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RESEARCH DESK

Leaders are Responsible for Psychological Safety

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INTRODUCTION

There is increased interest in the importance of creating a psychologically safe work environment, and organizations worldwide are investing significantly in attempting to do so.

Psychological safety refers to an environment where individuals feel comfortable taking interpersonal risks, such as speaking up, expressing opinions, or admitting mistakes, without fear of negative consequences or judgment. It fosters trust, open communication, and collaboration within teams, ultimately enhancing creativity, innovation, and overall performance.

And yet, according to an article published in Forbes magazine in December 2023, recent research from Wiley claims that there is a growing psychological safety disconnect between leaders and their employees. Wiley found that leaders tend to overestimate the level of psychological safety on their teams compared to the actual level of safety team members are experiencing.

This means that leaders may be operating under the assumption that if there are workplace problems or employee needs are not being satisfied, employees will speak up about it. However, the reality is, if employees don't feel safe doing so, they won't speak up.

Leaders need to be intentional in allocating the time to understand what the needs of their team members are and how they are feeling about psychological safety in the workplace. This is even more important when workers are working remotely some or all of the time.

The Role of Trust

Everyone knows that Trust is an essential part of creating a psychologically safe work environment but specifically, what behaviors are needed to create the kind of Trust that allows people to feel safe to speak up or even to disagree with their manager?

Many years of research into what it takes to build and sustain trusting relationships has allowed us at Intégro to establish the Intégro Trust Model based on the four behaviors essential to building Trust. These four behaviors are particularly relevant when leaders want to create a psychologically safe environment.

They are:

Acceptance – accepting people for who they are, being nonjudgemental. Knowing that you will not be judged negatively for saying what you think or questioning how things are done is essential for feeling psychologically safe.

Openness – openly expressing your ideas and opinions, knowing they will be listened to, and being open to listening to the ideas and opinions of your colleagues. Openness can only flourish when there is a high level of

Congruence or Straightforwardness – being able to say what you mean and mean what you say without sugarcoating the pill and learning to be direct and tell the truth while at the same time being respectful and accepting of the other person.

Reliability – following through on commitments and doing the best you can on everything you do. Team members need to know that they can rely on each other to achieve the best results.

All four of these behaviors combined will create a culture of Trust where everyone feels valued and can be confident about having uncomfortable conversations.

People Want to Do Their Best

Over the years, I've engaged in conversations with numerous managers who hold a somewhat cynical perspective on employees, viewing them as primarily motivated by their pay and inclined to do the bare minimum to maintain their employment. However, the Conscious Leadership Alliance's decade-long survey of over 20,000 employees contradicts this belief, as our research findings do not align with such a viewpoint.

The research questions included:

How important is it for you to fulfill the responsibilities of your role? and…

How important is it for you to do your best in everything you do?

On a ten-point scale where ten is essential, both questions average 9.4 out of 10. This means that the vast majority of employees believe it is very important that they fulfill their responsibilities and do their best every time.

That's the good news!

The challenge for leaders is that it takes effort and commitment for people to do that, and the workplace culture must support people to take that responsibility – it requires a psychologically safe environment based on a high level of Trust.

It takes Conscious Effort to Build Trust

I suspect you believe that people will automatically trust you because you know you are trustworthy. And yet, I'm sure you have had the experience of someone being suspicious about your motives for something you said or did.

Have another look at the four behaviors that build Trust above – Acceptance, Openness, Straightforwardness, and Reliability. Our experience in using this trust model with people who have experienced an Everything DiSC Profile is that most people find at least two of these trust-building behaviors that come really easily to them and at least one that requires quite a bit of effort. Let's look at how that works with each of the DiSC primary styles:

Dominance – people strong in the D Style are task-oriented, direct, and focused on achieving results. So, their natural strength in building trust is Straightforwardness and likely to be strong in reliability. They pride themselves on their ability to call it like it is. On the other hand, Acceptance

is almost an anathema to them. The D Style's need to continually achieve and to always be making progress means that Acceptance can be seen as preventing them from achieving more. Their tendency to be judgmental can be a real barrier to them creating a psychologically safe workplace.

Influence – people strong in the "i" Style are enthusiastic, outgoing, optimistic, and talkative. So, their natural strength in building trust is Openness – especially in sharing their ideas and opinions. Because of their need for recognition and to be well-liked, they are also quite open to listening to what others have to say.

The challenge in building Trust for the "i" Styles is reliability. Because of their enthusiasm, optimism, and energy, they have a tendency to over-commit themselves and run out of time to do everything they committed to – or simply forget because they made so many commitments. To maintain the respect of their team members, the "i" Style leader needs to be more disciplined about the decisions they make and make time for quality time with each team member.

Steadiness – people who score strongly in the S Style are friendly, cooperative, helpful, and focused on maintaining harmony. They have a strong need to be accepted by other people, and so Acceptance is the trust-building behavior they are naturally strongest in. Because of their need for Acceptance, they are also very good listeners, and so Openness is also likely to be a strength, especially Openness to what others have to say. However, their primary challenge lies in Straightforwardness. Individuals with the S Style tend to carefully consider their words to avoid causing offense or distress, often hesitating to provide immediate responses when pressed for quick answers.

Conscientiousness – like the D Style, people strong in the C Style are task-oriented but more reserved, analytical, and focused on detail and accuracy. Their need for correctness means their strength in building trust is reliability – doing correct work, making accurate decisions, dotting I's, and crossing T's. This also means they have very high standards for the quality of work they do and high expectations for quality from their coworkers. Their biggest challenge when it comes to building trust is likely to be Openness – they tend to be quite private, not sharing a lot of themselves. This can lead to teammates being unsure about whether they are trusted or not.

Building Trust with Opposite Styles

You also need to take into consideration that each DiSC Style's strength in building trust is also the most important thing they are looking for when deciding to trust someone else. For example:

The D Style expects you to be straightforward with them and give straight answers to their questions.

The "I" Style expects you to be open with them, volunteering information and letting them know how you feel.

The S Style expects you to be accepting of them and demonstrate that by being friendly, approachable, and caring.

The C Style expects you to demonstrate your reliability by being on time for meetings and having all the details you need to justify your decisions and actions.

If you look at this closely you will see that each of the DiSC Styles biggest challenge in building trust is the strength of their opposite Style, so building Trust with the opposite Style does not come naturally and can take quite a bit of effort to stretch to do so.

Let's look at a couple of examples:

A D-style person, Mary, is working with an S-style person, Bill, on a project. Mary asks Bill how long it is going to take to complete a report he is working on. Bill can't give a concrete answer at this stage, and he doesn't want to say anything that will disappoint Mary, so he says, "It depends." Mary, of course, is expecting Bill to be straightforward with her and give a straight answer to the question. Mary is likely getting irritated at this point and possibly responding in a fairly blunt way. Bill will interpret this as a lack of Acceptance and may become even more indirect in his responses. Knowing Mary's need for Straightforwardness, Bill can learn to change his response to, "It's going to take 2 to 4 days – I'm waiting on information from a number of people."

An "i" Style person, Samantha (Sam to her friends), is managing Clyde, a C Style person who has just got back to the office after doing an important presentation to a client. Sam enthusiastically asks Clyde how the presentation

went. His response was, “good!” Sam is expecting a bit of a story – with her strength for Openness, that is exactly what she would be doing. Clyde, on the other hand, places much less importance on Openness or sharing unnecessary information. Feeling frustrated, Sam says, “Couldn’t you tell me a little bit more about it?” Clyde’s response could be, “What do you want to know?” Of course, if Clyde is aware of Sam’s Style and need for Openness, he wouldn’t do that. He would stretch himself to tell Sam a little bit more about how the presentation went and how people responded to it.

Stretching oneself to build Trust with people who are different from you and create a psychologically safe environment requires a high level of interpersonal flexibility.

Interpersonal Flexibility

Interpersonal Flexibility is the ability to relate to other people in such a way that their needs are at least as important as yours.

What this means is that the highly flexible leader is consistently focusing on the needs of their team members to ensure that those needs can be satisfied.

Team members who feel psychologically safe know that their leader is aware of their needs and focused on ensuring they are being met. For more than forty years, the Conscious Leadership Alliance has been researching the concept of leadership flexibility to gain a deeper understanding of what it truly entails to be a flexible leader. We have found that there are three distinct skills that leaders need, to be flexible enough to create a psychologically safe workplace.

They are:
Warmth – the degree to which people find you to be approachable and easy to talk to. People must feel comfortable approaching you and talking to you, especially about difficult subjects that need to be discussed.

Understanding – your ability to put people at ease and engage with them in such a way as to build mutual understanding. Your team members must know that you understand them and that you ensure that they understand you.

Encouragement – the degree to which team members find you to be free with praise and looking for opportunities to encourage them.

It is easy to see when you look at these three skills closely that to do them well, your focus needs to be on the other person and their needs. And remember the definition of flexibility – the ability to relate to people so that their needs are at least as important as yours.

Lack of Flexibility

Inflexible people are more focused on their own needs and, as a result, are not aware of what other people's needs are. This is particularly damaging when we are talking about inflexible leaders – these leaders, and I hesitate to call them that, will find it difficult, if not impossible, to create a psychologically safe work environment.

The most prominent challenge organizations face in creating a psychologically safe work environment is that there is a high proportion of leaders who are inflexible, and yet think they are flexible or worse, believe that seeing your own needs as more important is normal. They say, "Isn't everyone primarily focused on satisfying their own needs?" The answer to that question is yes, to some degree, however the majority of people don't set out to satisfy their own needs at the expense of others.

The good news is that flexibility can be increased, but for that to happen, the individual needs to first become aware that they are inflexible and that they are more focused on their own needs than other people's needs.

Leadership Characteristics that Improve Psychological Safety

The following characteristics of high flexibility are a good place to start to get a better understanding of what high flexibility looks like, and what you can do to improve.

Openness: Is willing to listen to alternative views and to change their mind in the face of new evidence.

Need Satisfaction: Focus on satisfying mutual needs, looks for win/win solutions, not win/lose. Flexibility means helping others succeed, too.

Adaptability: Adapts their behavior to be appropriate and effective in different situations and in dealing with different people. Is willing to experiment.

Social Skills: Has well-developed social skills, able to relate comfortably with people who are different. Their behavior demonstrates a concern for others.

Range of Interests: Has a broad range of interests and is willing to explore new ways of thinking. Shows an interest in what others like to talk about.

Style Adaptability: Flexible people adapt to the styles of the people they are dealing with. They are able to take control as well as let others take control. They can affiliate well with others and detach themselves to concentrate on the task when required.

Willingness to Compromise: Flexible people are willing to compromise to achieve win/win solutions. This does not mean they will compromise on important principles or lower their standards. A flexible person makes tentative rather than absolute statements.

Dealing with Ambiguity: A flexible person can function well in, or at least is not unduly disturbed by ambiguity. They can tolerate a period of uncertainty while they review conflicting ideas to determine the best course of action.

Summary

Creating a culture of psychological safety within an organization yields significant benefits, including improved team performance and employee retention. Leaders play a crucial role in nurturing this environment by developing their skills in interpersonal warmth, understanding, and encouragement. The Flexibility and Trust Survey measures these interpersonal leadership skills providing valuable information on the leader's flexibility and trust building ability. In addition, the survey identifies action steps the leader can take to be a more effective leader and significantly increase Psychological Safety. For more information contact your Conscious Leadership Alliance Associate.

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