the things we do and say to avoid potential threats and embarrassment. Gain the team's permission to identify defensive routines in team members at the earliest opportunity. Invite all team members to do the same. This will help the team unlearn defensive routines and activate new behaviors that promote a higher tolerance for candor.

16. **Ask for bad news**. This may seem counter-intuitive, but asking for bad news is a way of

speeding up the process of identifying areas for experimentation and innovation. When there's bad news, it allows us to challenge the status quo more easily because something is already broken or not working right.

17. **Tee up challenge-the-status-quo questions**. Ask your team one challenge-the-status-quo question at the end of the day and ask them to ponder that question with the expectation to discuss it the next day. This practice helps establish a norm, pattern, and expectation of challenging the status quo. Hold a short meeting the next day and have each person share his or her thoughts.

18. **Praise quantity over quality in brainstorming**. Brainstorming research clearly shows that the most fruitful approach to brainstorming is to generate as many ideas rather than focusing on the quality of those ideas. In the end, unconstrained thinking is the vehicle to the best solutions. When you tackle an issue for brainstorming, don't limit or constrain the process.

19. **Challenge your own decisions**. Leaders make decisions that are right today and then wrong tomorrow. At other times, we simply make the wrong decisions, period. Openly challenge and discuss some of the decisions that you have made in the past to demonstrate that even correct decisions aren't correct forever. Help your team know that you are willing to revisit old decisions, courses of action, and points of view.

20. **Look for R.O.T.** Everything we do eventually becomes obsolete. Every source of competitive advantage we have is temporary. It's like ice. The only question is the rate of the melt. Engage your team to look at the way you do things. Identify anything that is redundant, obsolete, or trivial (R.O.T.). Sources of R.O.T. represent the low-hanging fruit of the status quo that needs to be dismantled.

21. **Teach deliberate vs. emergent strategy**. Deliberate strategy is the formal, long-term strategy that we are all familiar with. But when that deliberate strategy meets reality, it's always wrong. The only question is: how much? Emergent strategy, on the other hand, is the process of adapting your strategy real-time in the context of a dynamic environment. Lead a discussion in which you teach these concepts and then identify where your deliberate strategy is not working in the context of current reality.

22. **Model the art of disagreement.** Having challenger safety means that the members of your team can debate issues on their merits and find the best one without creating fear and interpersonal conflict. It's your job to teach them how to have marvelous disagreement to create an idea meritocracy. Master the emotional and interpersonal art of disagreeing in a warm and friendly way so others don't take offense. Maintain a respectful body posture while avoiding curt, abrupt, and abrasive language and overly aggressive or sarcastic body language. If you keep practicing this skill, your team will develop an incredibly high tolerance for candor.

23. **Share challenge experiences**. You can't remove all of the risk associated with challenging the status quo, but you can eliminate much of it simply by sharing your own successful challenge experiences. These are the times when you took a personal risk and challenged the status quo yourself. Identify the best examples from your

professional life and share them with your team at opportune times.

24. **Identify tangible and intangible sources of value**. When we challenge the status quo, it often means we have an idea about how to create more value. Help your team understand that there are two categories of value--tangible and intangible. Tangible value might come in the form of design, comfort, durability, or ease of use. Intangible value might come in the form of prestige, security, or reputation. Encourage your team to challenge the status quo with specific dimensions of value in mind so they can be more detailed and thorough in their thinking.

25. **Recognize patterns**. Before we can challenge the status quo with a credible idea or suggestion, we need to identify a pattern of cause and effect that we think we can improve. Teach the members of your team that they are in the pattern-recognition business. It's their job to collect and analyze data--both hard and soft--to understand underlying patterns. Results are simply a result of cause and effect relationships, but with many variables at work, there's more complexity.

26. **Put an hypothesis on the table**. Invite the members of your team to bring hypotheses to the table. A hypothesis is a proposed explanation about why things are the way they are. When you use the concept of a hypothesis, you naturally feel less fear and more objectivity in what you're doing. You're not as worried about being wrong. You can always say, "Well, it's a hypothesis. I could be wrong." This is a healthy, apolitical way of putting an idea or challenge on the table.

27. **Protect your team from groupthink**. When team members start to think alike, we call that groupthink. Groupthink is a barrier when it comes to creating an environment that can incubate innovation. Team members sometimes become more concerned about fitting in with the conventional thinking of the group instead of performing the hard labor of critical thinking. Get into the habit of asking your team to disagree with you. Say, "I don't want an echo chamber. What's another way to think about this."

28. **Scan the environment for adaptive challenges**. Teams and organizations have to respond to three kinds of adaptive challenges: (1) Opportunities, (2) Threats, (3) and Crises. Opportunities offer potential benefit. Threats offer potential harm. Crises offer certain harm. It should be the default setting of the team to scan the external competitive environment and internal performance environment for adaptive challenges on a regular basis. Once you identify your adaptive challenges, ask the team how we can challenge and disrupt ourselves to respond to each one.

29. **Identify inflection points**. An inflection point is a point on a curve in which it changes direction. It's a turning point. Teams have the responsibility to identify inflection points that might have an impact on what they do. But that's not all. Every team has three-step responsibility for an inflection point: (1) Identify, (2) Interpret, (3) Respond. Lead your team in a discussion to ask: What is beginning to change? What does it mean to us? What should we do about it?

30. **Engage in recombination**. Challenges to the status quo often come as the natural result of connecting things that we don't normally connect. It's a trial and error process

that requires a lot of iteration. For example, who thought that chocolate and peanut butter would go together? The process of connecting things over and over is called recombination. Hold a recombination session in which you take one thing and try to combine it with a host of other things that you wouldn't normally think of connecting. Try some outlandish combinations just to see what happens.

31. **Hold a "do-nothing scenario" session**. To put the status quo to the test, bring your team together and hold a do-nothing scenario in which they think through the consequences of preserving the status quo instead of changing it. Have them think through both planned intended and proposed unintended consequences in both the short term and long term. This often results in a realization that keeping the status quo is a higher risk than changing it.

32. **Identify your status quo bias**. A status quo bias is a bias that favors anything that protects the status quo because we believe that we are doing things in the right and best way. When our status quo bias is strong, we stop looking for ways to improve things. We focus on preserving instead of disturbing. We cultivate a "not invented here" mentality. Good enough becomes an acceptable option. As your team, "What would you do if there were no status quo and we could start fresh? How would you do it?

33. **Come with dumb questions and raggedy solutions**. You've heard leaders say, "Don't come to me with questions. Come to me with solutions." That's nonsense. Encourage your team to come to you with unrefined thinking. Mature ideas aren't born that way. We need time and we need each other to help us sharpen our questions and potential solutions. Allow your people to put half-baked thinking in front of you and each other. Give place for the ad hoc, haphazard, anecdotal, and impressionistic. If you expect polished, tested, and ready-for-prime time questions and solutions, be prepared to wait a long time.

34. **Respect local knowledge**. When you talk to one of your team members, view them as the expert. Recognize that in their individual role, they have access to local knowledge--the first-line information that comes to us in context through actual experience and relationships. Respect that local knowledge and be willing to solicit and circulate it throughout the team. That's how you increase the velocity of information on your team and increase the chance that somebody will see an opportunity to challenge the status quo.

35. **Bring in outsiders**. To deliberately rattle and disrupt your team, bring in outsiders to present alternative ideas and thinking. It's one thing to have diversity of thought within your team, but it's still typically within a narrow range. Bringing in outsiders can recharge your team with energy and fresh thinking. It can explode your assumptions and elevate your vision. It can push out the limits of what you believe is possible.

36. **Follow the disruption question sequence**. An effective way to challenge the status quo is to use the disruption question sequence. Begin with a "why?" question: Why do we do it this way? Move to a "what if?" question: What if we tried this. Finally, end with a "how?" question? How could we do that? Model and teach the members of your team to implement this three-question process, which is the primary driver of disruptive and

innovative thinking.