

## PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY The Optimal Context for Injury Prevention

By E. Scott Geller

Over the years, several terms have been introduced and applied to address the psychology of OSH. In that regard, the author introduced behavior-based safety (BBS) in 1979.

Over the next decade, the BBS process of using a worker-derived behavioral checklist for peer-to-peer observation-and-feedback sessions flourished in popularity and success (Geller, 1997; Krause et al., 1996; Sulzer-Azaroff & Austin, 2000).

Subsequently, the need to address more human dynamics than observable behavior inspired the foundation of people-based safety, which included the observation and feedback process of BBS (Geller, 2005; 2008).

For numerous applications of BBS, the organizational context or culture has prevented optimal injury-prevention outcomes. This led to the concept of safety culture or climate. OSH consultants and trainers introduced methods to cultivate an organizational safety culture, even a total safety culture (Geller, 1994; 2000; 2001), that could support a successful BBS or people-based safety process. Consulting firms began marketing and implementing safety-culture surveys to assess whether an organization was “ready for” an effective BBS process. The most beneficial culture surveys pinpoint specific cultural adjustments needed to support an effective BBS process. Recently, a new culture-related concept has entered the human-dynamics domain of OSH: psychological safety.

### What Is Psychological Safety?

“Psychological safety is being able to show and employ one’s self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status or career” (Kahn, 1990, p. 708). In psychologically safe organizations, participants feel accepted and respected and believe they will not be humiliated or punished when speaking up with questions, concerns, mistakes or new ideas. Employees who feel psychologically safe are more engaged in their work; they speak up more often and are motivated to improve the performance of their team and organization (Detert & Trevino, 2008; Edmondson, 1999).

Clark (2020a) describes four stages of psychological safety: inclusion safety,

learner safety, contributor safety and challenger safety. Inclusion safety is the foundational stage when individuals feel accepted in their group or work team. They sense a comfortable person-state of belongingness and interdependency.

In the next stage, learner safety, individuals participate in ongoing learning and teaching. As learners, they openly demonstrate vulnerability by asking questions and requesting help without fear of ridicule or embarrassment. They solicit feedback to be the best they can be, and, whenever appropriate, they provide feedback to teach others. In other words, team members at this stage of psychological safety cultivate ongoing continuous improvement as both learners and teachers, depending upon situations and circumstances.

When employees or team members give others supportive or corrective feedback, they have reached the stage of contributor safety. With a make-a-difference mindset, these individuals feel empowered to make meaningful contributions to their team and the organization. Participants achieve the ultimate level of psychological safety when they feel comfortable challenging the status quo. Clark (2020b) refers to this state as “intellectual bravery,” a “willingness to disagree, dissent or challenge the status quo in a setting of social risk in which you could be embarrassed, marginalized or punished in some way” (p. 10).

Note how these four levels of psychological safety suggest using various survey items or questions to determine the level of psychological safety perceived by an individual. More specifically, a culture survey could request employees’ opinions regarding the following statements by assigning each statement a score of 1 to 5 on a Likert scale, with 1 for “totally disagree” and 5 for “totally agree.” Note that these survey items are only suggestions and must be customized for a particular workplace.

1. I feel a positive sense of belonging within my work team.

2. I am comfortable asking my supervisor questions about my job.

3. I willingly ask my coworkers for their assistance whenever needed.

4. I often provide work-improvement advice to other employees.

5. I contribute to the overall success of my organization, beyond just completing my job assignments.

6. I feel comfortable suggesting alternative work plans or practices to my supervisor.

7. I have voiced concerns to management about company policy without a negative consequence.

8. I have received words of approval from my supervisor after suggesting a change in a particular work procedure, process or plan.

### Connections to OSH

An article in *Safety+Health* introduces psychological safety as a “hot concept in management” (Vargas, 2021, p. 42) and reports related interview statements from esteemed safety professionals. For example, Rosa Antonia Carrillo stresses the need for employees to “feel it’s psychologically safe to give you bad news, to share mistakes, to share concerns or even give you critical feedback, because we can’t improve without that feedback” (p. 43). Relatedly, Mark Hambrick, regional safety and health manager at Silent-Aire, reports that “psychological safety is the ability to have tough conversations and grow from them as an individual, group, team and organization” (p. 44).

As noted, the injury-prevention success of BBS depends on the delivery and acceptance of one-to-one behavioral feedback. After completing an employee-derived behavioral checklist, including reports of environmental factors that might have influenced the observed behavior, the observer should communicate the results to that worker. However, many organizations and their employees bypass this BBS step and deliver the checklist information to an individual who enters the data on a program that computes averages for comparing safe and at-risk percentages

across work teams, both within and between organizations.

Why do many BBS applications omit the critical interpersonal feedback process? There is an obvious answer: Psychological safety is lacking. What does this mean in practical operational terms? What is lacking in an organization that omits the invaluable interpersonal conversation component of BBS? Yes, we are back to considering the safety culture, or the environmental and social context of the workplace that can facilitate or stifle psychological safety.

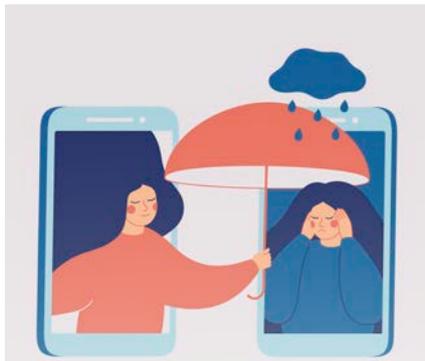
### Cultivating Psychological Safety

Given the obvious benefits of psychological safety, we arrive at the pivotal question: How can an organization cultivate a work culture that promotes, supports and sustains psychological safety among its employees? A one-word answer to this vital and provocative question is simply “leadership.” The leaders of an organization set the cultural tone of that organization, thereby enabling or disabling interpersonal trust and the frank, open dialogue that reflects a particular level of psychological safety.

Many safety professionals have written articles that identify various leadership characteristics that inspire and support psychological safety, including this author (Geller, 2000; 2008; 2016). Here we consider six basic leadership qualities that have been empirically verified to distinguish the leaders of good versus great companies and note their connection to encouraging and nurturing psychological safety. Many readers will recognize this reference to the classic *From Good to Great*, by Jim Collins (2001).

More than 2 decades ago, Collins and his research team studied 11 companies that transitioned from being good to great and had sustained this level of excellence for at least 15 years. Collins and his team systematically compared these good-to-great companies with a carefully selected set of 11 companies that maintained good productivity and profits for at least 15 years but never made the leap from good to great.

Collins and his research team found several common qualities among the good-to-great companies. Among these distinctions were the following leadership characteristics observed at the 11 good-to-great organizations. Consider how these six leadership qualities relate to cultivating a work culture that facilitates psychological safety.



The good-to-great leaders facilitate fact finding to learn and improve, not to find someone to blame. They lead with questions rather than answers, and they promote frank, open dialogue and debate. The result is that employees are not satisfied with the status quo but are continuously engaged in finding ways to improve company performance.

**1. Manifest personal humility or compelling modesty.** This leadership quality receives priority attention in the Collins (2001) study. He relates several case studies of companies that did not reach their potential because their leaders were more concerned about their own notoriety than the reputation of their company. The “good-to-great leaders never wanted to become larger-than-life heroes,” rather they “were seemingly ordinary people quietly producing extraordinary results” (p. 28).

**2. Project success beyond self.** Related to the first leadership quality, good-to-great leaders attribute company success

to factors other than themselves. As systems thinkers, they see the big picture and realize their success is contingent on the daily small-win accomplishments of several individuals. They routinely acknowledge the synergistic contributions of the many employees who enable remarkable results.

### 3. Accept responsibility for failure.

While spreading success beyond themselves, the good-to-great leaders take full responsibility for organizational failures. They face the brutal facts of less-than-desired outcomes, and they hold themselves accountable without blaming other people or just bad luck. Interestingly, Collins and his team found that the leaders of the comparison companies often blamed others for lackluster performance, while taking personal credit for extraordinary results. Social psychologists call this the self-serving bias (Mezulis et al., 2004).

**4. Promote a learning culture.** Humble leaders are open to new information. They are always learning, with a fervent belief in never-ending improvement. The good-to-great leaders facilitate fact finding to learn and improve, not to find someone to blame. They lead with questions rather than answers, and they promote frank, open dialogue and debate. The result is that employees are not satisfied with the status quo but are continuously engaged in finding ways to improve company performance. They are constantly alert to possibilities for process refinement, diligently searching for the best solutions to problems, and regularly submitting suggestions to fine-tune their operations.

**5. Work to achieve, not to avoid failure.** Although they reveal and face brutal facts, the good-to-great leaders never waver in their resolve for greatness. For these leaders, failure is not an option; it is not even considered. With an optimistic stance, these leaders focus on achieving exemplary success. They attend to their envisioned enterprise with fanatic consistency and a disciplined constancy of purpose.

**6. Encourage self-motivation for meaningful work.** Self-motivation is key to safe, long-term productivity and is enhanced whenever perceptions of personal choice or autonomy, competence and community or relatedness are heightened (Deci, 1996; Deci & Ryan, 1995; Geller, 2016b). Moreover, people are self-motivated when their behaviors provide natural ongoing consequences that are rewarding.

When does behavior on the job become intrinsically rewarding and self-motivating? When people believe their work is meaningful. When does this happen? Sometimes the special value of the effort is obvious, such as when people are engaged in activities that prevent unintentional injuries. However, even in these cases, it is critical to provide interpersonal appreciation, gratitude and supportive feedback to reassure people that they are accomplishing meaningful work. Great leaders know how to promote and support self-motivation, and they do this often.

This sixth leadership quality is especially significant for OSH because it defines a self-transcendent source of self-directed motivation (Maslow, 1971). Specifically, working to keep people injury free is obviously meaningful actively caring behavior that fuels self-motivation. In this regard, Collins ends with the following: "It is impossible to have a great life unless it is a meaningful life. And it is very difficult to have a meaningful life without meaningful work" (p. 210). Safety leaders do meaningful work and, therefore, have meaningful lives.

### Great Leaders & Psychological Safety

The connections between the qualities of good-to-great leaders, defined more than 2 decades ago by Collins and his research team, and the leadership qualities purportedly needed to inspire and support psychological safety are quite remarkable. Indeed, Vargas (2021) concludes her introduction to psychological safety with five ways for anyone to cultivate it: 1. ask questions; 2. be humble; 3. build relationships; 4. value all perspectives; and 5. foster autonomy.

While managers and supervisors are assigned their corporate positions, any employee can choose to be a leader by practicing the six qualities of good-to-great leaders as key to nurturing psychological safety. Note that these leadership qualities are relevant beyond the workplace to educational facilities, community service agencies, sports teams and the home.

### Conclusion

This article addresses an important human dynamic that is becoming prevalent in the corporate world, including OSH. While the concept of psychological safety might seem new to some readers, it appeared in management literature at least 30 years ago. Plus, while the

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safety and productivity advantages of cultivating a work, educational or home culture that facilitates and supports psychological safety are obvious and demand serious consideration, such a mission or vision is certainly not new. As explained, the need to cultivate a culture of interpersonal trust, interdependent collaboration and continuous improvement has been a primary mission of OSH since the 1980s or perhaps earlier. Indeed, the leadership strategies proposed to enhance and support psychological safety are the same as those identified empirically more than 20 years ago as qualities practiced by the leaders of especially successful organizations.

A revelation that a particular human dynamic is not new nor innovative does not detract from its relevance and importance. If a new label for a useful concept attracts more attention and implementation, then positive progress has been accomplished. **PSJ**

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