

Leadership in a psychologically safe workplace

ebook

Psychological safety has the power to make or break team success, yet for many leaders, it's an afterthought.

Consider for a moment:

That bright innovative mind you hired a few months back who stopped expressing opinions...

That account manager you could rely on to provide accurate assessments of opportunities who suddenly became a yes person...

That error that, had it been disclosed by the employee could have been rectified, was hidden until it turned into a crisis...

These situations are symptomatic of the same issue: A lack of psychological safety in the workplace.

This ebook looks at leadership from a psychological safety perspective and will empower leaders to create psychologically safe environments within their organisations.

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Insights and psychological safety

Until Google's 2012 breakthrough study, there was little mainstream awareness on the role psychological safety plays in a healthy workplace. But at Insights, we've been aware of the transformational power of psychological safety since we opened our doors in 1993.

Today we've helped countless leaders lay the cornerstone for psychological safety in their organisations. In delivering over six million Insights Discovery Personal Profiles, we're helping teams adopt a common language around differences and have true appreciation for diversity.

Insights Discovery provides teams with skills to take active steps towards inclusion and innovation and to create psychologically safe workplaces that empower people to thrive.

What is psychological safety?

Also referred to as "the buzzword of 2022", psychological safety in the workplace is the shared belief that you are free to speak up, e.g. suggest new ideas, question existing ones or challenge the status quo without fear of alienation or career-affecting repercussions.

The term entered the mainstream with the results of Google's infamous Project Aristotle that cited psychological safety as the single most important driver of team effectiveness, beating management-friendly drivers that were listed like dependability, structure and impact¹. Its importance was cemented by Amy Edmondson's viral TedTalk, Building a Psychologically Safe Workplace.²

Is the lack of psychological safety in the workplace an issue for leaders?

Don't kid yourself. Not only is the issue real, but it's stunningly prevalent.

During the height of the pandemic, November 2021, Crucial Learning released a study of 1,300 people and revealed that 90% had felt "emotionally or physically unsafe to speak their mind" more than once in the last 18 months.

74% cited political or social issues as generating fear and 70% cited issues around Covid-19³.

The result was a host of unhealthy behaviours around communicating:

- Staying silent but feeling inauthentic (65%)
- Avoiding people (47%)
- Silently fuming and stewing (42%)
- Ruminating about all the things they'd say if they had the courage (39%)
- Faking agreement (19%)
- Severing relationships (14%)

“A manager's effect on a workplace is so significant that Gallup can predict 70% of the variance in team engagement just by getting to know the boss.”

Jon Clifton
CEO, Gallup



A follow-up poll by Crucial Learning revealed what these behaviours may actually cost organisations⁴:

22% People who estimate their inability to hold crucial conversations cost their organisation more than \$50,000

50% People who estimate they waste two weeks or more in the unhealthy behaviours listed above

Gallup reports that only three in ten U.S. workers strongly agree that at work, their opinions seem to count.

If you're still not convinced, consider a 2022 Gallup study that found 60% of people around the world are emotionally detached at work (and 19% are downright miserable).

Not only is a lack of psychological safety in the workplace an issue, but it's likely costing you money.

Psychological safety is the **lifeblood** of innovation

Why employees resist speaking out

There are many reasons why an employee might refrain from sharing an idea or opinion:

Economic considerations. It's one thing to point out a potential error on a low budget project, but another thing altogether to suggest a redesign at the expense of £25,000,000. Right or wrong, to even suggest the latter could be a career limiting move.

Lack of voice. In certain organisations, some employees may feel their input is not welcomed. In addition, it can be tough to speak up before one has 'earned their stripes' or developed supportive relationships throughout the organisation.

Uncertainty. There are times, particularly around issues like harassment and abuse, when the allegation is so serious and potentially damaging that the employee feels they must be absolutely certain before they risk speaking up.

A culture of deference. Those employees who don't feel that their manager will welcome their challenging the status quo are less likely to speak up. This impact is worsened when the manager is closed to outside views

or perceives different views as a challenge to their leadership. In this case, the employee who speaks up may also risk upsetting peers who want to remain on the right side of the manager.

Fear of retribution. While many organisations promise protection for whistle-blowers, what happens when sharing negative information impacts the very people enforcing that policy? Those who speak out may be labelled as troublemakers or drama queens and become isolated. Even worse, they may lose their jobs and reputation, gravely impacting their livelihood.

Expensive mistakes. Imagine speaking up, upsetting everyone, costing the company money, then being wrong? It's the old adage: make too many mistakes in business and you're out of business. So how many mistakes do you get to make? How expensive must a mistake be for you to be punished? Employees may rationalise that it's easier to stay quiet.

“In one study investigating employee experiences with speaking up, 85% of respondents reported at least one occasion when they felt unable to raise a concern with their bosses, even though they believed the issue was important.”

Amy Edmondson

Professor of Leadership,
Harvard Business School

How psychological safety manifests in the workplace

In contrast, the overarching characteristic of psychologically safe work environments is that people feel safe to speak up. They *want* to speak up. This can prevent errors at every level and is particularly relevant in health and engineering settings.

Employees feel safe to make suggestions without being ridiculed or shot down. This inspires creativity and innovation and is notably present in companies like Google and Apple, known for their track records of innovation.

People develop the courage to test ideas because they feel supported by their manager if they make a mistake. A culture of learning prevails and, if you're in leadership and development, we don't need to tell you that continuous learning is a critical component of employee engagement and retention.

There's transparency around how decisions are made and the organisation's purpose and goals. This empowers employees to have greater ownership of their respective areas and develop a holistic understanding of considerations at all levels of the organisation.

Managers speak less – a maximum amount of time equal to that of their employees. This allows for greater diversity of thought within the organisation.

Managers and employees engage in regular informal feedback conversations, giving all sides low-risk opportunities to address each other's blind spots before they become damaging.





The benefits of psychological safety are based on robust empirical evidence

“As considerable prior research shows, psychological safety is a precursor to adaptive, innovative performance – which is needed in today’s rapidly changing environment – at the individual, team, and organization levels.”

Amy Edmondson

Professor of Leadership,
Harvard Business School

While the organisational snapshot on the previous pages may seem warm and fuzzy, the bottom-line result is a solid upward arrow on the graph.

Gallup points out that moving the ratio from three in ten employees who feel their opinions count to six in ten can empower a 27% reduction in turnover, a 40% reduction in safety incidents and a 12% increase in productivity.

When we combine those stats with a reduction in mental health crises, burnout and general unhappiness on the job, we can get behind Google's assertion that psychological safety is the key to team effectiveness.

How leaders can create a psychologically safe environment for employees

The ability to provide psychological safety is an underrated power skill.

It's not that leaders don't think it's important, but when we're up against quarterly reports and shareholder calls, it's easy to let the idea of psychological safety fall to the wayside.

Leaders may be tempted to think that their good intent and "open door policy" should be enough to empower their employees to feel safe about expressing themselves, but the

statistics revealed earlier should dissuade that notion.

There are, however, best practices leaders can embrace to create or reinforce a culture of psychological safety in their workplace.



Six actions to take today

1. Start with self-awareness

In Gallup's State of the Global Workplace 2022 report ⁵, they identified five components of a bad job, and each one was directly related to the manager. In other words: bad boss, bad job.

Now surely, they couldn't be referring to you, because you work hard to be a good leader and support your team, right?

What we often don't realise is how our behaviours are perceived in the workplace and the impact we have on others. This is where self-awareness comes into play. When we understand our own behavioural preferences and what drives them, we become aware of our triggers and reactions. Now we have the power to mitigate them.

We also become aware of how our behaviours are received by others. For example, data driven managers who love to get to the point may not realise that others may perceive them as curt. Socially motivated managers who start business conversations by sharing personal stories may be perceived by others as frivolous, but again, we now have the power to mitigate how we show up.

Self-awareness empowers other-awareness. This is awareness of others' behavioural preferences, triggers and motivators, and how they interact with our own. This is also where self-awareness finds a practical application in the workplace.

The ability to understand and mitigate relationship dynamics is a big driver of creating psychological safety in the

workplace, because we're more likely to notice when others around us feel unsafe, and adapt our own behaviours accordingly. This ability is a massive -and massively rewarding - power skill that will benefit all facets of your organisation, not to mention your professional and personal life.

2. Speak less, smile more

Lin-Manuel Miranda was onto something when his version of Aaron Burr offered this advice to Alexander Hamilton.

In keeping with the American theme, the Supreme Court of The United States has an effective way of ensuring dominant personalities don't monopolise discussions: Nobody speaks twice till everyone has spoken once⁶.



Ensuring that all voices are heard equally serves the additional purpose of fostering a sense of greater belonging amongst a diverse employee base.

This speaks to the heart of empathetic leadership. Managers should not only give their employees an equal opportunity to share their thoughts, but when challenges arise, don't jump to the rescue!

Real learning happens when workers have a safe and supportive space to



Six actions to take today

solve problems on their own, and the leader's role is to hold that safe space for the employee while they work things out in their own way.

Speaking less gives your people a chance to be heard, a concept that's linked with commitment, engagement and learning. When employees are given true agency to influence their projects and roles, and the safety to make mistakes in the name of learning, they are more inclined to support the organisation's purpose and each other.

Leaders should not only be aware of how much they speak, but also the order.

In 1951, the Asch Conformity Experiment revealed that 32% of subjects conform to the views of

an obviously wrong majority. In a follow up study, it was revealed that if one other person in the room shares a dissenting opinion, conformity drops to near zero⁷.

We believe that people conform due to fear of judgement and punishment. Be aware that, as a leader, your opinion has the power to influence those around you, so in the interest of encouraging authentic discourse, speak last.

3. Be visible and accessible (in-person and virtually)

Waxing poetic about your open-door policy is meaningless if your office is located on the top floor behind two gatekeepers and limited access hallways.

In a bricks and mortar office space, this means increasing your day-to-day visibility with a centrally located office (preferably with glass partitions) that your team can see and regularly walk by. It also means using the same kitchen, water cooler and printer.

These simple moves can increase psychological safety by reducing that traditional hierarchical separation between professional levels. Daily face to face interaction creates opportunities for impromptu conversations around progress, feedback and non-business related sharing. This is the difference between talking about an open-door policy and actually living it.

In a remote team, it's important to be more intentional about accessibility.

Six actions to take today

Regular one on one meetings with individual members of your team should happen at least once per week and be considered sacred. Not moving these meetings because more important priorities come up signals to your team that THEY are your real priority.

It's also important to schedule time for non-business related meetings. At Insights, the (largely remote) marketing team has the Cup of Tea call every Friday at 3pm. For a maximum of 45 minutes, marketing staff from around the world jump on and there is only one rule: No business talk.

It's notable that Insights' Head of Marketing, who usually attends virtual meetings from her stand-up desk in professional attire, often appears on the Cup of Tea call from the comfort of her living room, dressed in jeans. The signal is "I'm just another member of the team."

Virtual leaders are also encouraged to make daily use of the chat functions on their virtual team software. Group chats, both professional and casual, can take the place of the office walk-by and inspire casual conversations.

4. Build a learning culture that allows for mistakes

Psychological safety means lowering the stakes around speaking up.

There are countless stories about team members who knew something was wrong but were either afraid to speak up or were berated when they did so and subsequently changed their stance, thus failing to prevent a disaster.

(If you're interested, read up on the space shuttles Challenger and Columbia, the Chernobyl meltdown and the two Boeing 737 MAX crashes.

In each instance, engineers shared concerns that were disregarded, or they reversed due to managerial pressure).

When we fail, we learn. Having said that, nobody is expecting that managers encourage or endorse largescale failure or reduce accountability. Rather, in allowing employees to make smaller mistakes as they go and learn from them, leaders will create an environment in which largescale missteps don't happen. Courage to speak up becomes a safety redundancy that protects the organisation and the people in it from dangerous mistakes.

Employ a strict rule that no idea is allowed to be shot down and suggestions needn't come with ironclad research to back them up.

Remind your team regularly that the best ideas often come from



Six actions to take today

suggestions that go completely against the norm. Disruptive ideas always feel uncomfortable at first, but if companies like Airbnb, Uber and PayPal are anything to go by, it's important to nurture them.

In a similar spirit, brainstorming meetings should be creative and casual. There is no such thing as a bad or silly idea. Employees need a supporting culture of psychological safety to relax their minds and ideate (no doubt why working from home is so popular with designers, copywriters and other creative staff).

5. From ego to empathy

Be aware of your motivation at any given moment, and particularly when leading others. Are you motivated to look good and be the Good Leader, perhaps earning praise from the CEO and a generous bonus, or are you motivated to support your people and make their lives better?

Dutch organisational psychologist Freek Peters refers to egocentric management as "hero management" and, while there are times when this kind of management is necessary and effective, he suggests that managers should also be motivated by employee development, the vitality of the team, stimulating innovation and building community. He calls this style of management, "interplay"⁸.

Be aware of when you're inwardly resisting an employee's suggestion, and rather than shutting it down, consider why you're resisting. Perhaps the idea may force you to concede you were wrong earlier on, or you worry about upsetting certain team members (or your CFO) by changing course.

Consider where the employee's suggestion is really coming from and put yourself in their shoes. Why are they concerned? How hard was it for them to speak up? Actively listen to what they're

saying and - just as important - what they're not saying.

The good news is that taking a step back to really think about their suggestion is bound to make that employee feel heard. Even if you don't go with their idea, you can still be empathetic. That you gave their suggestion careful consideration and truly explored their perspective will go a long way to building trust.

When mistakes do happen, once again, empathy becomes the saving grace. Forget sympathy and platitudes; neither are helpful, put them aside.

If you wish to build trust with an employee, sit and hold space for them as they share their experience and their thoughts on what happened. Do not interrupt, don't even ask questions; just listen and accept. People never say what we expect them to say; there is always new information that arises when we



Six actions to take today

stop trying to control the flow of a conversation.

Once you have accepted what an employee is feeling, together you can craft a healthy and positive way to move forward and learn from what happened.

6. Protect your team

The greatest military leaders fought with their soldiers. In fact, as Dr. Rafael Chiuzi reminds us in his 2022 Ted Talk, *The Case for Psychological Safety and Better Teams*⁹, the term 'leader' comes from leading the charge into battle and being willing to sacrifice themselves on the front line.

Your team needs to know that you are willing to lead the charge to protect them, and they will

not speak up unless they trust that you have their back. Nor will they bother to speak up if they don't believe that you trust their judgement.

Be patient with yourself and others; encouraging open dialogue takes time and consistent effort.

Increase clarity with your team and have lots of one on one meetings to ensure that clarity and to encourage workers to share their great ideas.

Some teams adopt and enforce a zero tolerance policy around gossip, but we recognise that all teams are different with regard to how they communicate on a personal level. We recommend that you invite your team to have a conversation about what may be construed as gossip vs respectful

sharing and expect them to uphold the boundaries they set.

Model and enforce confidentiality on an individual and team level.

When a team member outgrows you or moves on from the team, celebrate their success. See their progress as win for everyone in the organisation. Nothing says 'I have your back' more than truly and wholeheartedly celebrating others' success.

How to support a psychologically safe workplace as an employee

Psychological safety relies on developing awareness of self and others

We all want to contribute to an workplace where we can feel free to speak up and be heard, but who's willing to go first?

****silence****

Yep. That's what we thought.

It's easy for your leader to rhapsodise about psychological safety and promise protection should you feel the need to speak up, but they are not in your shoes; not really.

The struggle is real. Speaking out carries the obvious risk of alienating ourselves and others.

And yet, the development of a psychologically safe environment is attractive. Feeling heard. Being acknowledged. Working towards a common purpose. Caring about your manager and feeling they care about you. Trust.



Do you have the courage to go first?

For those brave souls willing to step-up and be part of creating a psychologically safe work environment for yourself and others, we've listed a few places to start...

1. Develop self-awareness

If you read the part about how managers can leverage self-awareness, the same goes for everyone in the organisation. In fact, awareness in leadership is most effective when everyone in the organisation has the same level of commitment to developing self-awareness and other-awareness.

Awareness gives you the power to influence relationship dynamics and better understand your colleagues and managers; key drivers of psychological safety.

2. Replace "I need to speak my truth" with thoughtful communications

Have you ever noticed that this sentence is usually said right before someone disparages a colleague? Psychological safety is about authenticity, but not at the expense of publicly humiliating others.

Having the safety to speak up carries a responsibility to use the opportunity well. If you wish to share a comment, before speaking, quickly check in with yourself. What's your real motivation for sharing? Will it benefit the situation at hand, or is

it to get attention? Is it helpful or unkind? Proceed with caution and caring.

3. Learn how to initiate tough conversations

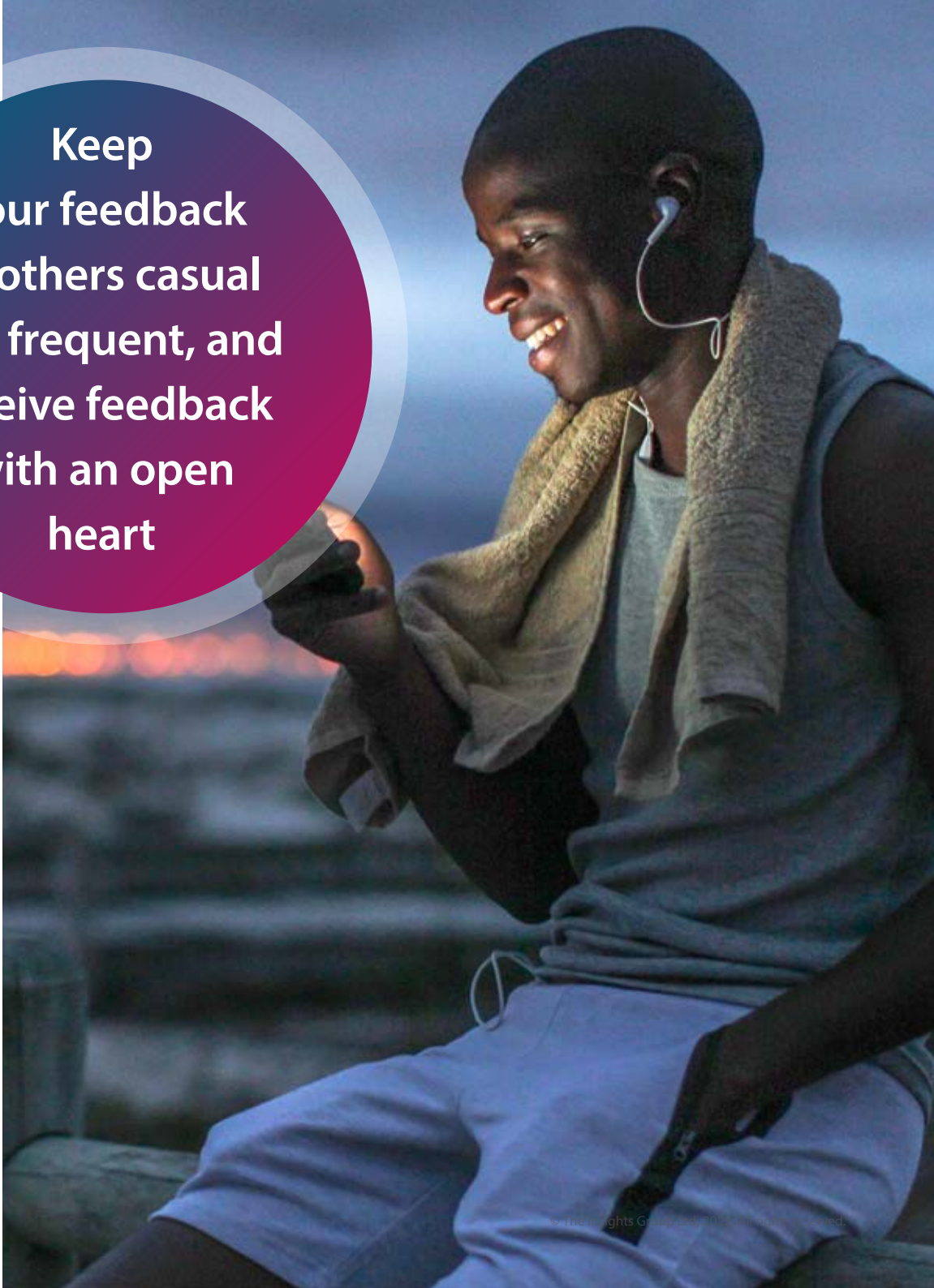
If someone says something inappropriate, there are few ways to deal with it.

In the moment, you can keep it brief *"dude, really?"* or take them aside and assume sarcasm: *"I know you're trying to be funny and trust that you don't mean any harm. I wanted to let you know that I have a sister who has a learning disability, which is why those jokes are hard for me to hear."*

Another idea is to ask permission to have an awkward conversation and let the other person decide. For example, *"I'd like to invite you to have an honest conversation with me about our different perspectives on this issue. We don't have to have it right now, but would you be open to that?"*

This gives the other person time to change gears mentally and a sense of control and safety around the conversation.

Finally, never forget that 'but' negates everything that came before it. *"I don't mean to offend you, but..."* Try, *"I'm worried I might offend you, and I want to talk to you about something that threw me at the meeting this morning..."*



**Keep
your feedback
to others casual
and frequent, and
receive feedback
with an open
heart**

4. Learn to criticise well

No one is immune to the sting of criticism. Even those accomplished leaders who claim to love it certainly didn't start out that way.

The good news is that there are ways to provide tough feedback that respects the other person and generates trust rather than hurt feelings.

Respectfully direct:

"What I love about this idea is how creative and robust it is. What I find interesting is that it relies on a process that's still in development. My question is, would that process be ready in time to support this idea?"

Use the word "I" instead of "you". It's less aggressive and doesn't put the other person on defence.

"This is a cool idea, and I feel it might be too late in the year to plan for it. Let me show you the budgetary guidelines so together we can see if it fits..."

5. Keep feedback as informal and frequent as you can

We're not suggesting that you criticise others' ideas all the time; this is about normalising feedback, and teaching each other that the sky won't fall just because an idea didn't land.

Impromptu and quick conversations are a great way to normalise receiving and giving feedback. Lunchtime walks around the building or morning coffees in a virtual environment are a perfect time to ask questions and share thoughts.



When we feel safe, we are far more open to giving and receiving constructive feedback. Our minds have enough clarity to consider what's been presented to us and how we can integrate that feedback into our performance.

Rather than spending time and energy worrying what others think of us, we trust that they have our back and in turn, we are true to our commitment to have theirs.

Suddenly, within the shift towards psychological safety, we find ourselves free to focus on what we're bringing to the table and how we can help others succeed and fulfil our mutual purpose.

It doesn't require a scientific study to prove that this is a powerful place to be.

When we say our people matter but we don't actually care for them, it can shatter trust and create a culture of paranoia, cynicism, and self-interest. This is not some highfalutin management theory—it's biology. We are social animals and we respond to the environments we're in. Good people put in a bad environment are capable of doing bad things. People who may have done bad things, put in a good environment, are capable of becoming remarkable, trustworthy, and valuable members of an organization.

Julia Hobsbawm

The Nowhere Office, 2022; (pg. 119)

How Insights supports psychological safety in organisations

We're a people development company that works with businesses across the globe to improve the effectiveness of individuals and build better teams.

Our solutions activate and leverage self-awareness and other-awareness to help people communicate and collaborate in ways that develop and nurture team psychological safety.

With 22 global offices, we support our customers with their most pressing business and people challenges from team engagement, culture and leadership, to collaboration and productivity.

Through a combination of preference-based profiling, instructor-led sessions and bite-size activities, we help individuals understand how they can make an impact in their roles and within their teams, and how they can contribute to psychological safety, so that everyone in the organisation can bring their best selves to work, every day.

Insights has been developing leaders for almost 30 years by focusing on each leader's self-awareness, emotional intelligence and relationship-building skills.

Our latest leadership intervention, the Self-Aware Leader, helps leaders develop the skills and mindset necessary for empathetic leadership, a key component of psychological safety.

Visit our www.insights.com for more information about our approach to leadership development



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