



Unlock innovation with psychological safety

Why it's time to face up to the challenges of a polarised world

The xford Group
A City & Guilds Business

Our contributors

Thank you to our team who weaved together their strands of deep knowledge and decades of experience, to bring together this report.



Andy Dent
Head of New Business
and Marketing



Caroline Taylor
Director, Solutions,
Innovation and People



Dilpazier Aslam
Curation and Learning
Technology Lead



Robin Ryde
Senior Consultant and
author of *Mind the Bosses*

Contents

About the authors	2
Foreword	4
1 Introduction	7
2 Most organisations are not fully psychologically safe	8
3 The impact of not having safe spaces for innovative conversations	10
4 Leadership opportunity one: reviewing the role of hierarchical structures	15
5 Leadership opportunity two: leaders inviting challenge	19
6 Leadership opportunity three: expanding the psychologically safe culture to all parts of the business	22
7 The HEAR model	24
8 Conclusion	30

Foreword

"As leaders we work within an interesting and demanding set of tensions:

The tension between providing clear direction and empowering others

The tension between stretching our people to meet business demands and caring for individuals' well-being

The tension between creating a safe space for some, which can make it uncomfortable for others

As the world's extremes become, well, more extreme, polarisation on all fronts is adding to the tensions in which we operate. Examples include views on the causes of social injustice, how to provide economic opportunity, or how to respond to climate change.

How do we invite diverse voices to the table, whilst nurturing psychological safety? People need to share ideas without risk of feeling vulnerable.

Our research showed how people are looking to us as leaders to embody psychological safety in the midst of all this tension.

Caroline Taylor
Director, Solutions,
Innovation and People



We outline here some ideas to help you navigate this situation to your organisation's advantage – to unlock the innovation potential within all your teams and individuals.

Perhaps now, more than ever, it's in everyone's interest to face up to the challenges of a polarised world."

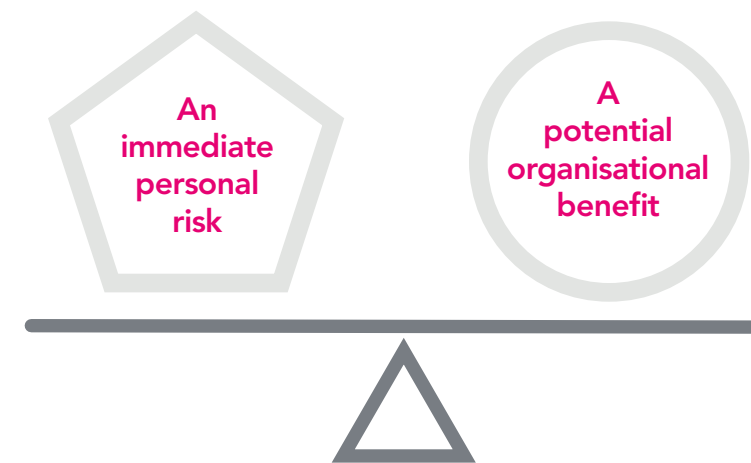


1 Introduction

Each of us makes a simple, yet costly, mental evaluation before we share a thought to innovate and improve an organisation.

That evaluation is this:

Is it worth me taking the real and immediate personal risk of being critiqued by seniors, peers or colleagues if I suggest an innovative idea, for a potential and delayed benefit for my organisation?



What would you choose?

And what would you choose to do if you knew the people around you held more polarised views than you? What if their opinion about how to handle a project, the market in which you operate, industry trends - not to mention wider social views around left/right-wing politics, gender roles, the economy, migration, or being vaccinated – were radically different from your own?

**Would you speak about an idea to challenge the norm and innovate?
Would you share your concerns about a proposal you had a bad feeling about?**

We connected with 20 senior leaders from a range of industries. With each we engaged in an in-depth exploration to establish a fuller understanding of psychological safety and its impact in their workplace. We were particularly keen to understand the impact of polarised views from wider geopolitical and social matters that

may be leaking into the workplace and if this was affecting performance and engagement.

From our interviews there was a clear trend that the majority of people would not take this personal risk due to a lack of psychological safety in team or individual relationships.

We found that although all the organisations recognised the value of having a psychologically safe culture, most were still in the early stages of realising it. Our research also revealed that, for a range of reasons, most people were not bringing their views to work.

What this meant, for many areas of an organisation, was unrealised potential for an open culture; a place buzzing with safe-challenge and the resulting innovation. Instead, most places found themselves bound by a traditional hierarchy, leaders uncomfortable with being challenged and the idea of psychological safety struggling to transition from pockets of the organisation into a mainstream culture.

2 Most organisations are not fully psychologically safe

Our respondents shared that the majority of employees are choosing not to take the personal risk of sharing an opinion and being exposed to criticism or ridicule. Instead, they are remaining silent.

“

As one interviewee said:

You become a conformer, you do what is asked, you're not innovating, making suggestions, you're basically doing a reasonable job, but none of that extra stuff. Trust is the factor that stops people [feeling] psychologically safe...

”

This silence has a real impact on the innovative advantage in your business, because employees who experience an inclusive culture feel highly encouraged to drive innovation and optimisation.¹

And in a polarised world, where opinions are moving away from the centre ground on a spectrum of social and economic issues, even fewer employees are feeling safe enough to share their thoughts. For example:

“The vaccine is never discussed ... because I think people are afraid to share their view, to be judged. So, I think the vaccine one is very full of tension, and people know that as soon as you mention it,” says one senior leader of a multi-national.

Many individuals are not sharing their ideas because they don't feel fully able to have those robust conversations where ideas are shared, explored, challenged and refined into solid business plans. They are also uneasy about flagging a concern without having an immediate solution.

We also found that some organisations had made avoidable and expensive mistakes, consuming resources businesses can't afford.

“Having a different view is not seen as positive. There's a need of conformity. The boss maybe saying something totally stupid, but nobody is going to say it. You have to be very courageous. People don't speak up and the monster grows bigger and bigger,” says another interviewee.

And what are the key challenges to creating those much-needed safe spaces?

Our research showed three themes:

- Rigid hierarchies acting as blockages to the free flow of ideas
- Leaders unwilling or uncomfortable to invite people to challenge them
- Psychological safe cultures being limited to parts of the organisation

We also found what most of us suspected; that bits of disconnected training are unable to change the dominant ways of working.

Yet leaders are realising the growth potential here, are creating spaces where ideas are shared, built on, and brought to market; whether it's those many small ideas that help resolve systemic challenges, or the big idea that becomes your next USP. The results of which are that the higher your psychological safety, the higher your chances of being more innovative.

Or as the Harvard Business Review says: **“Psychological safety allows for moderate risk-taking, speaking your mind, creativity, and sticking your neck out without fear of having it cut off — just the types of behaviour that lead to market breakthroughs.”**²

Our definition of psychological safety.

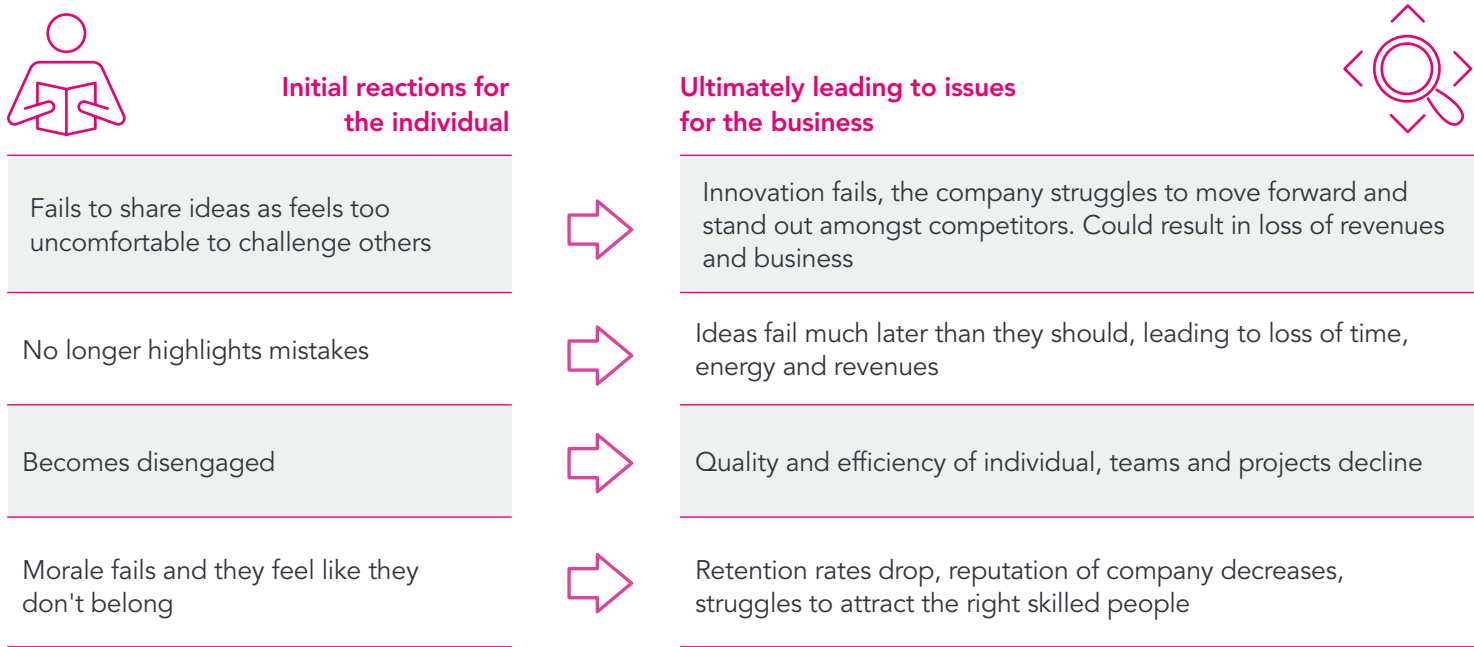
When we refer to psychological safety in this report, we mean:

"When individuals and teams believe that they won't be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes. Psychological safety results in happier teams that take more intelligent risks, raise concerns sooner, stay on the team longer, are more resilient to change and external threats, and ultimately result in a real improvement to the bottom line of your business."

1. Gallup webinar 'Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: How to Make it a Competitive Advantage rather than Window Dressing': 16 March 2022
2. <https://hbr.org/2017/08/high-performing-teams-need-psychological-safety-heres-how-to-create-it>

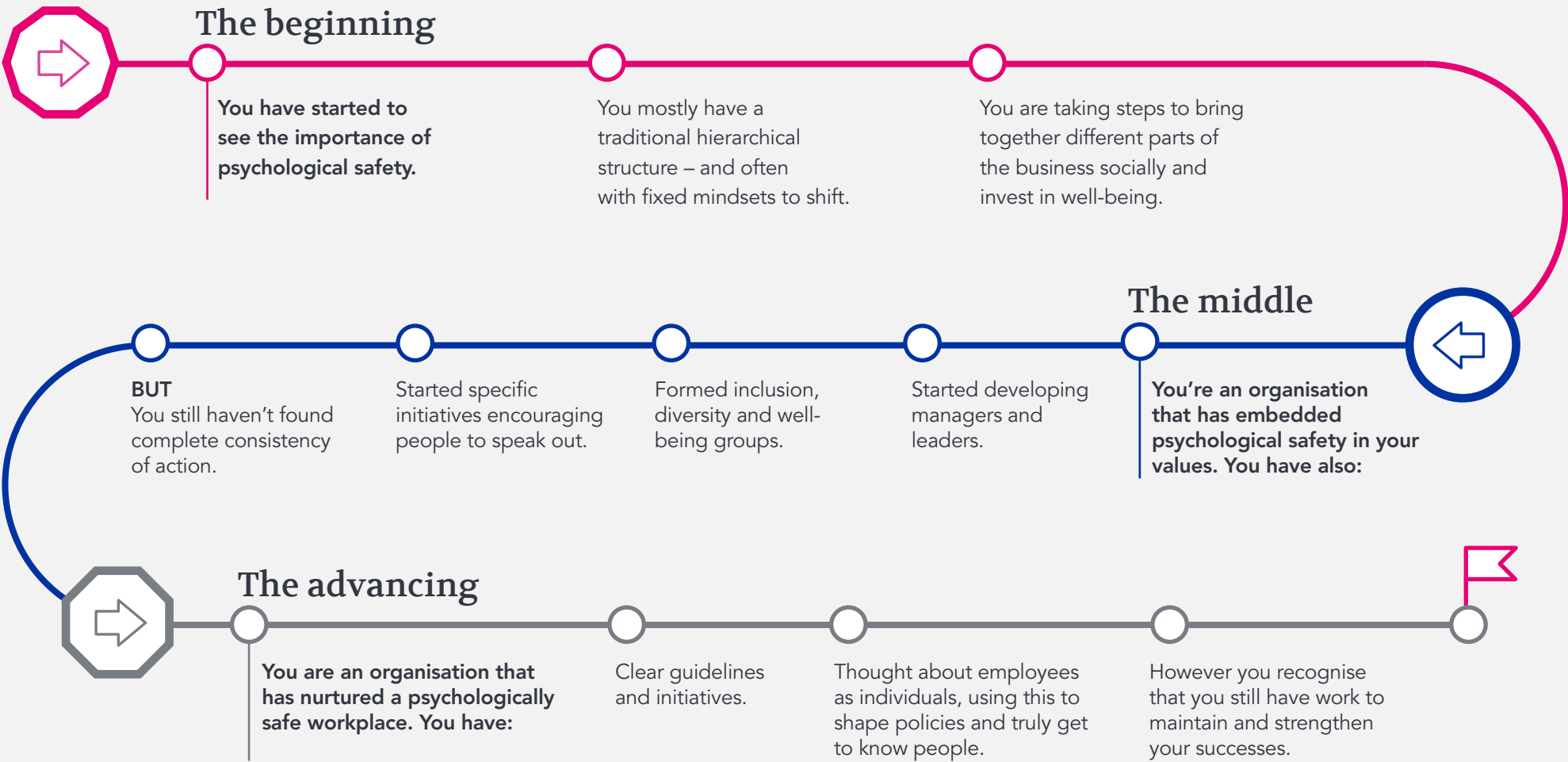
3 The impact of not having safe spaces for innovative conversations

Our respondents highlighted the impact on innovation when there’s not enough psychological safety:



As the table above shows, the impact of not having psychological safety in a polarised world leads directly to a drop in the level of innovation in your organisation.

Psychological safety – where are you in the journey?



Where do you see yourself on the journey of creating a fully psychologically safe workplace? At the beginning, middle or as advancing?
And where would you like your organisation to be two years from now?

“
One reason is that people’s psychological safety is quite fragile and vulnerable at the minute because of the pandemic.
”

Dr Hannah Wilson, Head of Clinical Governance and Clinical Psychology Lead at Kooth.

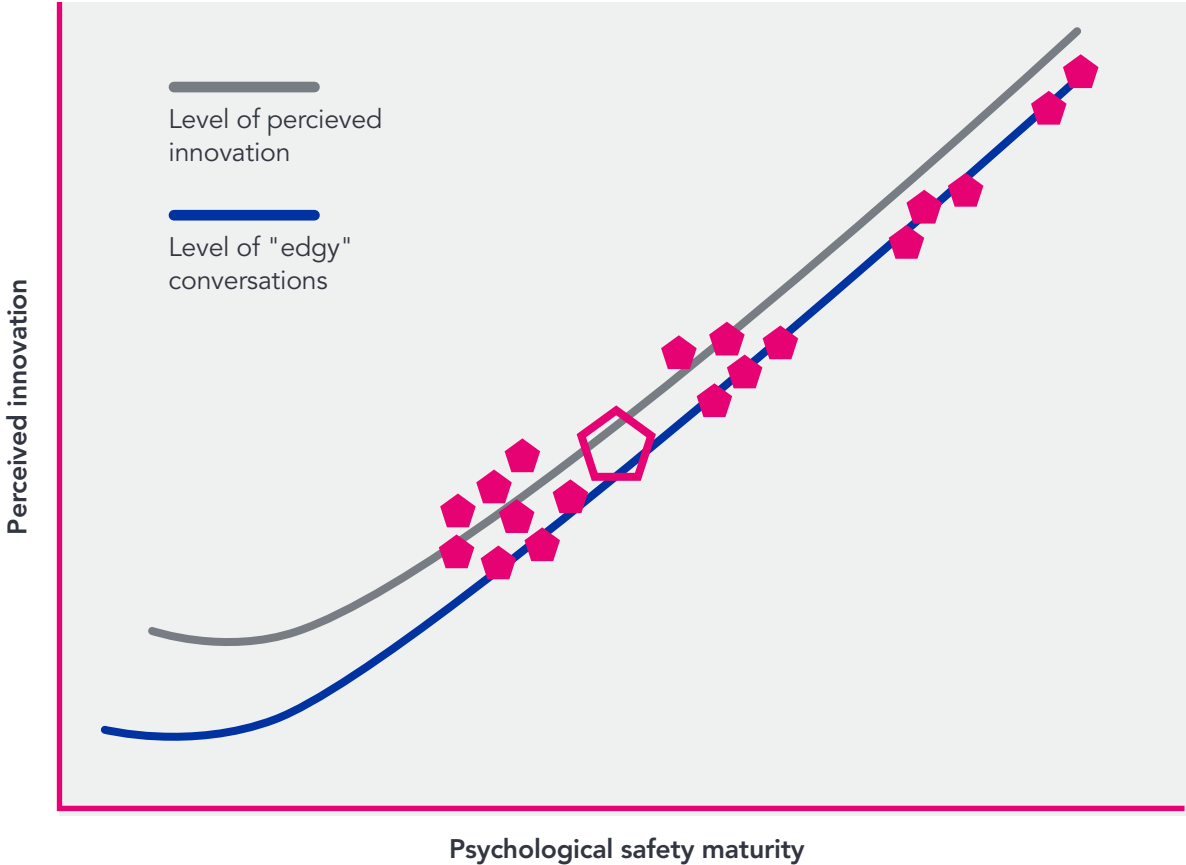
If, like most of the leaders we interviewed, you find that your organisation is either at the beginning or the middle of the maturity journey, the good news is that you’re probably already aware of the value psychological safety has to offer your business. No one we engaged with said that they weren’t on the journey somewhere, indicating that businesses had recognised the imperative to have psychologically safe work environments; all the more so in a polarised world.

And why is this all the more relevant now? “One reason is that people’s psychological safety is quite fragile and vulnerable at the minute because of the pandemic,” says Dr Hannah Wilson, Head of Clinical Governance and Clinical Psychology Lead at Kooth. “We’ve essentially been pickling in psychological threats for nearly two years now.”

Another factor caused by the pandemic is that people’s work priorities have changed. “Employees are realising the importance of things like well-being, feeling valued, and feeling safe,” says Dr Wilson. “Before COVID-19, they might have put up with feeling miserable. Now, they expect workplaces to step up and take action, or they’ll move to another workplace that offers more support.”³

The psychological safety / innovation curve

An interesting correlation occurred across the twenty respondents when we started to look at where organisations were on the journey to psychological safety maturity (beginning, middle or advancing) and the levels of innovation (perceived) that were reported from our discussions. This in itself may not be surprising as higher levels of psychological safety have been widely reported to produce more innovation and higher levels of performance.⁴ However what we started to notice was the organisations at the top the curve were the ones that reported tackling some of the edgier, more polarising, conversations.



This was echoed in a recent McKinsey report: “When employees feel comfortable asking for help, sharing suggestions informally, or challenging the status quo without fear of negative social consequences, organizations are more likely to innovate quickly, unlock the benefits of diversity, and adapt well to change.”⁵

One correlation our research indicated is that the edgier conversations reflect the deeper psychological safety felt by colleagues. We think this is an indicator to watch out for. If your workplace is not having these conversations, how might you shift your leadership style in response?

There’s some interesting work in this space by Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky on the concept of ‘orchestrating conflict’, i.e. proactively bringing disagreement to the fore and engaging both sides to explore what losses they are fearing.⁶

Without psychological safety, the likelihood of those conversations ever taking place drops.

Leaders looking, therefore, to build more innovative workplaces would be wise to nurture psychological safety, which is being further threatened by polarised individual views.

The more psychologically safe an organisation is, the more likely individuals and teams will feel able to have vulnerable conversations about ideas to create innovative solutions to business challenges.

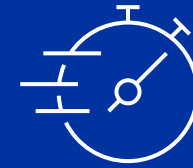
3. <https://work.kooth.com/dont-leave>: Your guide to beating the Great Resignation report: pp 27-28

4. Edmondson, Amy C., and Josephine P. Mogelof. “Explaining psychological safety in innovation teams: Organizational culture, team dynamics, or personality.” Creativity and innovation in organizational teams 21 (2006): 28.

5. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/psychological-safety-and-the-critical-role-of-leadership-development>

6. Heifetz R., Grashow A., and Linsky M. The Practice of Adaptive Leadership pp152-3

Psychological safety and innovation in action



Get to know the human, not the idea

One VP said with regards to the challenges of creating more psychologically safe workplaces: “You have two people who have a tension as a result of views, which leads to groups having tensions against each other, which leads to cliques forming. The only answer is to smush them together. As an outsider, you can encourage things, so you build socials that force people to mingle. You do coffee afternoons where you randomly assign people to have coffee with each other and share what is going on in their lives. In any of the divisive conversations ... it’s always ‘get to know the human, not the idea’.”

A consistent set of challenges emerged from our interviewees. These were factors that were inhibiting organisations from realising their innovative potential because businesses weren’t fully psychologically safe.

The three leadership challenges to establish psychological safety that our research highlighted are:

1. Rigid hierarchies acting as blockages to the free flow of ideas
2. Leaders uncomfortable or unsure how to welcome challenge
3. Expanding the psychologically safe culture to all parts of the business

Let’s explore the opportunities these challenges offer leaders.

4 Leadership opportunity one: reviewing the role of hierarchical structures

Our research indicated that many of the current polarising events people are living through are compounding the challenge of not feeling psychologically safe in rigid hierarchical structures at work.

For example, one of our interviewees shared their experiences of the caution people adopted during the recent polarising American election: “When [the US] had to decide whether to vote for Biden or Trump, I know for sure that the company was divided in two. They left political discussions out of the door and the same happens here... we have some who are not vaccinated, and they are fully against vaccination, but we do not discuss that in the office. We may discuss it out of the office openly but not in the office ... You may discuss, but you never go up to that point where personal issues may ruin the relationship,” says one leader we interviewed.

There was a fear that by openly sharing one’s views these might be held against you by those in positions of influence.

These top-down structures can create an atmosphere where knowledge is power, and status (rather than ideas) holds greater influence. The added layer of feeling uncomfortable with, for example, that person’s political views makes this hierarchy less psychologically safe.

One of the trends in Korn Ferry’s Future of Trends 2022 report is ‘Reinvention’ of business models: “Organizations will become more fluid. Expect flatter, non-hierarchical structures and more project-based working.”⁷

There’s no suggestion that hierarchies must be completely dismantled in order for organisations to be psychologically safe. It might, however, mean reassessing the usefulness of hierarchies where it’s in the interest of some individuals to maintain the status

quo, and insist that ideas are cascaded through the structure, vetted by seniors who are ‘in the know’ before being shared with the next layer of management.

Polarised views compound this challenge because each individual in that waterfall process may not feel fully comfortable with the other. And if they don’t, and choose to withhold an idea, no one benefits from that idea.

As an alternative approach, some organisations are: “successfully creating a “network of teams”—an agile organisational structure that empowers teams to tackle problems quickly by operating outside of bureaucratic or siloed structures—requires a strong degree of psychological safety.”⁸

7. <https://www.kornferry.com/insights/featured-topics/future-of-work/2022-future-of-work-trends>

8. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/psychological-safety-and-the-critical-role-of-leadership-development>

The negative impact of hierarchical structures

Starkly different experiences

One of our interviewees said they'd encountered different approaches to psychological safety across the various organisations they had worked with in recent years. These experiences varied widely, from an engineering firm when compared to a progressive tech company that they identified as being well equipped in this area.

So how do they differ?

The engineering firm: A very traditional company with a rigid hierarchical structure, they were reported to be behind in their diversity and inclusion, with no clear strategy around this or well-being. People, therefore, were feeling reluctant to speak up, only expressing their views via anonymous surveys. While this was the case, the firm was starting to recognise the need for people to feel safe and not judged.

The tech company: The alternative experience was with working with a tech start-up. Without a traditional hierarchical structure, people were actively encouraged to share their voices, and were actively observed doing so in front of their leaders.

This approach started at the recruitment stage where they used value-based interviewing to find employees aligned with company values, rather than focusing on experience alone. A greater investment in professional development was also considered to make people feel more valued and respected, and in turn voice opinions. Monthly meetings where opinions were requested and valued simply increased the feeling of psychological safety.

A global company moving forward, but battling against a sense of social conformity

One Head of Talent Management shared their experience of old-school hierarchy slowing the establishment of psychological safety.

Moving forward on psychological safety, but still 'carrying luggage from the past'

- The organisation was taking steps to move forward in creating an environment of psychological safety for employees.
- Clear values and leadership principles (including focus on empowerment and collaboration) had been established, alongside building strength.

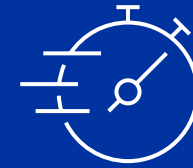
- Leadership training and classes had been offered to leaders and had taken place, but as yet learning was reported not to have fully cascaded down the organisation.

What barriers are they facing?

- Luggage brought over from the past meant that inappropriate behaviours and political advantages were still being seen.
- There was also a sense of social conformity in the industry where they were polite, but didn't want to seek confrontation or challenge, and were fearful of speaking out and did not feel their voices would be heard.
- Strong egos were felt to impede learning, and some simply didn't trust the leadership team to make good decisions.
- "What gets more tense in the conversation [is]...this leadership thing, it's this favouritism [where] one gets promoted...[where] I would see more frustration."



Psychological safety and innovation in action



Creating spaces for disruptive ideas

One leader we interviewed shared a company-wide 'innovation initiative'. In this practice, colleagues in every part of the business, irrespective of seniority, are given time to come up with disruptive proposals that are different and challenge the norm; something that helps the business disrupt the market in a good way. Individuals are then given the opportunity to share their thinking with the CEO and Board of Directors to see what the next steps might look like.

5 Leadership opportunity two: leaders inviting challenge

Is your current definition of a leader still serving you? Are you the type of leader that invites challenge and debate, with only a few people actually stepping forward to take up that invitation?

Our second barrier was about this leadership style. I.e. that people were unsure if the invitations to feel safe to share and challenge were genuine. Speaking truth to power takes significant courage and whilst leaders often "verbally" invite this, in open forums it is often not forthcoming - leaving leaders to believe there is no challenge or with the question, "why does no one ever challenge me?".

There is opportunity here to examine the environment that you are creating for your people to speak truth to power (i.e. you) - an area explored expertly by Dr Megan Reitz and John Higgins in Speak Up (2019).

In our research, 'permission seeking' to challenge leaders was being met with inconsistent answers. Some were hearing leaders talk about being challenged and to share thoughts without fear of reprimand. Yet they weren't seeing it in practice; there were too few spaces in which to offer that challenge: Many experienced an invite to a conversation where things had already been decided.

Others were not so lucky; there was no such audible invite, and no visible example of leaders responding positively to opposing ideas.

The result of both of these is that most people didn't feel that leadership was embodying the principles of psychological safety. And our research found most people were unwilling to discuss ideas to innovate in this climate.



Leaders inviting challenge

Welcome steps

A couple of organisations in our research spoke of how they were experiencing positive change with strong, open, entrepreneurial CEOs. However, for both these organisations, and others, it was clear that they considered more leaders were needed to change their mindsets in order to embrace psychological safety. Therefore, they expressed how they were developing leaders to think differently. In particular, they were focusing on:



Encouraging leaders to get to know people on a personal level to understand more about them and the pressures they were working under. This level of understanding would help to provide an atmosphere of trust and sharing.



That leaders needed to be more open and vulnerable in order to encourage more honesty from the team, some via emotional intelligence training. If they were seen to offer insight into themselves personally and as a leader, and encourage others to do the same, this would help employees to feel comfortable enough to challenge them.

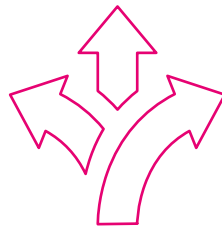


Focus on helping leaders to empower others in the organisation, encouraging them to speak out, creating an environment where people weren't afraid to challenge, no matter their level or position in the organisation.

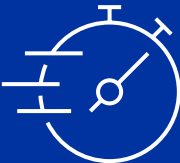


Consistency in action – making sure not only that their own behaviour was consistent, but also that of the leadership team as a whole. They had to be seen to 'walk the talk'.

This is no easy task and we at The Oxford Group have observed a growing tension between leaders providing direction, whilst still empowering their people. Looking to thought leaders such as Dan Pink and his fascinating and provocative work Drive, gives us deeper insight into how ensuring your people are given the opportunity for autonomy, mastery and purpose. This can be a powerful way to motivate, engage and create a sense of openness.



Psychological safety and innovation in action



Asking for different ideas

One leader said: "I talk to my team every day and I'm constantly asking are you happy, engaged? I'll often ask them to challenge me, so I'll put forward ideas, and I'll say: 'if you don't think I'm right, or if you've got a different idea, then tell me.'"

6 Leadership opportunity three: expanding the psychologically safe culture to all parts of the business

Almost all the leaders we spoke to referenced their values and behaviours when talking about implementing psychological safety in their organisation. They saw this as the backbone to ensuring that all were on the same page, working towards psychological safety.

Over time, they had also begun to filter in new processes with the hope of creating a workspace in which people felt open to challenge colleagues and speak up. While training was an important element of this, they highlighted various ways in which processes were changing in an attempt to create a different, more open, culture.

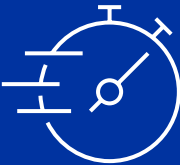
Values and processes	Encouraging speaking out	Promoting well-being
Refocusing values to include respect, inclusivity, integrity and collaboration, and coaching employees to live by them.	Creating an environment where mistakes are considered a learning opportunity and they become a collective responsibility.	Introducing emotional first aiders.
Introducing frameworks, cultural guidelines and pillars to lead by.	Monthly meetings and town halls where people are encouraged to share their opinions. For some, this started as early as the onboarding and recruitment stage where people were told the importance of expressing their opinion.	Setting up in-house training on emotional well-being and support.
Monitoring of initiatives through performance management systems, performance reviews, focus groups, anonymous surveys and clear whistleblowing policies.	Company-wide innovation initiatives where employees are invited to come up with a disruptive proposal to bring to the CEO and board of directors.	Running meditation and well-being sessions.

The limitation of this approach is that most organisations were struggling to translate this values-based approach into fully embedded organisational culture. There was a circumstantial factor and a systemic reason for this.

The circumstantial factor: In part this was affected by the pandemic and the push to work from home. Space to challenge polarising topics rarely surfaced naturally in digital meetings amongst colleagues. In the absence of water-cooler moments and after-work socials, it meant that any tensions here were less likely to bubble to the surface. This was coupled with the feeling that some of these more divisive issues were less likely to surface in the workplace. People saw these divisive issues as more personal views and open to judgement, rather than opinions that necessarily would be shared at work, particularly not in the corporate office environment in which most of them sat. And it's in this challenge and difference that often lies innovation, deepened inclusion and cognitive diversity that's currently being lost.

The systemic reason: Aside from this circumstantial factor, a principal reason for this was that the general workforce was looking to leaders to exemplify what this meant in practice. And currently most are not seeing this fully embodied in the leadership space. Until they do, all indications are that people won't be sharing their innovative ideas.

Psychological safety and innovation in action



Finding common ground

One leader spoke of the philosophy they apply to build a psychologically safe workspace in all parts of the business: "I would say two things come to my mind. One is, do not feel attacked by others, you don't have to defend yourself. Your views and the other views are equally legitimate. The point that there are different views from yours doesn't mean that yours are wrong, or vice versa. Just accept that there can be different views and it is not a personal attack. [Two] look at the content, look at the reason why things happen and try to find a common ground and a common space..."

7 The HEAR model

One of the leaders we interviewed made a stark remark in reference to leading people in a polarised, post-Covid world: “[It’s time for leaders to] lead like you’ve never led before.”

Author of *Never Mind the Bosses*, and senior consultant at The Oxford Group, Robin Ryde, told us:

If you really want to achieve specific goals then you need psychological safety. So if without it, a leader says, “I want innovation in my team to achieve growth and be transformational”, or “let’s make our strategic work more effective,” you could apply your efforts to achieve that strategy – but then get it wrong and fail.”

"My question is how can psychological safety help us rethink our organisations? How do we play to our area of expertise? How do you create the conditions for experimentation? If you want to be best-in-class, you simply must have psychologically safe conversations."

In fact, leaders are recognising that they are not the experts, and that business decisions require robust dissent by all the relevant experts in the workforce to test the veracity of assumptions and ensure important perspectives have been reviewed.

There’s a classic quote from the archives of management books of General Motors’ legendary leader Alfred Sloan. Sloan one day gathered one of his top committees to present an important business decision. “Gentlemen,” he said, “I take it we are all in complete agreement on the decision here.” Everyone around the table nodded. “Then,” continued Mr. Sloan, ‘I propose we postpone further discussion of this matter until our next meeting, to give ourselves time to develop disagreement and perhaps gain understanding of what the decision is all about.’”⁹

The point here being (other than that we have travelled some way in terms of gender equity) that we recruit innovative minds so they can apply their skills to overcome business challenges, not to agree to ‘whatever the business decides’. Liz Wiseman explores this in more detail in her book *Multipliers*.

Our interviewees had some clear views about the prevention of the negative impact of polarised views on psychological safety and in turn innovation, including:

- Creating safe conversations around differing viewpoints, encouraging people to listen.
- Opening up to others on a personal level, acknowledging differences, but finding common ground.
- Educating others around different cultures and experiences and encouraging them to be curious.
- Helping to ensure that people feel listened to, and not silenced or cancelled.
- Creating and communicating clear company values.

9. Peter F. Drucker Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices (<https://fortune.com/2015/12/07/alfred-p-sloan-decision-making/>)

“ Cultures of trust are the result of leaders and their actions.” Gallup¹⁰

”

So, where does the balance lie between inviting all voices in your organisation to feel safe to challenge ideas and express their thoughts (some quite polarised) – and also investing your own expertise and leadership – and how do you do both of these in service of creating an innovative organisation?

The greater your ambition as an organisation, the higher the psychological safety you need to serve that. Psychological safety allows you to work on the first thoughts until they’re developed into something more robust to invest your resources to achieve your goals.

In our experience we find four principles offer a way to maintain that balance, and they’re summed up in the acronym HEAR.

By using this approach we believe you will create the conditions for psychological safety and innovation with your people.

10. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/248012/why-tech-companies-need-trust-improve-agility.aspx>



HEAR YOURSELF...

Honesty

Be honest with how you're feeling, and the role you want to play to guide your organisation.

Empathy

Show self-care with whatever you might be experiencing. You have value and others have value.

Accuracy

In understanding any biases that might be affecting your ability to invite and listen to others.

Respect

Respect your own views, nurtured from years of experience, not about ignoring yourself.

H

E

A

R

Honesty

Be honest with your intention to listen and also share your own views.

Empathy

Assume people are well intentioned and want to share their sincerity.

Accuracy

In hearing the facts over your feelings. What are they saying rather than what you are feeling about what they are saying.

Respect

Respect others' views. What are the commonalities? Respect is not the same as agree.

... TO HEAR OTHERS



Honesty

HEAR Yourself...

Be honest with your intention to listen and also share your own views.

... to HEAR others

Be honest with how you're feeling, and the role you want to play to guide your organisation.

What our respondents said about being honest.

It's about opening up to others on a personal level:

For several respondents, it was about providing opportunities for employees to open up with one another on a personal level, both with leaders, managers and peers. Some had taken steps to organise meals and get together for people from different departments, investing in creating personal bonds and relationships. It was about taking the time to get to know each other and find where similarities lie as well as differences.

One respondent shared this advice on identifying the impact of the most senior person in the room: "Be aware of who the most senior leader is in the room – and their role to make all the voices heard."

"Clean coaching and [understanding] relationship dynamics help deal with the power paradigm of those with the microphone. For example, even if it's the group that was disempowered who now has the microphone and makes the others the 'bad guys'. It's about being inclusive and not swapping the power dynamic roles."

Empathy

HEAR Yourself...

Show self-care with whatever you might be experiencing. You have value and others have value.

... to HEAR others

Assume people are well intentioned and want to share their sincerity.

What our respondents said about showing empathy.

It's about helping to ensure people feel listened to:

This was particularly important for leaders to follow, ensuring that people were not silenced (or cancelled), even if their views were different. Here, collecting feedback through surveys and sessions was also viewed as important, as was running speaking-up sessions and developing new ways to address concerns.

One leader spoke about the addiction to being right rather than being human, referencing Judith Glazer's work on *Conversational Intelligence* and the three levels of communication and the value of leaving any personal agendas behind to truly empathise with your team.

Accuracy

HEAR Yourself...

In understanding any biases that might be affecting your ability to invite and listen to others.

... to HEAR others

In hearing the facts over your feelings. What are they saying rather than what you are feeling about what they are saying.

What our respondents said about displaying accuracy.

It's about educating others and being curious:

Some suggested the importance of 'lunch and learn' sessions to create awareness of different cultures and experiences. Here it was felt important to create an atmosphere in which people listened to one another with curiosity and asked others to explain their opinions, rather than judging them for them. It also involved coaching people to know how best to respond to conflict and others' needs.

Others shared the practice of reverse mentoring where people from a neuro/cultural/gender etc. diverse background mentored leaders in senior roles to help widen their appreciation of the challenges people faced. This, in turn, can create a more psychologically safe environment.

McKinsey refers to this as consultative leadership. "With consultative leadership, which has a direct and indirect effect on psychological safety, leaders consult their team members, solicit input, and consider the team's views on issues that affect them. Supportive leadership has an indirect but still significant effect on psychological safety by helping to create a positive team climate; it involves leaders demonstrating concern and support for team members not only as employees but also as individuals. These behaviours also can encourage team members to support one another."¹¹

Respect

HEAR Yourself...

Respect your own views, nurtured from years of experience, not about ignoring yourself.

... to HEAR others

Respect others' views. What are the commonalities? Respect is not the same as agree.

What our respondents said about showing respect.

It's about creating a respectful conversation:

The most commonly recommended intervention by respondents (in the face of polarisation) was to create safe spaces in which conversations could happen; sharing views in a respectful way. Some respondents referenced the usefulness of our [5 Conversations framework](#) in this respect. This included the development of forums where people would be invited to share different opinions, ranging from views on sexual identity to the Black Lives Matter movement.

11. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/psychological-safety-and-the-critical-role-of-leadership-development>

8 Conclusion

Our research found that psychological safety is a fundamental pillar in supporting an organisation to be innovative. Those organisations that have the psychological safety to have the edgier conversation are also likely to be the ones to have innovative conversations.

We also found three opportunities available to leaders to help make their organisation psychologically safe:

- To flatten the hierarchical structures if they are preventing the free flow of ideas
- Reflecting on one's leadership shadow, to ensure the message that 'it's OK to challenge and question', is one that is consistently heard and believed by those you're inviting into the conversation
- To expand psychological safety to all parts of the business, not just some silos, through exemplifying open leadership

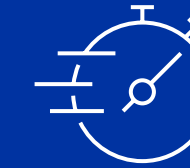
To help you achieve these goals we believe the approaches in the HEAR model will facilitate the human connection needed to be a psychologically safe organisation:

- Be honest with how you're feeling and your intention to listen to others
- Show empathy to yourself and assume that others are well-intentioned
- Focus on accuracy when understanding your own biases and hearing what people are sharing
- Respect your own views as a leader whilst also respecting the sincerely held views of others

At its heart, psychological safe spaces are places where there's positive regard for others that create the safe human connection. Vibrant innovation flourishes as a result.

We have been supporting organisations to create conditions for success for over 30 years. If you'd like a discussion about how we can help, just get in touch.

Psychological safety and innovation in action



An ongoing journey

"We have a lot of metrics that scientifically or not scientifically measure the climate in your organisation, the climate of trust, the climate of interaction. We have a lot of metrics that tell us that we are progressing right and therefore we are improving more than what we expected so that people perceive it, feel it and enjoy it. Metrics tell us that we are on the right track. In terms of where on a scale, honestly, I truly feel that that is a journey where there is never an end."



Contributors to the research

Thank you to all of the leaders who participated in this piece of research.

A+E Networks

- Lucy King, Head of Talent & Performance

Anglo American

- Hwee Bin Tan, Manager: Talent & Learning

CALA Group

- Rod Pearson, Head of People
- Louise Poole, Group People Director

Chiesi

- Alessandro Carloni, Chief Finance Officer
- Giorgio Cavalleri, Global People & Leadership Development Head
- Giacomo Mazzariello, Chief Human Resources Officer

Dare Global

- Sam Boswell, VP of Software Engineering

ED&F Man

- Adrian Osbourn, Group Head of Learning & Organisational Development

Essentra

- Carole Talbot, Global Talent & Learning Manager

Ferring

- Karin Möller-Preile, Head of Human Resources Global Technical Organisations
- Monika Tabacchi, Head of Talent Management & Learning

KLEEMAN

- Vangelis Passalidis, Head of Sales

Legal & General

- Gary Shewan, Learning & Development Consultant

PwC

- Colby Pope, Organisational Effectiveness
- Gerlind Smith, Human Capital Director

Space to See

- Elizabeth McManus, Space Maker & Director

TikTok

- Jade Brooks, OD Consultant

William Hill

- Paul Iredale, Group Head of Talent and Capability
- Mikolaj Jucewicz, Head of Talent & Leadership Development

To continue the discussion you can find us at:

E: enquiries@oxford-group.com

T: +44(0)845 2508448

Subscribe to receive our newsletter and updates

Or follow us on:



About The Oxford Group

The Oxford Group have been unlocking leadership and management potential, enabling the world's top businesses to thrive for over 30 years. Combining our coaching, facilitative and experiential approach with specialist design capability and a focus on innovation and creativity, we develop engaging learning content, bespoke blended solutions, and products to support managers and leaders to create the conditions for success. With a global network of over 220 consultants and coaches across five continents speaking more than 30 languages, our solutions can be adapted for your culture, language, and context - delivering transformational learning experiences for the world's leading organisations.

www.oxford-group.com

Agriculture House | Oasis Park | Stanton Harcourt Road | Eynsham | Oxon | OX29 4TP

The xford Group
A City & Guilds Business