

BUILDING TRUST IN SAFETY

By Justin Molocznik

As the saying goes, it can take years to build trust, but only seconds to destroy it. Talk about pressure! But when you look at the fundamentals of any healthy and productive relationship, the cornerstone is trust.



Who is the most trusted person in your life? Whether it is a significant other, parent, sibling, colleague or pet, what are the attributes of the individual that make you trust them? What would it take to break that trust?

Relationships are built from trust, and, in the world of OSH, relationships are critical. For example, think of a time when an employee shared a safety hazard or incident with you or their supervisor. What was the response? How did you react in the moment? If it was supportive, then you may have developed a new ally in progressing your safety culture. However, if it was met with anger, frustration, blame or even punitive action, you probably negatively impacted that individual's perception of the expectations for communication and their belief in a safe work environment. Both outcomes were dependent on the trust that was perceived from the event.

Over the past few years, I have written about many topics that are key to safety professionals. In doing so, I have spoken with many industry experts and trust has been a common theme among those discussions. When discussing positivity in safety and the propensity to approach things negatively, trust was identified as a mediator (Molocznik, 2022a). In looking at transparent communication in OSH, authenticity and trust are important components to relationship development and communication (Molocznik, 2022b). Trust is essential in our profession.

Trust in safety is also a two-way street. Employees must trust that leadership has their best interest in mind, especially when it comes to safety. At the same time, leadership must trust employees to utilize the provided tools and training to make the safest and best decisions in their daily tasks. Trust has been found to mediate safety climate in areas such as motivation toward safety, attitude toward safety and organizational communication (Kath et al., 2010). But to create an environment of trust, employees must feel psychologically safe. A psychologically safe employee is comfortable and willing to speak up, engaged and motivated, and fearless in

sharing mistakes and learning both as an individual and as a team member (Gallo, 2023). This is incredibly important to an organization and vital to safety culture. But with all the positive impacts of a psychologically safe environment, an environment lacking psychological safety can hinder employees and undermine a safety culture. While psychological safety is related to trust, it is not the same. Psychological safety expert Amy Edmondson (2018) explains that trust is interpersonal between two individuals and psychological safety is experienced at a group level. I interpret this to mean that trust and psychological safety are interrelated, where trust between individuals extends to the group's overall feeling of psychological safety.

To expand universally within an organization and address psychological safety, Edmondson suggests normalizing opportunities to learn from mistakes (this may sound familiar for those with experience in learning teams), encouraging team bonding through day-to-day tasks, ensuring that people feel seen (authentically), and seeking input with both humility and openness (specific to leaders within an organization; Baskin, 2023). Edmondson also includes a free psychological safety survey (www.the fearlessorganizationscan.com) that may help safety professionals develop their own metrics on psychological safety.

The table is set; we understand the importance of trust in safety and, by extension, psychological safety. But how do you build trust? Start with relationships. Whether it is you as a safety professional learning about the individuals you serve or a member of leadership walking the production floor and spending time with employees, showing that you care about the individuals goes a long way. Working toward mutual respect in everyone's contributions within the organization also creates trust. Finally, actions and follow-through are key to developing trust, especially in safety. If someone brings a safety concern to you, acting on that concern and ensuring that you bring them satisfaction in protecting them from that safety concern creates a bond of trust.

A large portion of my OSH experience comes from construction. One of the greatest challenges throughout my career has been creating an environment of psychological safety and trust within the organizations I have worked with and between the individuals I have worked for. But recognize this, I do not believe that any of the hazard recognition programs, safety committees, learning teams, or even wellness programs that I have implemented would have had a chance of being received without first building trust and psychological safety. Start there and watch your safety culture thrive. **PSJ**

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Justin Molocznik, M.S., CSP, CHST, CRIS, is director of safety and human resources for JTM Construction in Seattle, WA. He holds an M.S. in Industrial and Organizational Psychology from Kansas State University. Molocznik serves as the ASSP Region I Vice President and on the Washington State Governor's Industrial Safety and Health Advisory Board. He has previously served as ASSP Region I Area A director, Region I deputy regional vice president, president of the Puget Sound Chapter, and as a member of ASSP's Editorial Review Board.

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