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Leader as Coach

Build Psychological Safety

Pre-Work and Participant Guide

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Build Psychological Safety

Are you ready to improve your team's dynamic?

Clarity, purpose, trustworthiness – these are all factors that high-performing teams have in common. However, one factor underpins all the others and is critical for teams to truly perform their best. That factor is psychological safety. So, how do you create a psychologically safe environment? It starts with understanding.

Psychological safety is driven by universal human needs and it shows up differently for everyone. Understanding your own psychological safety needs and those of others is the first step to recognizing how those needs affect the team dynamic. ***Build Psychological Safety*** will help you gain insights into those needs and give you the tools to create the psychologically safe environment necessary for your team to learn from mistakes, freely share ideas, and take risks to innovate.

By attending ***Build Psychological Safety***, you will:

- Explore your key psychological safety needs and how they relate to your work environment.
- Learn how psychological safety needs influence interactions with others at work.
- Practice applying psychological safety knowledge and skills to create a psychologically safe team environment.

This guide contains the pre-work for the session as well as key concepts and activities that will be completed during the session.

Optional Pre-session activities

- Take the Psychological Safety Needs Self-Assessment.

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Pre-Work

Psychological Safety Needs Self-Assessment

Instructions

All of the statements in this self-assessment relate to one of five universal psychological safety elements. Read each one and select how strongly you agree or disagree, then review the following page to interpret your results.

Predictability				
1 Strongly disagree	**2** Disagree	**3** Neither agree or disagree	**4** Agree	**5** Strongly agree
1. I am naturally averse to risks and require strategies to work with the risks necessary to innovate.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
2. I feel best working with leaders who share a lot of details about expectations and risks.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
3. I have been seen as having an orientation toward details and micromanaging commitments and tasks.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
4. I can't relate to people who seem to thrive on change.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
5. When I feel stressed, I have a strong need for more detail, explanation, and reassurance.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
			Total score:	

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Options				
1 Strongly disagree	**2** Disagree	**3** Neither agree or disagree	**4** Agree	**5** Strongly agree
1. I am self-motivated and don't require much direction or management.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
2. I find myself avoiding or pulling back from situations that make me subservient to others.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
3. I spend a lot of energy creating and protecting my sense of control over my work and time.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
4. I have underestimated others' need for direction and structure compared to mine.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
5. When I feel stressed, I often find myself trying to give orders or take the task over.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
			Total Score:	

Equity				
1 Strongly disagree	**2** Disagree	**3** Neither agree or disagree	**4** Agree	**5** Strongly agree
1. I am seen as an empathetic caretaker who stands up for others.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
2. I spend a lot of energy advocating that every voice needs to be heard.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
3. I have had strong reactions when I perceive favoritism or preferential treatment.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
4. I believe strongly in people, myself included, to being treated fairly.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
5. Sincere and appropriate credit are important to me.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
			Total score:	

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Status				
1 Strongly disagree	**2** Disagree	**3** Neither agree or disagree	**4** Agree	**5** Strongly agree
1. I spend a lot of energy cultivating my professional image.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
2. It's very important to me to be highly regarded.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
3. I get a sense of fun and energy out of competition.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
4. I often reserve my input until I know it will go over well and won't be rejected.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
5. It's hard for me to feel out of favor, so when I am stressed, my reaction is often to justify myself defensively.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
			Total score:	

Trust				
1 Strongly disagree	**2** Disagree	**3** Neither agree or disagree	**4** Agree	**5** Strongly agree
1. I put a lot of energy into showing my loyalty to my team and protecting it.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
2. I am an important connector within my team and organization.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
3. I sometimes go overboard on taking care of others' needs over my own.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
4. Personal sharing is required for me to feel connected to others on my team.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
5. When I am stressed, I find that I lean into my group structure rather than detach from it.				
☐ 1	☐ 2	☐ 3	☐ 4	☐ 5
			Total score:	

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Interpreting your results

Review your scores for each universal safety element.

If you scored a 10 or lower, you have a low need for this element. You are not very motivated to create or protect this safety element in your environment, and you are unlikely to be triggered by threats to it. Measures to provide psychological safety for a person with a high need for this element might feel uncomfortable for you, and vice-versa.

If you scored between 11 and 18, you have a moderate need for this element. You spend moderate energy to create or protect this safety element, and you are only likely to be triggered by *serious* threats to it. Measures to provide psychological safety for a person with a high need for this element might feel excessive to you, but you work best when there is more of this element in your environment than someone who has a low need for it.

If you scored a 19 and above, you have a high need for this element. You are highly motivated to create or protect this safety element in your environment, and you are likely to be triggered by threats to it. Measures to provide psychological safety for a person with a moderate need for this element might feel insufficient to you, and measures that would make a person with a low need for this element comfortable would likely trigger a stress response for you.

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Participant Guide

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Build Psychological Safety

Is fear a good management strategy?

According to research, no.

- A stress response is triggered in the brain by threats – even those you don't consciously notice.
- Once triggered, higher functions like thinking, learning, analysis, creativity, and insight stop. The challenges you face require these higher functions.

Psychological safety is *required* to use the higher brain functions required to perform your best.

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Breakout group activity: Acquired!

Instructions

1. Recall the reactions of each person, then discuss the answer to each question in order:

   ▶ When you think about this scenario happening to you, whose response sounded most like yours?

   ▶ How do the safety needs of the people in your breakout group vary?

   ▶ Bonus: What safety need did you think was illustrated by the person in each example?

2. Be prepared to share with the large group.

Acquired: Reactions

Paola: "Everything is changing! I have no security! There is no consistency in the messages I'm hearing, no certainty, no clarity. I don't know what this means for my future. No one has any details. There is no foundation to hold onto, no process! Frankly, my world is falling apart."

Ori: "None of my usual means of getting answers work anymore! I have completely lost control over my life. I am at the mercy of others to decide my future! I have no choices. Other people will decide my fate and whether I stay or go."

Elias: "How can they make this decision without any input from us? After how well we've performed this last year in particular – this is so wrong. We should have been given a voice. This is not fair. I've been so loyal! Doesn't any of my hard work count for anything?"

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Samir: “I guess we’ll see how they really feel about me. Everyone used to think I was valuable. My job title and my office seemed to prove it, but who knows? I have a reputation for getting things done, but what if I get demoted? How do I really compare to others in this organization?”

Thanh: “Not being part of this team would be crushing! Everything we’ve built will vanish. All these relationships will end. Who can I trust? Who is on my side? Without my team, I don’t really have a home in this company.”

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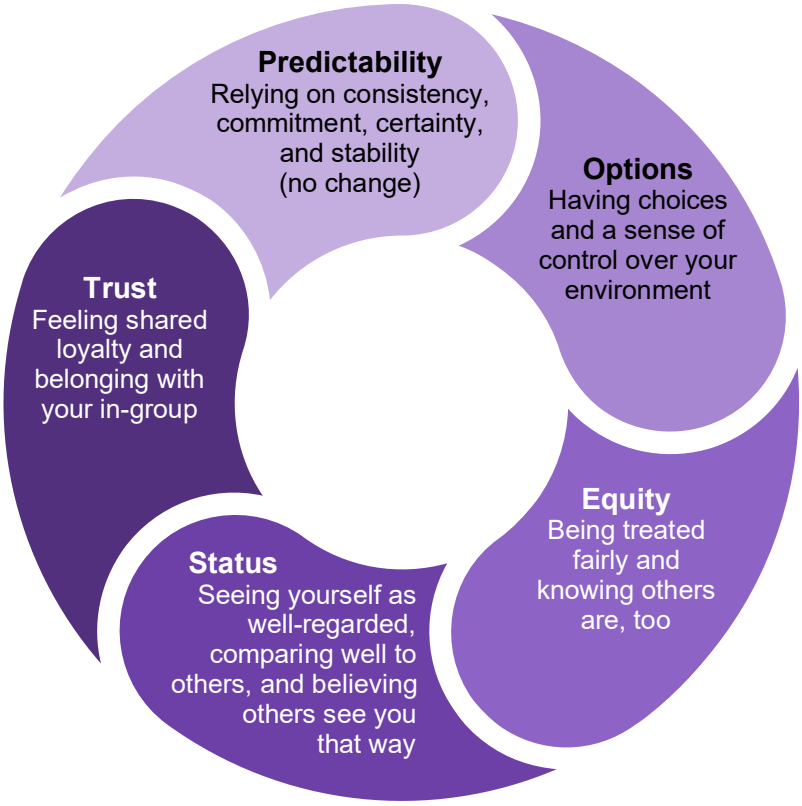
Universal Psychological Safety Needs

The five universal safety needs

There are five universal safety needs. These are needs people work to build into their lives and use to interpret their environment – does it provide for their needs or not? This is true for everyone! It happens in ways you may or may not be aware of, but it's always happening.



When safety needs are threatened, a stress response is triggered. If a need is important to you, even a slight threat to the loss of that need will trigger a stress response. The more sensitive you are to threats to a particular safety need, the more likely it is to affect your perceptions and experiences.

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Elements of safety: Predictability

Brains – and the people who have them – love predictability and consistency. Research shows that *uncertainly creates a negativity bias*. The brain is more likely to judge a neutral situation as negative if you are already feeling uncertain. That's because when things are predictable, you can relax and spend less energy while new situations require *more energy*. Change means uncertainty, and that triggers stress.

This love of predictability extends to ideas and people. People feel stress when faced with new ideas, especially those that challenge their beliefs and require adjusting to new people who are unlike those they have already adjusted to.

- If you have a *low need* for predictability, you can cope with a higher level of inconsistency and change. Maybe you're even motivated by novelty.
- If you have a *high need* for predictability, you may have no tolerance for any changes at all. You may also feel the need for more detail, clearer commitments, and other measures to supply certainty.

Elements of safety: Options

While everyone likes to know what is expected of them, most people don't like not having any say in what they're supposed to do. A sense of control in any situation is a powerful human need. Having a sense of control means feeling that you have options to act out your will according to your values. Feeling a lack of options or sense of control for an extended period of time has been proven to be harmful to physical health and leads to an increased stress response.

The friction caused by threatening autonomy is powerful. What else is powerful? The boost you get when you buy in to an idea – choosing to do something from a sense of having options. Not only does research show that people are more likely to succeed when they've bought in, but the brain also gets a dopamine hit, triggering a reward state.

- If you have a *high need* for options, you can be triggered so deeply that you lose the ability to process instructions, sabotaging you in a situation where, for instance, you need to follow unwelcome directions.
- If you have a *low need* for options, you may not be threatened as easily or as deeply.

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Elements of safety: Equity

Equity is a particularly deep instinct. Other mammals, including rats, seem to exhibit a bias for equity. Evolutionary psychology shows that the instinct for equity is tied to getting enough living space in the cave and sharing of food.

Equity is highly contextual, but seeing fair dealings triggers your brain's reward system. On the other hand, if your need for equity is threatened it can be a difficult trigger to manage, because it interferes with activating the prefrontal cortex to brake emotional brain, making it harder to regain higher functions.

- If you have a *high need* for equity, when your sense of equity is threatened, you may become fixated on perceived injustices or accounts that need to be settled.
- If you have a *low need* for equity, you may appear to others as opportunistic or driven to achieve ends by any means.

Elements of safety: Status

Just as the need for equity is rooted in sharing food during caveman times, status is also rooted in ancient cultures. Individuals depended on the group for matters of life and death. When they didn't have status or lost standing, others might not have helped them when they were injured. While status may no longer be life and death, the way people feel about each other is still important to survival in very concrete ways.

People tend to think highly of themselves, believe they compare well to others, and think that others see them the same way. In fact, the brain registers social rejection as physical pain, as if nature saw fit for people to learn the danger of rejection as clearly as the danger in being burned or cut. If you embarrass someone publicly, as far as their brain is concerned, you have hurt them, while complimenting them will register as a reward to their brain.

Self-esteem is a factor here, too. You'll feel less stressed if you think well of yourself and more stressed if don't. Your identity can be very much tied to your role and your standing relative to others, and how you think others perceive you.

- If you have a *high need* for status, you may become defensive and have an irresistible urge to justify yourself if you feel your status is threatened.
- If you have a *low need* for status, you may be uncomfortable with attention or acknowledgement.

Elements of safety: Trust

In ancient times, people were tightly interdependent with their small groups and saw strangers as threats. The loyalties within their small groups were crucial to feeling safe and secure. Even now,

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people are profoundly biased toward people in their “in-group” and feel good when they have a place inside that group.

Everyone cares to one degree or another whether the people they need to trust are loyal and whether they are accepted and belong in the groups they work in.

- If you have a *high need* for trust, you may try to build strong teams and enjoy traditions and other group norms. You may also get territorial about your place in the group.
- If this is a *low need* for trust, you may not be much for groups and have a good time being free to float between circles. You may do better on your own rather than collaborating.

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Understanding Your Psychological Safety Needs

Taking charge of your psychological safety

According to research, there are four key ways to take charge of your psychological safety.

- Take responsibility for your safety needs and biases.
- Support your needs and find appropriate ways to express them.
- Become aware of your triggers and practice managing them.
- See your needs and biases as part of your evolving story.

Manage triggers in the moment

How do you regain control after you've been triggered? Don't repress your feelings! Research shows that repressing feelings does damage in both the short and long term. Instead, engage your higher functions.

- Notice and label what you're feeling. Labelling is a higher function. Start there. Label what you're feeling and what you're doing.
- Reframe the situation – see it as something other than a threat.
- Imagine others' perspectives. Remember, their brain has its own needs.
- Consider the big picture: Why are you here? What goals do you share?
- Once you're calm, make sense of what happened so you can change things next time.
- Lastly, practice makes perfect. Your sensitivity to threats will actually decrease as you work with your psychological safety self-awareness.

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Supporting your psychological safety

Here are things you can do to boost and maintain resilience to safety triggers. Having deficits in your body needs, being stressed, or feeling distracted can cause you to be triggered more easily. Taking action to learn and practice strategies and stretch your comfort zones will make you more resilient to triggers.

- **Manage stress:** learn about your resting stress level and manage overstress.
- **Be mindful of body needs:** focus on nutrition, movement, mindfulness, sleep.
- **Be self-aware:** be in touch with your needs and triggers.
- **Practice working with your biases:** practice working with your biases and triggers.
- **Stretch your comfort zone:** spend time around people who are different from you and have different needs; work to expand your comfort zone.

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Breakout partner activity: Taking charge of your safety

Instructions

1. In breakouts, think about taking charge of your psychological safety. Discuss:

   - Where you plan to start.

   - What seems easiest.

   - What you're feeling challenged by.

   - What resources would help.

2. Be prepared to share with the large group.

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Building Psychological Safety with Others

Building safety with another person

People interpret others' words, actions, and motives through the lens of their own needs and sensitivities. To build safety with another person:

- Learn, understand, and protect each other's needs.
- Be sensitive to each other's triggers.
- Practice empathy toward others' perspective when it comes to conflict.

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Activity: Different safety needs

Instructions

The scenarios below explore different safety needs for members of a team. Review and answer the questions that follow.

Different safety needs for the same situation: Elias and Samir were assigned to work together on the same presentation. They each have their own perception of the other based on their psychological safety needs. Here, they have two different needs that have been threatened. Notice how their needs influence the way they interpret each other's actions and intentions.

Elias

Samir is such a self-promoter. I can't believe he took all the credit for something everyone worked so hard on. I'll see to it that everyone gets a piece of the credit.

Samir

Management loved my presentation! Everyone was talking about it! Elias has been acting annoyed with me, but he often seems threatened when I land the project.

- What different needs might have been threatened for each of them?

- As their manager, who would you talk to first? What would you recommend?

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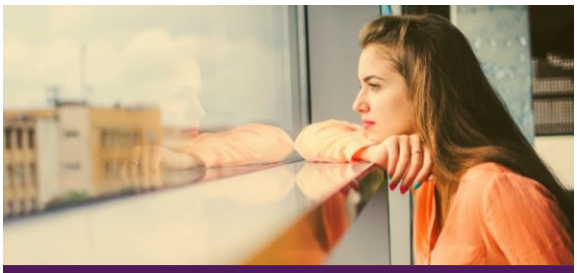
Different safety needs for the same safety element: Paola and Prea are having trouble working on a project together.



Paola

This is a huge project with a million moving parts. Everything needs to be handled perfectly from day 1. I'm doing all the work and Prea won't cooperate when I try to talk to her.

Prea

Paola has all the details down and we're in good shape for the first phase. She's nervous and wants a dozen meetings a week, but I don't see the need and can't accommodate that.

- What element might they have opposite needs for?

- As a leader, who would you talk to first? What would you recommend?

- For each pair, who are you siding with?

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Building Psychological Safety on Teams

Activity: How is safety showing up on your team?

Instructions

A lot of what psychological safety looks like is constructive debate, speaking up, giving candid feedback, openly admitting mistakes, and learning from each other. Here's what it might look like on teams and some actions leaders can take to create more psychological safety.

Review the behaviors and reflect on those you see in your team often, rarely, or never.

Proposing a new or risky idea	Framing projects and tasks as opportunities to learn
Admitting a failed approach or project publicly and sharing lessons learned	Experimenting
Openly accepting feedback and criticism	Debating ideas respectfully
Taking reasonable risks and learning from failure is modeled by leaders	Leaders openly inviting challenge from all levels of staff

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Breakout group activity: How leaders' actions build psychological safety

1. Select one or two leader actions from the list:
   - Model self-awareness of safety needs and triggers.
   - Provide choices and recognize the need for predictability.
   - Promote individual and group self-awareness.
   - Model and explain how much you value thoughts, input, and feedback.
   - Be clear about motives and intentions for change.

2. Discuss:
   - How do these leadership behaviors speak to protecting or promoting awareness of team safety needs?

   - Why are leaders' actions so important in creating psychological safety on teams?

3. Be prepared to share with the large group.

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Putting It All Together

Start with micro-actions

Micro-actions are small, manageable tasks that help you approach a larger goal in a more manageable way. Below is a list of micro-actions you can take today to help build psychological safety on your team.

- Model storytelling and openness.
- Frame a task as a chance to learn
- Boost quiet voices.
- Assign experiments and stretch assignments.
- Solicit feedback from all levels of hierarchy.
- Model humility and courage.
- Highlight team member competencies.
- Model openness to feedback and criticism.

Take action

- What are you most excited to work on, individually or as a leader?

- Where is your biggest opportunity to improve?

- How will you, your team, and your company benefit?

- What resources will you use?

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Key takeaways

- Psychological safety is a universal need.
- The brain interprets threats to psychological safety as danger. This impacts higher brain functions like rational thought and creativity – and can shut them down altogether.
- Your individual safety needs interact those of others on your team.
- Leaders and teams must work together to discuss, create, and maintain psychological safety.
- Psychological safety drives team performance, innovation, and creativity.

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About LHH

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In today's marketplace, organizations are discovering the need to turn their attention inward to find their future talent. At LHH, we help companies see the possibilities in their people. Through assessments, coaching, upskilling and transitioning, companies can realize the untapped potential within their own workforce, resulting in increased productivity, morale, and brand affinity.

A division of The Adecco Group – the world's leading HR solutions partner – LHH's 4,000 coaches and colleagues work with more than 7,000 organizations in over 60 countries around the world. We make a difference to everyone we work with, and we do it on a global scale. We have the local expertise, global infrastructure, and industry-leading technology to manage the complexity of critical workforce initiatives and the challenges of transformation. It's why 60% of the Fortune 500 companies choose to work with us.