

A Paradigm Shift to Psychological Safety

A road to find success with acceptance, freedom, and security

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ABSTRACT

Psychological Safety has been identified as the most critical factor for team effectiveness and success. Still very few organisations could create such an environment. As quoted by Sheryl Sandberg “We cannot change what we are not aware of, and once we are aware, we cannot help but change”[1], the research here is done with an intend to find out the instances which affects the emotional needs of the working professional so that organisations, leaders, change agents and most importantly every individual can take the required steps to bring the required change fostering a psychological safe environment.

Keywords - Psychological Safety, Agile , High Performing Team, Growth Mindset , Positive Quotient [PQ], Positive Intelligence , Team Work , Mental Wellness, Inclusion

INTRODUCTION

“Not finance. Not strategy. Not technology. It is teamwork that remains the ultimate competitive advantage, both because it is so powerful and so rare.” - Patrick Lencioni[2].

There is much research done to understand the dynamics involved in teamwork which creates positive, impactful results. One such pinnacle of research is Project Aristotle, research done in Google on 180 teams in finding out “What makes some teams succeed while others fail. After two years of extensive study, the researchers identified **psychological safety** in the team as the top reason behind team effectiveness.

If we map the results from Project Aristotle, it is in line with Patrick Lencioni’s bestselling book “5 Dysfunctions of Team” where Lencioni has explored the fundamental causes of team failure and provided the most definitive practical guide on building a high performing team.

If we study the outcomes of Project Aristotle and this book, the core of both is about building high-performing teams. Here psychological safety can be mapped with the dysfunction “Absence of Trust” and to some extent “Fear of Conflict” which are the foundations for building high-performing teams.



5 Dysfunctions of a Team



[4]

Though it is clear why psychological safety is required, very few organizations could create such a psychologically safe environment. The primary reason is how psychological safety is misinterpreted or misunderstood.

Hence this research is focused on understanding how people interpret psychological safety in the software organization, what are the day-to-day instances which are affecting psychological safety so that organizations and leaders can take required steps to address such concerns which will enable in creating a psychologically safe environment.

“We cannot change what we are not aware of, and once we are aware, we cannot help but change.”
— Sheryl Sandberg, Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead [1]

II. UNDERSTANDING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Timothy R. Clark in his bestselling book "4 Stages of Psychological Safety framework" has defined psychological safety as a condition in which human beings feel [3]

- (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."

Amy Edmondson, Professor Harvard Business School in her TEDx talk on Building a psychologically safe workplace has cited a few instances, mentioning one here for readers to have a deep understanding of why psychological safety at the workplace is important.

A nurse figured out a patient is given an overdose of medication. But she is reluctant to call the doctor and inform this as she remembers in the past her ability was questioned as she had wrongly detected and reported such incidents. She holds back and doesn't question or inform the doctor in the fear of being judged on her capability again. Such fear in case of this incident would result in the loss of life or critically damage someone's health. It's not the mistake or the reported errors but rather the fear of speaking, fear of taking action which impacts the performance of an individual/team/organization.

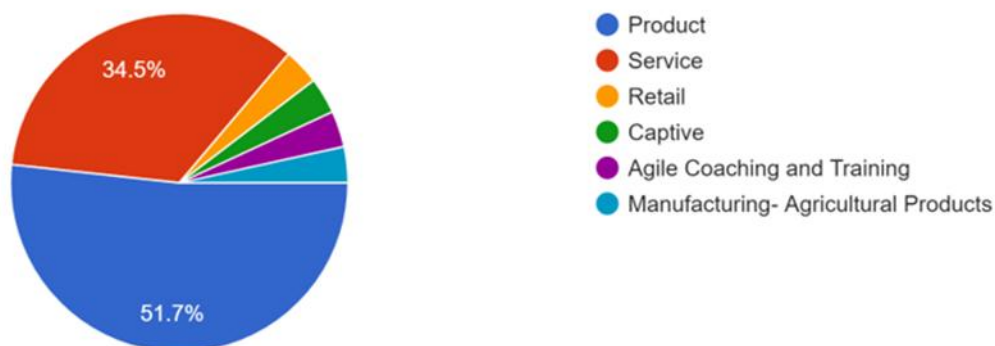
Amy has defined psychological safety where one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, asking questions, expressing concerns, and admitting mistakes.[5]

RESEARCH APPROACH

The research started with understanding and discovering the primary factors affecting psychological safety.

In the New York Times bestselling book “Positive Intelligence”, Author and Coach Shirzad Chamine has mentioned there are three primary factors that form the ground for our emotional survival needs. Each person leans toward one of these three motivations and all of us are driven by these three emotions. An Individual's psychological safety is nothing but how a person feels about these three emotions.

The research is based on thematic analysis of the data received from a series of interviews and survey responses received from 53 working professionals from various industries but primarily from a software engineering background. The scope of the research was to find out how the working professionals interpret their emotions around Acceptance, Independence, and Security and get the instances where they feel these are compromised.



In recent studies of psychopathology, it has been discovered that the feeling or ability of acceptance directly affects mental health, job satisfaction, and hence job performance [6]. In the interview done as part of this research, we asked questions related to “Acceptance”.

A. Does your team accept a team member who is disengaged or not performing as per the expectation?

Responses:

- a) It's not just the people who don't have the skill or are not able to perform as per the team's expectation that have the difficulty in getting the required respect and acceptance, the people who feel they are outstanding performers compared to most of the team also express they face challenges in getting team acceptance or approval.
- b) Few informed they don't feel comfortable admitting that they don't know, or they can't do the work as it will impact their image.

B. Do you think your team members do not care about you?

Responses:

- a) Almost 80% of the respondents mention they get the required help from the management, leaders, team, mentors
- b) But few also expressed that their care is not just about receiving support or help, they also expressed care is about people valuing them and approaching them to get the support/help. The team not approaching them for any kind of support has created self-doubt in their ability. Sometimes even though they have the skill, they express a wrong perception about them that has created boundaries where people perceive them as they can't help or support. And this affects the belongingness in a team.
- c) Another dimension that came out of this research is the ability to be truly part of a team by sharing every small and big thing that is going on within the Team. Not just knowing the success or failure, the progress that is being made, sharing thought are termed as the new definition of “Care”.

C. If you make a mistake in your team, do you feel that you are being targeted?

Responses:

- a) The individuals who are part of the team who consider the failures as learning experiences feel they are motivated to express their opinions, try different approaches, and accept more challenging work.
- b) Many mentioned the degree of the impact of the failure to a great extent defines how people react to the situation.
- c) Most of the entry to mid-level employees called out that they fear nothing should break in the continuous integration / continuous delivery pipeline (CI/CD) because of them, there should not be many defects found in their code.

Build Failure, The most common instance of mistakes in the software industry:

The psychology involved specifically around “Build Failures” is very well explained in the book “Blameless continuous Integration” by Vivek Ganesan [7].

- a) Green build - Build has passed the tests for that stage of the development which can be delivered or deployed. In this case, all is well. The generating greener builds can be attributed in some organizations as the high-performing teams.
- b) Red Build - Build is not ready to be delivered /deployed. This can block everyone as new changes cannot be pushed, the build can't be tested, released, or deployed.

Of course, the developer feels terrible that his/her changes blocked others. But everyone else is furious as their deliverable is impacted. The emotions involved here are anger, frustration, self-loathing, sympathy.

What would be the next step of action from the developer? The developer will fear to attempt anything risky, anything challenging, or in other words will try to take safe approaches which have been already tried and tested.

A simple example of build failure: how it is represented, analyzed, and reacted can affect the individual's mental health impacting his/her ability to be innovative, hence impacting his/her engagement, satisfaction, and performance.

Many such metrics create a blame culture, Organisations need to shift from every single data point which creates a blame culture. A few of the recommendations from Vivek Ganesan are mentioned below about the Measures and Metrics.

What not to measure:

- A. Number of build failures caused by a team or a member
- B. Number of red builds per period

Instead, let us measure what matters,

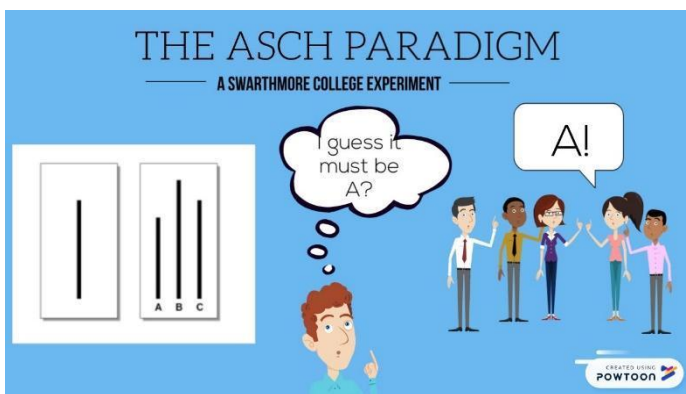
- A. Total red build duration per period
- B. Number of red builds unavoidable by developer

Not just metrics, any such instance of failure, how the group or team reacts creates the organization character and culture.

“The best single question for testing an organization’s character is: What happens when people make mistakes?” – Robert I. Sutton [8]

Why blaming for mistakes by a group of people can influence the organization's culture? Let’s understand the psychology behind this. “Conformity Bias” or peer pressure is the tendency of people to act like the people around them regardless of their personal beliefs. If most of the group behaves in a certain way that influences the individual behaviour. This has been experimented with by Solomon Asch in his research “Asch Conformity Behaviour” which is one of the classic researches in the field of social psychology where he investigated to what extent the group’s conformity will affect a person’s conformity.

Asch Conformity experiment [9]:



Asch experimented on a group of students. He experimented with groups of 8 people where 7 are stooges/actors and one real participant by showing a target line and asked which of the line’s “A”, “B” or “C” length would match with the target line. Out of the 18 trials, in 12 trials the real participants gave incorrect answers followed by the majority of the group’s incorrect responses though the correct answer was obvious.

It was concluded in Asch’s experiment that most of the people want to go along with the group in the fear of being ridiculed and few thought the group’s answer is correct. People conform because they want to feel accepted by the group or they think the group is better informed than them.

“Most conduct is guided by norms rather than by laws. Norms are voluntary and are effective because they are enforced by peer pressure” – Paul Collier, The Bottom Billion.[10]

The organizations, leaders need to give special care to understand the group norms, behaviours and take necessary actions to form a blameless truly inclusive culture

FREEDOM

Freedom as per leadership coach Deepak Choudhury can be defined in 3 aspects.

- Do we have Task freedom?
- Do we have financial freedom?
- Do we have time freedom?

TASK FREEDOM

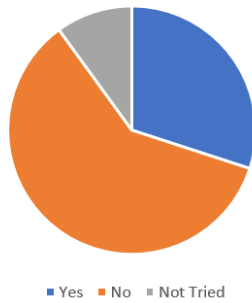
The question around Task Freedom was to understand if people feel that their work is being unduly scrutinized at a micro-level than desirable.

Responses:

- A. 90% of the participants said their work is not being micromanaged
- B. The dimension which came up while discussing this question is not micromanagement but the ability to choose and contribute the way they would like is still missing.
 - a. The ability to pick the work, contribute the way they want to do rather than being managed or instructed by someone on how to do what to do would provide mental peace, greater focus, and enthusiasm to contribute towards the work.

Our next question was around if their organization is supportive of changing technology/domain/role/ verticals allowing them to explore different career paths and opportunities.

Is your organisation supportive for career path change?



support, even changing the profile from a front end developer to a full stack developer and vice versa has been reported as a difficult transition.

Responses:

A. 60% of the participants showed the concern that the career path change is very challenging in many organizations while 30% of participants said they could change their career path and switch to a new role/technology/vertical.

B. A Quality assurance engineer struggled for a longer period to change to a full-stack development engineer even after expressing interest to the team and management. Time, lack of a mentor or peer support, lack of opportunity to apply the learning (self-learning) at work were mentioned as the hurdles on doing the career switch.

C. Similar challenges were mentioned while moving from an individual contributor to a lead/leadership role and vice versa, switching career from research and development to product management, sales,

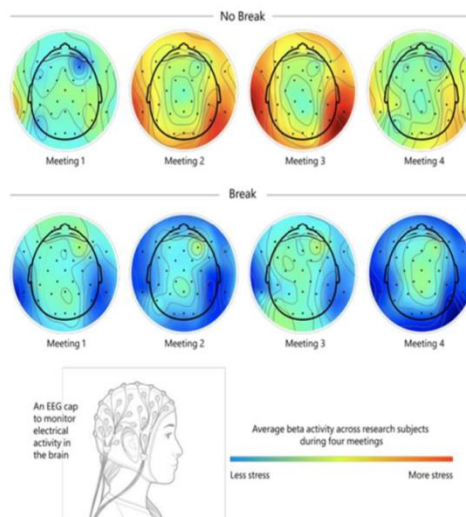
For the scope of the research paper, the recommendations are not given here as there are plenty of resources available on how employees can do career transition. The paper highlights the fact that it is still an instance of struggle affecting the employees' emotional need of getting freedom so that organizations/leaders can take care while building an environment where employees are truly enabled and empowered and get their "Task Freedom".

TIME FREEDOM

Let us now discuss in detail time freedom. Our question was about whether they can take required leave or breaks which they deserve and the work timings.

Many have responded that flexibility in the work time has given them better ways to manage work and life. But the flexibility is compromised especially in remote working when there are longer meetings, no planned breaks, and inability to say no to certain meetings in the fear of losing out information and many interruptions which affects the mental wellness.

Research has been published in Forbes [11], where the brain waves of people working for longer periods were monitored. The study revealed that the brain activity which represents stress increases when people are in continuous meetings without taking any break.



Now, we are talking about mental wellness, how would it impact psychological safety? It is not just the psychological safety that impacts mental wellness, a team or a group who are extremely high with stress will also have difficulty in creating a psychologically safe environment.

Recommendations:

It is important to bring the work culture which promotes the required breaks.

- A. Encouraging or enabling breather period during the day preferably 20% of the time
- B. Enabling buffers or breaks in between as a culture
- C. Providing no meeting days to give uninterrupted time for employees to focus on the most important activities
- D. More importantly, promoting wellness day where employees can focus on their physical or mental wellness

Such culture change will create a healthier environment which will, in turn, create happy employees fostering a psychologically safe environment.

FINANCIAL FREEDOM

Though in this research we have not gone into details on this aspect, a few of the responses are captured here for further study on this dimension.

- A. Rewards are not meeting with the recognitions I receive
- B. No balance or inequality on providing monetary benefits to the existing employees compared to a new hire of similar experience /skill/job position
- C. No transparency in the pay structure
 - a. While it is debated and we are missing practical approaches to bring transparency around the payment structure, most of the respondents highlighted this as an area of concern.

“Trust builds psychological safety and Transparency is the key in building Trust”

The research needs to further continue in understanding the practical ways of bringing transparency around the monetary benefits given to the employees.

SECURITY

Security is the need to control life’s anxieties and push away or minimize them.

THE SUPPORT SYSTEM

One of the anxieties that we all have is do I have the required support system around to lean in when in need.

Responses:

- A. The majority said they have the support system to lean in the workplace in the form of a team member, supervisor /lead /manager, mentor. Many highlighted the importance of their mentor on who they can lean in and get the required support. Such support outside of the team or the manager has helped in controlling the anxieties to a great extent in difficult situations.
- B. Few brought the aspect about the lack of a sponsor to help them advance in their career, advocate about their abilities, and help in creating opportunities to showcase their talent. This helps in managing the anxieties related to career progression.



Illustration by [Catt Small](#)

Recommendation:

- A. Organizations investing in mentorship programs will help and enable employees to find mentors who can guide them to move further in the career
- B. Leaders who are mentors can explore the talents and be a sponsor for those talents in finding and providing opportunities and help in career progression
- C. Forming, enabling, and empowering peer support groups, small networks of like-minded people who can work together in learning new skills and supporting each other to face challenges and explore new opportunities

PERFORMANCE REVIEW PROCESS

Another aspect of security is the performance evaluation cycle and the monetary benefits associated with the performance review cycles. We interviewed the working professional to understand their emotions during this phase.

Responses:

- A. Many companies have moved to performance discussions rather than having performance reviews and ratings. But still, some companies are following the performance review and rating process but all the participants agreed such a process doesn't add any benefit. Rather some have expressed they feel disturbed for over a month after going through this process. Many expressed they could not express their feelings during this process and the discussions have left them crushing their self-confidence, creating anxiety and stress related to job security and badly impacting their psychological safety.
- B. Even in the performance discussions followed in many companies, many said their contribution in completing teamwork is not given much importance rather the individual contributions on critical/complex work get highlighted. Many said the performance discussions, rewards, recognitions are not in line with the SCRUM / KANBAN philosophy of aligning to team/sprint goals. If I am contributing to completing the work which others have started as we have to keep the work in progress to a limit, then my majority of time goes on completing such work rather than taking on something new/challenging/complex.

Recommendations:

When we are embracing Agile methodologies, organizations need to think through their performance review, reward, and recognition process. Moving towards team reward and recognition from the individual in a true sense will help enforce and celebrate the teamwork culture where everyone works towards common team goals, helping each other and lifting each other to attain the result.

FEAR OF STAYING RELEVANT

The other dimension which came out of this research is the fear, anxiety associated with being relevant with the ever-changing technology and expectations. This is the fear expressed or unexpressed every individual is facing as technology is changing very fast.

Duena Blomstrom in her series of the newsletter on “Chasing Psychological Safety” has given an eye-opening example about airlines taking 68 years to get 50 million customers/consumers, Facebook took 3 years to cover this distance whereas Pokemon Go took just 19 days to reach 50 million consumers. This is to highlight and sensitize the fact that everything is moving faster and it is impossible to keep pace with this changing world where everything is Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous, in short, the VUCA world.

Recommendations:

One of the topmost skills highlighted by Duena Blomstrom is building resiliency[13]. And resiliency can be built in the teams which have psychological safety. The team that stays connected learns from each other and grows together will have the ability to strive for success in this VUCA world.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Though the recommendations are provided here on what organizations and leaders can do to bring change in building a psychologically safe environment, mentioning a story narrated by executive leadership coach Deepak Choudhury in the leadership coaching session called “In Search of Success (ISOS) to build teams towards success.

FINDING YOUR VALUE:

A man after failing on everything, career, relationship, money, status, started crying hard. Hot tears started rolling down his face, he cried so hard that he became breathless and prayed to God in his stuttering sound to take his life back. God heard the prayers of this man and decided to appear in front of him. God asked the man why he does not want to live. The man described himself as a failure, he is worthless and there is no point in living this life. God then asked him to take just one last chance before giving up his life and giving him a stone. God gave the man a task to go around and find the worth of the stone.

The man agreed and took the stone. He walked around and saw a potato seller and asked him what price the potato seller could give for the stone. The potato seller saw the stone and said at max he can offer 5 rupees for the stone as he can use this stone as a weight measurement tool. The man started walking further.

Then he saw a jewelry shop, he went inside to show the jeweller the stone and asked the price what he can offer for this stone. The jeweller examined the stone and said he can offer 1 million rupees for the stone. The man was surprised, he started walking further. The jeweller ran behind him and requested to give him the stone in exchange for 10 million rupees, but the man said the stone is not for sale. He wants to figure out the worth of the stone.

The man continued to walk and saw a precious stone shop. Upon checking the worth of the stone there, the man was astonished after hearing the response from the shop owner. The shop owner said, the stone is priceless, all the precious stones in the shop would still not be comparable to this single stone.

The man went back to God and said the stone is priceless and narrated the whole story. God said what did you learn from here. The man understood the deep meaning of this entire task. To find our worth we need to find the place where we are valued, surround ourselves with the group who can see the precious priceless stone inside us, and where we can also see the value in others.

Taking the same analogy here, when we are in search of success, when we are in search of finding the true value of ourselves, we need to find or create a place where there is acceptance, freedom, and security which will give us the courage and encouragement to unleash our potential as an individual, as a team, and as an organization.

The participants agreed all of us have the potential and power to help others feel accepted, independent, and secure by being accountable and taking the **10-factor responsibilities** in creating a psychologically safe environment.



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