

BUSINESS IN THE COMMUNITY

GUIDE

CREATING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AT WORK

An Employer's Guide

Sponsored by

Amey

Contents

03
Foreword

05
Introduction

06
What is psychological safety

10
Why we need psychological safety: what the research tells us

12
Barriers to creating psychological safety

14
Barriers in the contemporary workplace

17
How to create psychological safety

26
Learnings from our members

27
Reflection on impact

28
Conclusion

29
References

Foreword

Amey

Psychological safety is the foundation on which great teams are built. It is the shared belief that we can speak up, ask questions, raise concerns, admit mistakes, and offer ideas without fear of embarrassment, blame, or punishment. When it is present, people bring their whole selves to work. When it is absent, even the most talented teams hold back.

At Amey, we keep critical infrastructure running, serve communities, and make decisions that have real consequences for safety, service, and one another. That kind of work demands more than technical excellence. It demands an environment where every voice counts, where the quietest person in the room feels able to contribute as much as the loudest, and where those voices support and look out for one another, and where challenge is welcomed as a sign of care rather than dissent.

This is not about being comfortable all the time. Psychological safety and high performance go hand in hand. The goal is not to lower the bar, but to create the conditions in which people feel safe enough to be candid, learn out loud, and recover well when things don't go according to plan. Some of our most important conversations are the difficult ones, and they only happen when people trust that honesty will be met with respect.

Building and developing this culture is everyone's responsibility, but it begins with how we lead and how we treat each other day to day. It lives in the small moments: it is with the manager who responds to a mistake with curiosity rather than blame, the colleague who makes space for a different view, the team that genuinely wants to hear what isn't working.

This guide offers practical ways to notice, build, and strengthen psychological safety in your own team. I encourage you to use it, to reflect on it, and to make it your own.

At Amey we believe that the strength of our organisation has always rested on its people. Creating the conditions for them to thrive is one of the most important things we can do.



Emma Charlton
Business Director
Amey

Business in the Community

Business in the Community (BITC) exists to mobilise employers to create healthier workplaces and communities, recognising that responsible business has a vital role to play in strengthening both communities and the cultures people experience at work. Psychological safety is central to that ambition. When people feel able to ask questions, share ideas, raise concerns, and learn from mistakes without fear of blame or embarrassment, they are more likely to contribute fully, support one another, and help their organisations and communities thrive.

Creating team cultures where people can ask questions, constructively challenge ideas and share when things have not gone to plan is not only a leadership responsibility; it is shaped by everyday behaviours at every level of an organisation. Senior leaders set the tone, managers create the conditions, and employees influence whether those conditions are lived in practice. At BITC, we want to help employers and employees understand psychological safety not as a buzzword or a catch-all solution to people and culture challenges, but as a practical set of behaviours that can support learning, development, and stronger performance across the whole business.

This guide brings together research, BITC insight and real business experience from Amey to explain why psychologically safe teams matter, what can get in the way of creating them, and how organisations can take practical action. It is designed for employers who want to build healthier, higher-performing workplaces, and for employees at every level who want to understand the part they can play in creating teams where people feel able to contribute, challenge, and thrive.



Amy Butterworth
Inclusion and Wellbeing Director
Business in the Community

Introduction

In today's fast-paced and constantly evolving workplace, organisations are under growing pressure to perform, adapt, and innovate, to keep up with rapidly increasing demands. At the heart of all this are people and teams who need to collaborate effectively, share ideas, and respond to challenges in real time, whilst feeling supported by their workplace to do so. Yet too often, employees hold back from reaching their potential: they hesitate to ask questions, admit mistakes, or challenge decisions, not because they lack capability, but because they do not feel safe to do so.

This is why psychological safety has become an increasingly critical focus for organisations. The term 'psychological safety' can be dismissed as jargon, but at its core, it is about creating an environment where people feel able to speak up, contribute, and take appropriate risks without fear of embarrassment, punishment, or being ignored. It is not about lowering standards or avoiding accountability; rather, it is about enabling open dialogue, continuous learning, and better decision-making, all vital principles for an efficient and productive workplace.

The growing body of research in this field makes a compelling case: workplaces with higher levels of psychological safety see stronger team performance, greater engagement, improved knowledge sharing, and higher levels of innovation. At the same time, evidence shows that many employees still do not feel comfortable expressing themselves at work, highlighting a significant gap between aspiration and reality. Not only this, but in 2022, research by Business in the Community (BITC) highlighted that leading causes of work-related mental health problems were excessive pressure, targets, and workload.[i] BITC will outline in this guide how psychological safety can help alleviate those pressures through enabling people to ask for help, discuss concerns, challenge inefficient processes and so on. So not only can psychological safety help to create higher-performing teams, but also healthier teams.

For organisations looking to thrive in an increasingly complex world of work, psychological safety is no longer a "nice to have"; it is a fundamental enabler of both wellbeing and performance. BITC, in partnership with Amey, has developed this guide on what psychological safety is, why it matters, and how organisations can begin to build it into everyday practice.

Acknowledgements

BITC would like to thank Amey for sponsoring and contributing to this guide, along with our BITC members who have shared insights and experiences to help us identify current workplace challenges across the UK workforce and practical actions to develop more psychologically safe workplaces.

What is psychological safety?

1954

Psychological safety is a concept that has been around since the 1950s, originally coined by humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers to describe a sense of **'unconditional worth'** necessary for creativity and growth, in an environment **free from external judgment**.[ii]

1965

Since then, it has been defined by Edgar Schein and Warren Bennis in 1965 as **an atmosphere that reduces anxiety** about acceptance and personal value.

1982

And then by W. Edwards Deming in 1982 as **driving out the fear of risk** so that people can work more effectively.

1999

These early explanations of psychological safety all focused on the individual state of psychological safety, which has since shifted since Amy Edmondson published her research into psychological safety, learning behaviour, and team performance in 1999.[iii] Since then, we now understand psychological safety as a **team state** which predicts learning behaviours and team performance, through the shared belief that **the team is safe to take risks**, which may enhance performance.

In a nutshell: psychological safety is about people feeling valued to make contributions to the team and take risks to increase performance, without the fear of negative consequences on their career.

Or as Amy Edmondson would put it ***"a blend of trust, respect for each other's competence, and caring about each other as people".***

Importantly, psychological safety is not about overlooking mistakes, tolerating harmful workplace behaviour, avoiding conflict, providing job security, or the relationship between two people. Performance and behaviour can still be managed whilst creating an environment in which people can feel confident to share appropriate contributions, ask questions and share lessons learned from mistakes.

Psychological safety and high standards are not opposites

- Harvard Business Institute.[iv]

Let's talk about risks: By 'taking risks', we are talking about having the confidence to challenge norms or current ways of working, to improve team performance or customer experience. It is important that risks taken do not compromise any elements of health and safety.

An example of taking a risk in this sense would be a team member suggesting using short video walkthroughs of completed building work to explain progress and quality to potential customers, instead of the usual process of inviting them onto an active site. This is a risk in that it challenges the tried and tested way of working with clients, has not been done before, and is uncertain about how it will be received. However, it may save time for customers and help them understand the work more easily, improving confidence and sales. This does not put anyone at risk of harm.



Four dimensions of psychological safety

When writing about psychological safety, Timothy R. Clarke developed the idea of four stages[v] in which psychological safety shows up for team members:

- **Inclusion safety:** I feel accepted as I am and belong to the team.
- **Learner safety:** I can ask questions, give and receive feedback, experiment, and make mistakes.
- **Contributor safety:** I can use my skills, knowledge, and abilities to make a meaningful contribution, without fear of embarrassment or being shut down.
- **Challenger safety:** I can speak up and challenge the status quo if I see an opportunity or a risk and suggest significant changes.

Analysis of this model suggests that these stages are not strictly linear (going from inclusion to challenger safety) but instead represent different dimensions of psychological safety that people may experience to varying degrees. For example, a team member may feel confident sharing their thoughts on a topic, but may fear asking questions or giving feedback to others out of fear of retribution.[vi] Ideally, team members would experience all four levels of psychological safety at once to enable a more productive and high-performing environment.



Reflection

How do the four dimensions of psychological safety show up in your team?

Inclusion safety:

- Who speaks least in our team, and why might that be?
- How do I actively demonstrate respect for different identities and perspectives?
- Are there subtle behaviours (interruptions, inside jokes, cliques) that might exclude others?

Learner safety:

- Do team members regularly ask questions, or do they stay quiet?
- When did I last ask for feedback from my team and genuinely act on it?
- Are we openly discussing what didn't work, as well as what did?

Contributor safety:

- When someone shares an idea, how do I respond? Do I build on it or dismiss it?
- Are decisions dominated by a few voices?
- How do I ensure quieter team members are heard?

Challenger safety:

- Do team members challenge decisions respectfully, or avoid conflict?
- Do we have mechanisms to challenge ideas before they become decisions?
- Are we mistaking silence for agreement?

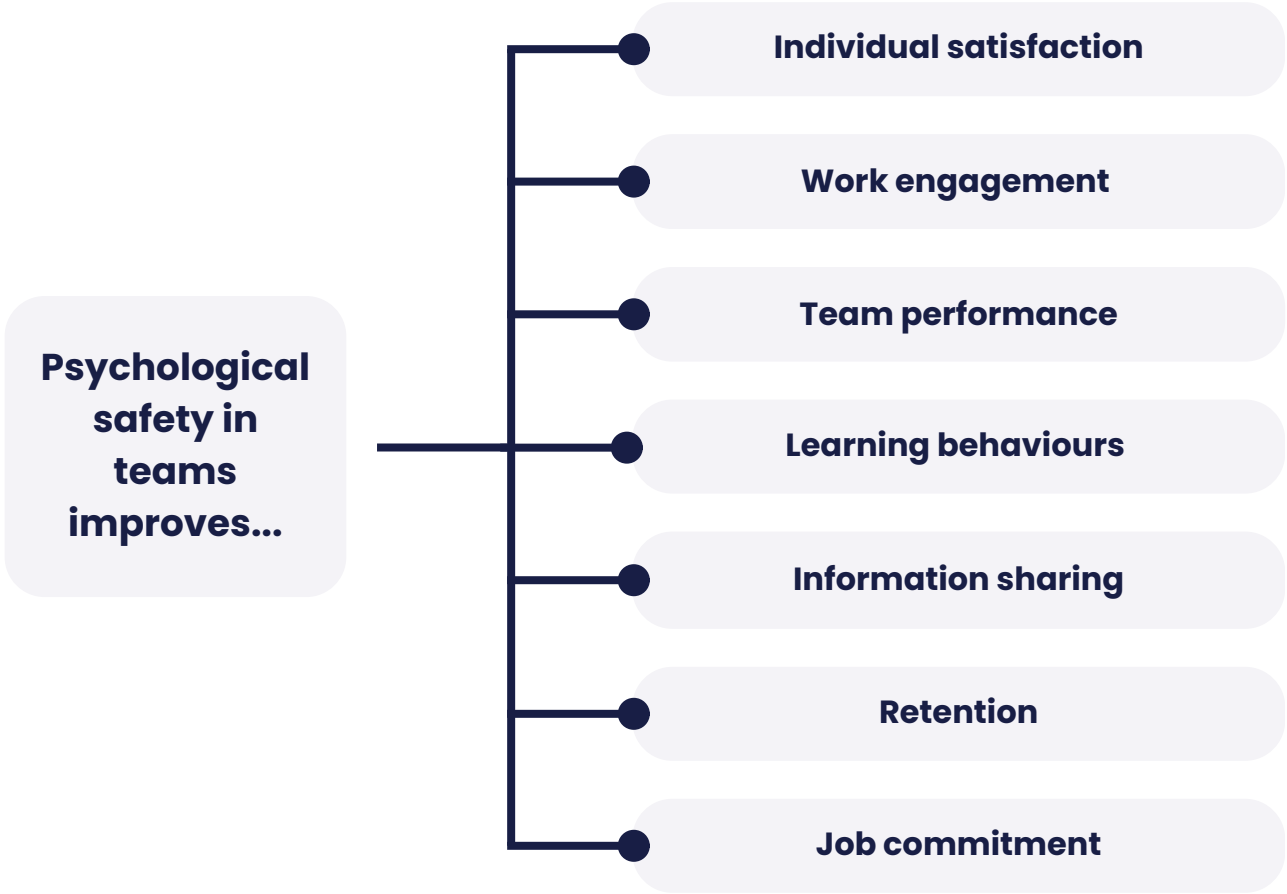
If you are a manager or a member of a team, reflect on these questions and think about how you may make tweaks to your ways of working in response.

Why we need psychological safety: what the research tells us

Most workplaces have something in common: they want to work efficiently, have high-performing teams, and boost productivity. It's likely that most employees also have something in common: wanting to feel valued, respected, and to maintain a sense of security even when they make mistakes.

This is where the need for psychological safety comes in. Amy Edmondson's research[vii] outlines that **psychological safety is significantly correlated to team learning behaviour (seeking feedback and discussing errors) and team performance** i.e. when people feel able to ask questions, admit mistakes, share their ideas, and take risks in solving problems, the team's performance improves.*

Research by Frazier et al.[viii] also found that higher levels of psychological safety were associated with higher levels of:



** Performance measures included the team meeting or exceeding customers' expectations; the team doing superb work; and the team continually improving.*

Despite the benefits employers can gain from ensuring trust, respect, and care are ingrained into team culture, recent research from Mental Health First Aid England highlights that[ix]:

- 49% of employees do not feel comfortable expressing their needs at work
- 35% do not feel safe asking for help
- 15% say they have made preventable mistakes because they felt unsafe speaking up.

These findings tell us there is still work to do to create supportive working environments consistently across the UK workforce.

Impacts on young people

While psychological safety affects employees across all age groups, it appears to have a disproportionate impact on those aged 18-24[x]:

- 31% have considered leaving their role because they do not feel psychologically safe
- 29% withheld honest feedback from their manager (compared to 13% of employees of 55)
- 78% feel demotivated due to a lack of psychological safety (compared to 50% of older employees)
- 25% are uncomfortable discussing mistakes openly at work (compared to 12% of over 55-year-olds)

These findings are particularly significant in the context of rising numbers of young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET)[xi] and pose an important question: could psychological safety have a role to play?

*The Workwell Self-Assessment Tool is a survey whereby representatives of organisations rank their levels of maturity against different elements of workplace wellbeing and receive a benchmark report.

When it comes to psychological safety, there's much to embrace. Organisations that foster psychological safety benefit from improved employee engagement, reduced turnover and heightened productivity.

For knowledge work to flourish, the workplace must be one where people feel able to share their knowledge! This means sharing concerns, questions, mistakes, and half-formed ideas.

– Amy C. Edmondson

Barriers to creating psychological safety

Creating psychological safety is not something that can be created overnight, and whilst the concept might seem quite simple, it does require some work.

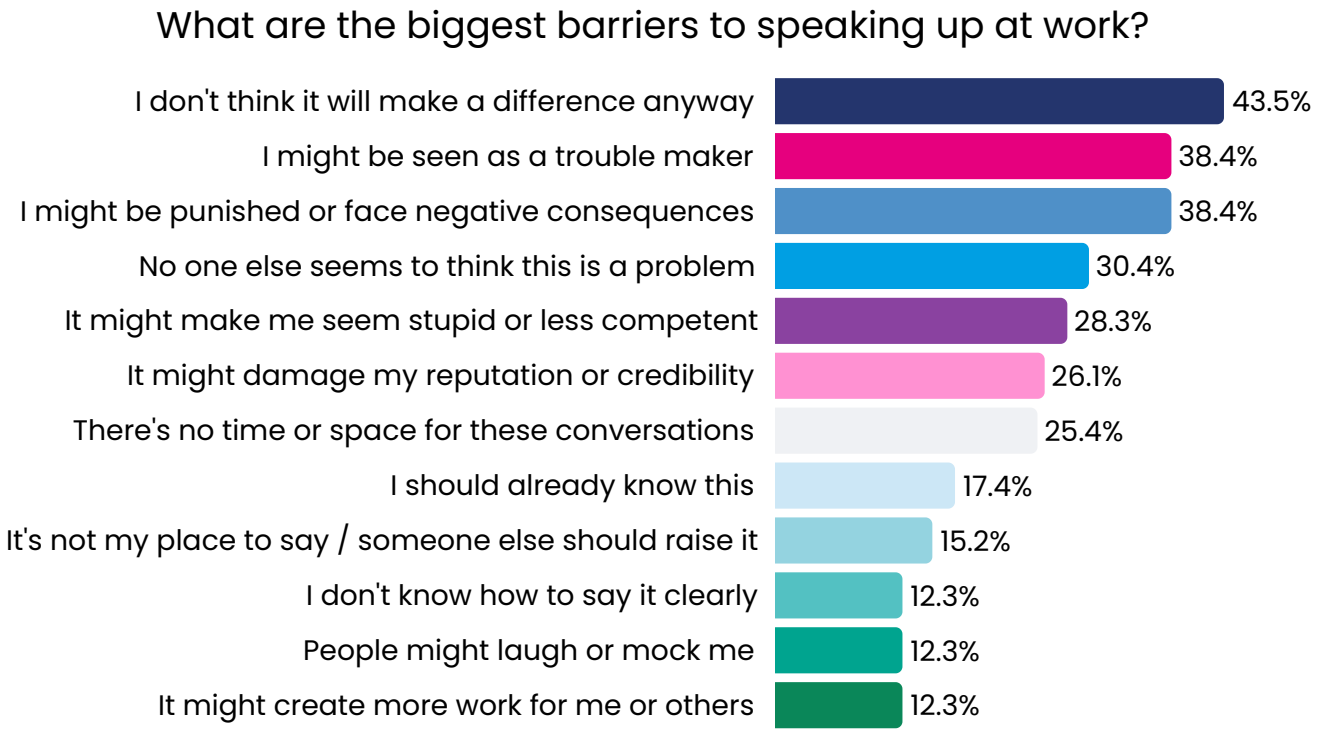
We know from Timothy Clarke's 4 Stages of Psychological Safety that feeling included in the team is one of the key foundations to developing psychological safety. However, BITC's insights from the Workwell Self-Assessment Tool* highlight that 'inclusive culture' is, on average, the lowest-scoring area of the seven elements of the Workwell Model, across UK organisations.

Without individuals feeling valued and respected as an important member of the team, they may feel less willing to contribute ideas, ask questions, and challenge ways of working. This is explored further in the research by Garratt & Geraghty, who looked at what statements people ranked the highest as barriers to speaking up at work, and found that the most common amongst respondents was

"I don't think it will make a difference anyway"

highlighting that feeling unheard or undervalued was the main deterrent to speaking up. Additional barriers included concerns about retaliation, the emotional burden of speaking up, the risk of damaging relationships, and the challenge of breaking a culture of silence. If people do not feel like what they say will be valued to begin with, then it seems unlikely they will risk those additional barriers to get their point across.[xii]

The other statements and how often people identified them as being among their top three reasons for not speaking up at work are highlighted in this chart below:



Source: Garratt, J., Geraghty, T (2025) Barriers to Psychological Safety.



Additionally, hierarchy can be a barrier in people feeling able to speak up and feeling psychologically safe in their team. More junior team members can feel as though their views are less important or may not be listened to, and fear repercussions if they upset the status quo, such as being overlooked for development opportunities.[xiii]

Barriers in the contemporary workplace

The job market

At a time when the job market is shrinking, and UK job vacancies have dropped to the lowest levels since the pandemic[xiv], repercussions and compromising development opportunities may be of more risk now than ever before in some people's careers. Therefore, creating an environment where people feel safe and supported to speak up may require more effort and intention.*

Personality types

While the barriers mentioned so far have all focused on the individual's thoughts and perceptions of their team environment, external factors can also impact a person's sense of psychological safety, including the behaviours and personalities of other team members. Research has found that teams with dominant, overpowering personalities may prevent others from feeling able to speak up and feel safe doing so.

Leadership style

Similarly, leadership styles can also be a barrier to psychological safety. Leaders who are more authoritative in style and tend to devalue others' ideas may cause people to feel powerless in their position and unable to make a difference. [xv, xvi]

Remote working

Remote and hybrid working can create barriers to psychological safety. Online meetings, recordings and transcripts can improve flexibility, accessibility, and inclusion, but they may also make some people more cautious about admitting mistakes, questioning processes, or challenging ways of working if they feel their comments will be permanently recorded. Building trust can also require more deliberate effort when teams have fewer informal, in-person interactions. At the same time, remote working may increase psychological safety for some employees, particularly those from minoritised groups. Working from home can reduce the need to code-switch, manage others' reactions, or navigate office dynamics that may feel exclusionary.

Building trust with colleagues online

Later on in the guide we will discuss how to create psychological safety at work, which can be applied to teams whether online or in-person, but the main distinction is building trusting relationships which help enable people to feel psychologically safe initially. To do this, here are some things to consider:

- Make check-in meetings personal, talk about the individual not just the tasks.
- Measure people's performance rather than their screen time.
- Ensure the purposes for different communication channels are clear.
- Create time for people to get to know each other in team settings, such as by asking ice breaker questions which are more informal.

**The labour market conditions and associated barriers discussed reflect the context at the time of writing (summer 2026).*

Google's Project Aristotle found that *where* teams were working from had no impact on team *performance*, as long as the team was psychologically safe. The question is, how do we develop psychological safety across both online and in-person environments, so that people have different routes to contribute, challenge, and connect in the modern workplace?

AI as a barrier to psychological safety

As artificial intelligence (AI) becomes increasingly embedded in everyday working life, it is beginning to shape not only how work gets done, but how safe people feel within teams. Used well, AI has the potential to reduce administrative burden, support better decisions, and free up time for collaboration. Used poorly, it risks undermining trust, voice, and learning, the very foundations of psychological safety.

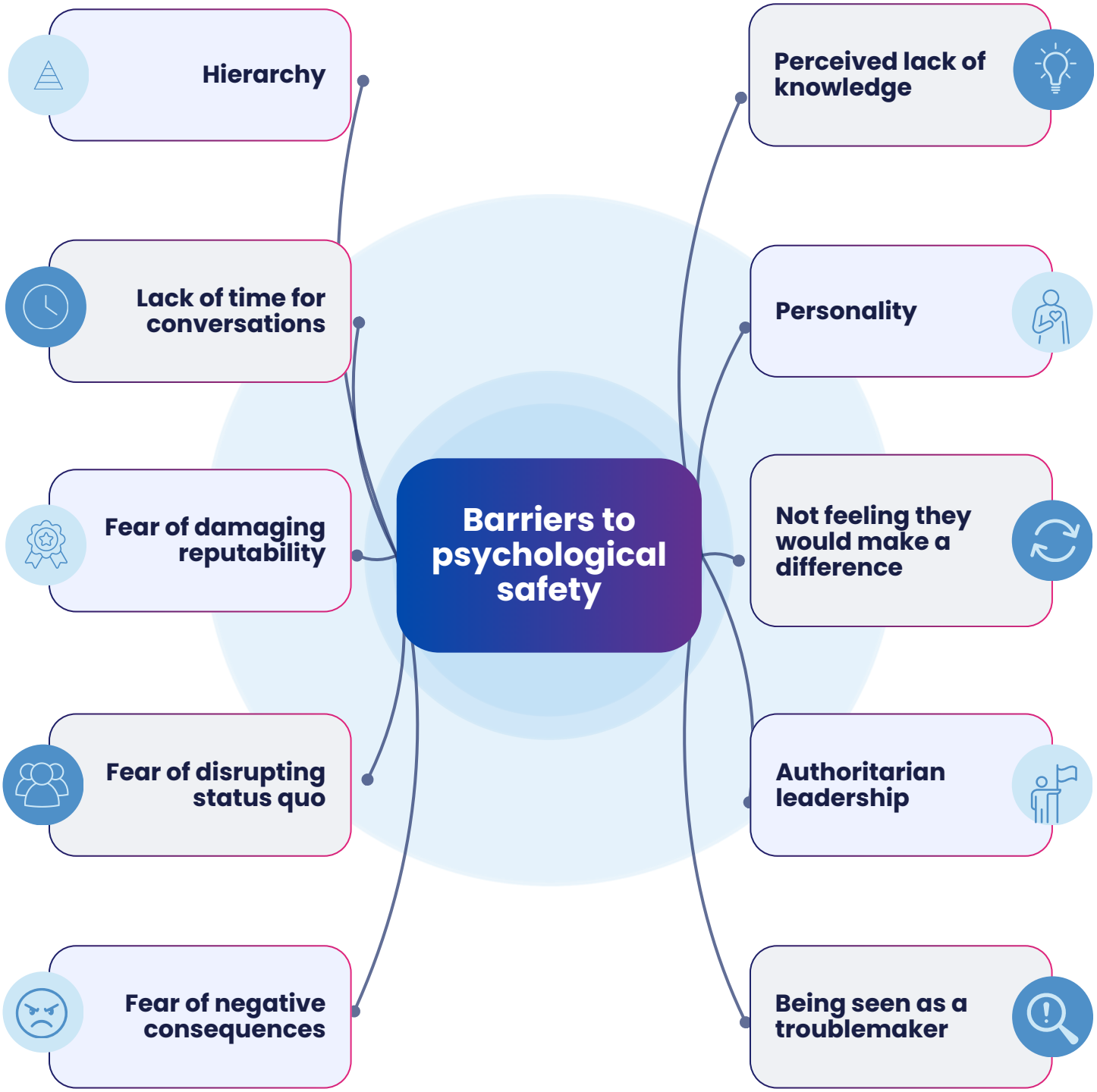
Business in the Community's Responsible AI framework emphasises that AI should be developed and deployed in ways that are ethical, transparent, and people-centred. This is critical when considering psychological safety. Trust between team members, clarity on roles and expectations, and clear accountability for decisions are central to whether people feel able to speak up, challenge decisions, and admit uncertainty. When AI systems are introduced without a clear explanation, or when and how AI is used becomes blurred, employees may feel threatened and wary rather than supported.

One emerging issue is the risk of "cognitive surrender".[xvii] As AI tools become more confident and authoritative in tone, there is a growing tendency for individuals and teams to defer to AI-generated outputs without sufficient challenge. Over time, this can reduce healthy debate and critical thinking within teams. Psychological safety relies on people feeling able to question assumptions and say "I'm not sure this is right". If AI becomes seen as the final answer, research shows that teams may make more errors, not fewer, because fewer people feel confident challenging what is presented to them.[xviii]

The use of AI for monitoring and surveillance also raises important questions. While often introduced to improve productivity or consistency, AI-enabled monitoring can feel intrusive if not handled carefully. When employees feel constantly watched or assessed by systems they do not understand, it can erode feelings of trust and control. This can lead people to become more cautious, less open and more focused on avoiding mistakes than on learning or innovation.

Looking ahead, organisations will need to be intentional in how AI is introduced into team environments. Aligning with BITC's Responsible AI framework means involving employees early, being transparent about how AI is used, and reinforcing that human judgement, curiosity, and challenge remain essential.

Barriers to psychological safety



How to create psychological safety

Measuring psychological safety

Before implementing new ways of working or changing leadership styles, it is important to understand how progress will be measured. This begins with establishing where your team is before any change takes place.

You will first want to measure the benchmark of your team's level of psychological safety. This benchmark measure can be done as part of a survey. As an example, as part of her research, Amy Edmondson used the following statements to measure how strongly members of a team agreed or disagreed with each statement, using a 5-point Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree:[xix]

1. If you make a mistake on this team, it is often held against you.

2. Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.

3. People on this team sometimes reject others for being different.

4. It is safe to take a risk on this team.

5. It is difficult to ask other members of this team for help.

6. No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.

7. Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilised.

These statements use language that is likely to be understood by most employees, and give an overview of the level of psychological safety within a team.

Suggested activity

Use the above statements to measure levels of psychological safety within your own team using an anonymous survey link to develop a benchmark score and gain insights into your team's feelings of psychological safety.

We suggest explaining to your team first why you want to gather this information and why psychological safety is important so they understand why they should be honest in their answers.

Another way in which you can collect information to understand the current level of psychological safety within teams is to run focus groups. This method of insights gathering produces more in-depth data and nuance to people's answers, producing a clearer picture of what is happening within teams. However, organisations should be careful as focus groups are more time-intensive and should be run by an individual who is impartial to the team to avoid bias in the analysis or the facilitator being a barrier to people's honesty in their responses.

Starting from the top

Leadership

Organisational culture is often shaped from the top. The behaviours modelled by leaders, and the way they lead their teams, set a powerful precedent that is mirrored across the wider workforce. In practice, this means that leadership approaches frequently act as a template for how teams operate day to day.

This principle applies directly to psychological safety. When senior leaders demonstrate trust in their teams, actively encourage feedback, and create space for people to take considered risks or acknowledge mistakes without fear of blame, these behaviours are more likely to be adopted by managers throughout the organisation. Over time, this consistency helps to establish an environment where openness, learning, and mutual respect are the norm.[xx]



Psychological safety through Leadership Development at Amey

Amey's Leadership Development Programme supports the organisation's commitment to building inclusive, high-performing teams by developing the leadership behaviours that underpin psychological safety. Delivered across two levels, the programme supports mid-level managers, operational leaders, and high-potential colleagues through Level 1, and senior and strategic leaders through Level 2. Together, the programmes help leaders create environments where people feel able to speak up, ask questions, challenge constructively, and learn from mistakes.

Over six months, leaders take part in a blended learning experience combining theory, reflection and practical application. Level 1 includes five face-to-face days and five virtual sessions, while Level 2 includes 10 face-to-face days delivered in partnership with Oxford Group (connected to City & Guilds). Across both programmes, participants explore their own leadership style, their impact on others and the conversations that build trust. Activities include Insights Discovery, feedback, coaching, delegation, wellbeing conversations, and scenarios that balance high challenge with high support. This matters because psychological safety is created through everyday leadership moments: how a manager responds when someone raises a concern, admits a mistake or offers a different view. By strengthening active listening, empathy, coaching, inclusive decision-making, constructive challenge and feedback, the programme gives leaders practical tools to make speaking up feel normal, valued and safe.

In practice, leaders used facilitated discussion, peer coaching and workplace activities to consider how to encourage different viewpoints, treat mistakes as learning opportunities, and hold supportive wellbeing and performance conversations. Participants particularly valued the reflective and practical elements, including work on leadership style, communication, 180 feedback and building stronger relationships with colleagues and clients.

Feedback from the close-out session showed impact at both individual and business level. Leaders reported deeper self-awareness, greater confidence in communication and networking, and a clearer understanding of the wider Amey context. They also applied practical tools to improve team conversations, transparency, problem-solving, and client relationships, while recognising the importance of people-focused leadership linked to psychological safety, quality and wellbeing.

The programme has also strengthened Amey's leadership pipeline, with several participants moving into wider strategic leadership roles following completion. The Level 2 programme has received external recognition through two Brandon awards, reinforcing the strength of the programme brand and the quality of the learning experience.

Overall, the programme demonstrates that psychological safety can be taught, practised and reinforced through deliberate leadership development. By helping leaders listen, coach, and challenge constructively, Amey is embedding the conditions for teams to contribute fully, learn openly and improve continuously.

Creating opportunities for listening and learning

A key element of leading from the top is normalising a culture of listening and learning. Managers play a vital role in ensuring that employee voices are heard, not only to generate ideas for improvement but also to openly discuss challenges, mistakes, and opportunities for growth. Establishing systems and structures that enable this is essential. This might include creating regular discussion forums, implementing feedback mechanisms, and intentionally building time into team routines for questions, reflection, and shared learning.

It is important to recognise that adopting these practices may require adjustment. For some teams, speaking openly or challenging ideas may initially feel uncomfortable, and individuals may need time to build confidence and trust. However, by embedding these approaches into standard ways of working, organisations can move beyond pockets of psychological safety and instead create a consistent culture where speaking up is expected and learning from mistakes is viewed as a valuable part of development.



In practice: building psychological safety through inclusion at Amey

Amey recognised that psychological safety cannot be created through standalone diversity initiatives alone. People bring multiple, overlapping identities to work, and colleagues are more likely to speak up, challenge ideas and contribute fully when they feel seen, valued, and included as whole individuals. To strengthen this sense of belonging, Amey created the 'Unity Group', bringing together its employee Affinity Networks to work collaboratively rather than in isolation.

The aim was to create structured opportunities for listening and learning across the organisation. By bringing network chairs, allies, and communications partners together each month, the Unity Group created a space where experiences, concerns, and ideas could be shared openly and fed directly into business decision-making. Rather than each network working separately, the group enables collective problem-solving, reduces duplication and ensures employee insights are heard and acted upon.

This approach is important for psychological safety because people are more likely to contribute ideas, ask questions, and raise concerns when they believe their voice matters and can influence change. The Unity Group helps create those conditions by connecting employees with leaders, encouraging dialogue across different lived experiences, and demonstrating that feedback leads to tangible action.

The initiative has delivered benefits beyond employee engagement. Since its launch, Affinity Networks have evolved from support communities into drivers of organisational change. For example, the Diversability Network helped shape Amey's Domestic Violence Policy, one of the first in the sector, and contributed to the organisation achieving Disability Confident Leader (Level 3) status. The networks have also influenced wider business policy and practice, ensuring employee voice is embedded in decision-making. The Group's impact has been recognised externally through awards including a Highly Commended award at the British Diversity Awards for the Move You in Boxes Armed Forces initiative, and Best LGBTQIA+ Network at the Rainbow Honours Awards.

As Emma Charlton, Chair of the Unity Group, explains:

"Unity matters because none of our people fit into a single box, so support that only looks at one part of them was always going to fall short. Bringing the network chairs together every month means we catch things early, share what's actually working instead of each reinventing it, and take issues straight into the business rather than letting them sit in a policy document. That's why it has worked: colleagues see their concerns turn into real change, and that builds the trust psychological safety depends on."

By creating regular opportunities for employees to be heard, learn from one another and influence organisational decisions, the Unity Group demonstrates how listening and learning across a diverse group of stakeholders can strengthen trust, inclusion, and psychological safety across an organisation.

One size does not fit all

Psychological safety will not look identical in every context. There will always be nuances across teams and sectors. For example, in high-risk environments such as healthcare or emergency services, the consequences of mistakes are significantly greater, which can influence how psychological safety is experienced in practice. Similarly, team size can play a role. Smaller teams, where relationships are often closer and trust is more easily developed, may find it easier to foster open communication. In contrast, larger teams may require more deliberate effort to build the trust needed for individuals to feel comfortable sharing ideas, asking questions, or acknowledging mistakes.

By recognising these differences while maintaining a consistent organisational commitment, leaders and managers can create environments where psychological safety is both supported and sustained across all areas of the business.

Techniques and practices to enable cultural and organisational change

Be consciously inclusive in your meetings

When employees feel that they must constantly monitor their behaviour, suppress viewpoints, modify communication styles, or hide aspects of themselves to avoid negative judgments ('masking'), significant energy is diverted away from productive work. This can contribute to stress, reduced engagement, lower creativity, and diminished collaboration.

In contrast, psychologically safe environments reduce the need for masking by creating conditions where people feel accepted, respected, and able to contribute authentically. As a result, more energy can be directed toward learning, problem-solving, innovation, and team performance. For multigenerational and diverse teams, fostering psychological safety means creating an environment where differences in perspective, communication style, work preferences, and lived experience can be expressed without fear of exclusion or negative consequences. When this occurs, organisations are better able to benefit from the full range of knowledge, skills, and perspectives present within the workforce.

- Ask the quiet team member if they had any thoughts on the conversation being had, with the option to provide feedback after the meeting if they prefer.
- Ask people to expand if necessary and ask for clarification to avoid misunderstanding, e.g. a useful phrase is "Let me check I've understood what you mean", which demonstrates respect and gives the other person a chance to ensure their message is understood correctly.
- Invite questions from your team; try to avoid filling silence and pause to give other people the chance to speak up.
- Thank people for raising concerns, checking their understanding, and suggesting alternative solutions which they believe may be more effective. This demonstrates respect for others' contributions and shows people that their thoughts and feedback are valued.

For more **practical actions** to help create an inclusive workplace culture, explore BITC's Everyday Inclusion: What Is It and What Really Works? report.

Encourage challenge

- Ask questions of your team e.g. “who has a different view on this?”, “where do we see potential risks in this approach?”, “what have we learned from this project that we could improve on next time?”.

  Be prepared for silence at first. If this is something that the team have not had the opportunity to feed into before, they may be apprehensive. In which case, you could give the opportunity to provide written feedback after the meeting. Making this a normal way of working will cause people to expect these questions and eventually feel more comfortable answering them.

- If there is a new project coming up, encourage input and feedback from the team at the start. Encourage people to share their thoughts and ideas through statements such as “we have not done this before and welcome people’s thoughts on how we can get this right”.

Shift the view of ‘getting things wrong’

Mistakes are part of our human nature, and they often provide valuable learning opportunities. Move away from focusing on who made the mistake and focus more on what can be learned to prevent the same mistake from happening again. Be mindful of how these conversations are approached and whether the conversation would be more appropriate to have in an individual or team setting.

Build relationships

- Take an interest in the people in your team - how they are, who they are. This will help them feel more valued and therefore more comfortable speaking up.
- Give full attention to meetings and conversations - avoid answering emails/calls/texts during them. This gives the impression that you’re not listening or that you don’t care.



Work to overcome fear

Research looking at the barriers to speaking up at work found that there were three distinct types of fear people faced when it comes to speaking up in the workplace:

- **Fear-Averse** – dominated by fear of retribution, stigma, and futility.
- **Competence-Anxious** – driven by fear of looking incompetent or overstepping boundaries.
- **Cynical-Conformist** – marked by disbelief that speaking up will lead to change, reinforced by conformity pressures.[xxi]

Helping people to overcome this fear will require a patient and consistent approach to building trust, and ensuring people feel valued when sharing their ideas, challenges, and questions.

Types of fear and priority practices:[xxiii]

Fear-Averse	Levelling power gradients through having a rotating chair of meetings; addressing persistent problematic behaviour so people are less worried about ridicule; integrating anonymous channels for feedback; visible endorsement of speaking up; and thanking people for contributions.
Competence-Anxious	Effective listening & giving space in meetings for people to contribute; clear & compassionate communication; running learning exercises such as reflection on projects to understand what could have been done better.
Cynical-Conformist	Rewarding speaking up; sharing success stories; sharing clear follow-ups from things raised at previous meetings; embracing different ways of speaking up- including written communications, one-to-one conversations, as well as speaking up in group settings.

Psychological safety through a Multicultural Leadership Development Programme at Amey

Amey's 18-month Multicultural Leadership Development Programme (MLDP), developed in partnership with its employee-led Multicultural Network, was created to support employees from ethnic minority backgrounds to build confidence, strengthen leadership capability, and progress their careers. The programme recognised that, in large organisations, hierarchy, limited representation, and concerns about how others may perceive different perspectives can make it difficult for people to speak up, challenge ideas or contribute fully.

Rather than focusing solely on leadership skills, MLDP created a structured environment where participants could openly discuss experiences that are often left unspoken in the workplace, including cultural identity, imposter syndrome, code-switching, networking, and confidence. Through mentoring, reflection, peer discussion, and practical leadership development, participants were encouraged to explore their leadership style, build self-awareness and develop the confidence to contribute authentically.

This approach is closely linked to psychological safety, as when people feel comfortable bringing their whole selves to work, sharing different perspectives and discussing challenges without fear of judgement, they are more likely to speak up, learn from others and contribute to better decision-making. The programme created a dedicated space for honest dialogue and reflection, helping participants build trust, confidence and a stronger sense of belonging, while equipping them with tools they could take back into their own teams.

The impact has been significant for both individuals and the organisation. Across the first two cohorts, 96% of participants reported increased confidence, while 70% of participants in Cohort 1 secured a promotion, lateral move, secondment, or additional responsibility within 12 months. 80% wished to continue their mentoring relationship after the programme ended, demonstrating the value of the connections and support networks created.

Participants also reported feeling more comfortable sharing ideas, leading authentically and contributing to conversations they may previously have avoided. As one participant reflected: **"Being part of Amey's Multicultural Leadership Development Programme helped me feel more confident, reflect on myself, choose my moments and lead with or without the title."**

Another shared:

"Since starting the MLDP, my confidence has grown so much. I've stopped asking for permission to shine, I'm trusting myself more, and I'm choosing progress over perfection every single day."

By creating a psychologically safe environment for learning, reflection and honest conversation, MLDP demonstrates how targeted leadership development can strengthen confidence, inclusion, and employee voice, while helping organisations develop more diverse, resilient, and effective leaders.

Learnings from our members

Business in the Community recently brought together practitioners in inclusion and wellbeing at an event hosted by Amey to discuss how to create psychologically safe workplaces. The event consisted of talks from leading practitioners in this field, as well as opportunities for questions and discussions. The following quotes capture some of the **insights and reflections shared by practitioners** from within our member network:

> How leaders respond to team contributions is just as important as making the space for them. Leaders of teams must be considerate and curious in their responses, asking people to expand, explain their thinking, and not be quick to shut people down. This maintains respect between team members and ensures people know that their contributions are valued and not easily overlooked.

> At times there can be challenging scenarios, high pressures and tough deadlines but it is important for the people leading teams to maintain emotional regulation, meaning to stay calm through team meetings, to be thoughtful in responses, to ensure that the team environment stays respectful, considerate and safe for all team members.

> Use language that feels right for you and your team. Psychological safety can feel a bit clinical. Trust and openness may be more appealing for the group to get on board with and understand. Apply the principles of psychological safety in a way that suits your team and the organisational culture.

> Leaders showing vulnerability, such as acknowledging challenges, uncertainty, or lessons learned, signal that it is safe for others to do the same. This doesn't mean oversharing but rather being appropriately open and real.

> In order to build trust within teams, it is important to have visible and accessible leaders. Trust is built over time, through building relationships, having mutual respect and feeling valued as part of the team. That starts with team leaders being visible to their team and available when needed.



Reflection on impact

How will you know that your efforts to develop a psychologically safe team have made any impact or change?

- Have the productivity levels of the team changed?
- Are more people asking questions and speaking up during meetings?
- Has the number of mistakes made in the team reduced?
- Are people reporting higher satisfaction levels in the engagement survey?
- Have you seen a change in your team achieving KPIs and targets set out?

Conclusion

Creating psychological safety at work is not a one-off initiative or a standalone programme; it is an ongoing commitment that must be intentionally woven into the fabric of an organisation. As this guide has outlined, psychological safety is fundamental to enabling learning, innovation, and performance, while also supporting employee wellbeing, engagement, and retention.

The evidence is clear: when people feel safe to speak up, ask questions, share ideas and learn from mistakes, individuals and teams perform at their best. Yet, many employees, particularly younger workers, still do not feel able to express themselves fully at work. This gap highlights a significant opportunity and responsibility for leaders and managers across all sectors to take meaningful action.

Building psychological safety requires both structural and behavioural change. It starts with leadership, setting the tone through trust, openness and consistency, and is sustained through everyday practices from all team members, such as inclusive meetings, encouraging challenge, responding constructively to mistakes, and actively listening to employee voices. Just as importantly, it involves recognising and addressing the barriers that prevent people from speaking up, including fear, hierarchy, and past experiences of not being heard.

There is no single blueprint that will work for every organisation or team. Psychological safety will look different depending on context, sector, and team dynamics. However, the underlying principles remain the same: respect, trust, inclusion, and a shared commitment to learning. By applying these principles in a way that reflects your organisation's culture and values, you can create an environment where people feel confident to contribute and supported to grow.

As organisations continue to navigate change, whether driven by evolving workforce expectations, technological advancements, or wider societal shifts, psychological safety will only become more important. It underpins adaptability, creativity and resilience, all of which are critical for future success.

Ultimately, creating psychological safety is about creating better workplaces, where people are not only able to perform, but to thrive. The role of managers is central to this. Through deliberate, consistent action, you have the opportunity to shape cultures where every voice matters, learning is continuous, and teams can achieve their full potential.

Next steps

- Measure your team's psychological safety, implement recommendations made within this guide, and monitor for any changes, encouraging feedback from your team over time.
- Monitor how changes in psychological safety link to incidents, productivity, and team performance to demonstrate the impact of psychologically safe teams.
- Commit to taking action on workplace wellbeing – start by completing our Workwell Self-Assessment Tool to understand how your organisation is performing on workplace wellbeing, compared to our UK benchmark, and where to focus your efforts.

References

i. Business in the Community (2022) Your Job Can Be Good For You. Available at: https://www.bitc.org.uk/report/your-job-can-be-good-for-you/

ii. Psych Safety. The History of Psychological Safety. Available at: https://psychsafety.com/the-history-of-psychological-safety/

iii. Edmondson, A. (1999) 'Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams', Administrative Science Quarterly, 44(2), pp. 350–383. Available at: https://web.mit.edu/curhan/www/docs/Articles/15341_Readings/Group_Performance/Edmondson%20Psychological%20safety.pdf

iv. Harvard Business Impact (2025) Why Psychological Safety Is the Hidden Engine Behind Innovation and Transformation. Available at: https://www.harvardbusiness.org/insight/why-psychological-safety-is-the-hidden-engine-behind-innovation-and-transformation/

v. Clark, T.R. (2020) The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety: Defining the Path to Inclusion and Innovation. Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

vi. Psych Safety (2021) The Four Stages of Psychological Safety. Available at: https://psychsafety.com/the-four-stages-of-psychological-safety/

vii. Edmondson, A. (1999) 'Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams', Administrative Science Quarterly, 44(2), pp. 350–383. Available at: https://web.mit.edu/curhan/www/docs/Articles/15341_Readings/Group_Performance/Edmondson%20Psychological%20safety.pdf

viii. Frazier, M.L., Fainshmidt, S., Klinger, R.L., Pezeshkan, A. and Vracheva, V. (2017) 'Psychological safety: A meta-analytic review and extension', Personnel Psychology, 70(1), pp. 113–165. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12183

ix. British Safety Council (2025) Nearly Half of UK Workers Afraid to Flag Risks, Finds New Research. Available at: https://www.britsafe.org/safety-management/2025/nearly-half-of-uk-workers-afraid-to-flag-risks-finds-new-research

x. Mental Health First Aid England (2026) Young Workers Are Struggling at Work: New Research Shows What Employers Can Do About It. Available at: https://mhfaengland.org/news-and-blogs/young-workers-are-struggling-at-work-new-research-shows-what-employers-can-do-about-it/

* Performance measures included the team meeting or exceeding customers' expectations, the team doing superb work, and the team continuing to improve.

* The WorkWell Self-Assessment Tool is a survey in which representatives of organisations assess their organisation's level of maturity against different elements of workplace wellbeing and receive a benchmarking report.

xi. Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2026) Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), UK: February 2026. Available at: https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneet/february2026

xii. Garratt, J. and Geraghty, T. (2025) Barriers to Psychological Safety. Psych Safety. Available at: https://psychsafety.com/barriers-to-psychological-safety/

xiii. Lackie, K. et al. (2023) Creating psychological safety in interprofessional simulation for health professional learners: a scoping review of the barriers and enablers, Journal of Interprofessional Care, 37(2), pp. 187–202. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13561820.2022.2052269

xiv. British Chambers of Commerce (2026) Britain's Workforce Is Not Ready for What Is Coming. Available at: https://www.britishchambers.org.uk/news/2026/04/britains-workforce-is-not-ready-for-what-is-coming/

xv. Garratt, J. and Geraghty, T. (2025) Barriers to Psychological Safety. Psych Safety. Available at: https://psychsafety.com/barriers-to-psychological-safety/

xvi. Remtulla, R., Hagana, A., Houbby, N., Ruparell, K., Aojula, N., Menon, A., Thavarajasingam, S.G. and Meyer, E. (2021) 'Exploring the barriers and facilitators of psychological safety in primary care teams: a qualitative study', BMC Health Services Research, 21, article 269. Available at: https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/172512/1/s12913-021-06232-7.pdf

xvii. Katz, L. (2026) 'We trust AI over our own brains, research finds', Forbes, 27 March. Available at: https://www.forbes.com/sites/lesliekatz/2026/03/27/cognitive-surrender-we-trust-ai-over-our-own-brains-research-finds/

xviii. Klingbeil, A., Grützner, C. and Schreck, P. (2024) 'Trust and reliance on AI — An experimental study on the extent and costs of overreliance on AI', Computers in Human Behavior, 160, article 108352. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2024.108352

xix. Google (2015) Understand Team Effectiveness. Google re:Work. Available at: https://rework.withgoogle.com/intl/en/guides/understand-team-effectiveness

xx. Bandura, A. (1977) Social Learning Theory. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall. Available at: https://www.asecib.ase.ro/mps/Bandura_SocialLearningTheory.pdf

xxi. Garratt, J. and Geraghty, T. (2025) Barriers to Psychological Safety. Psych Safety. Available at: https://psychsafety.com/barriers-to-psychological-safety/

Business in the Community (BITC) champions responsible business as essential for long term economic growth and resilience. We convene, campaign, and consult with business to tackle society's most pressing challenges—from climate change and place-based regeneration to inequality, workplace wellbeing, and inclusive growth.

Founded by His Majesty King Charles III in 1982, BITC has over four decades of experience in engaging business and delivering measurable impact in both business and in communities through evidence-based interventions. As a trusted partner to business and government, BITC convenes leadership, influences policy, and accelerates action—helping shape a future-ready economy that works for everyone.

Business in the Community
137 Shepherdess Walk
London
N1 7RQ

www.bitc.org.uk
020 7566 8650

Business in the Community is a registered charity in England and Wales (297716) and Scotland (SC046226). Company limited by guarantee No. 1619253.