

# THE LINK BETWEEN PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY & A HIGH PERFORMANCE CULTURE

By Harper & Gray



High performance is desired by every organization; it can be embedded in the company values and culture, and can be achieved via KPIs and other metrics within teams. The bottom line is that high-performance is important and valuable, but it has to be coupled with psychological safety for it to hold long-term results, and ultimately be sustainable.

The Harvard Business Review **spoke about this topic** at length, stating “the highest-performing teams have one thing in common: psychological safety, the belief that you won’t be punished when you make a mistake. **Studies** show that 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 behavior that lead to market breakthroughs.”

What comes first, the “chicken”  
(high performance)  
or the “egg” (psychological safety)

We’d argue that although one can’t exist without the other, you can’t demand high performance (nor expect it to manifest) without creating psychological safety first within teams.

Doing this takes time and requires vulnerability, accountability, and a lot of reflection! Here are *5 ways* you can start to create a culture of psychological safety, which will then allow you to start to build a high-performance team.



## 1. Leaders need to be Vulnerable



Whether you manage a team of two or ten, vulnerability is a trait that often takes us right out of our comfort zone, but can have excellent outcomes on team performance. As highlighted by **Forbes**, the norm that we associate with leaders is individuals in authority who “shouldn’t be questioned” when in reality, this is an outdated view that has been proven repeatedly to not work.

Instead, vulnerability generates better trust in the workplace and also creates relatability, removing the pedestal that we can often see leaders on.

This doesn’t mean that respect levels will drop, instead, they have been proven to increase! People take a cue from their leaders on vulnerability. They are more likely to emulate or mirror their leader when everybody feels safe enough to do so.



## How can I start to be more vulnerable at work?



Vulnerability doesn't necessarily equal wearing your heart on your sleeve at work, but instead talking about relatable topics that can create a better bond with your team.

It can be as small as making an active effort to talk about weekend plans more, or it can be discussing personal topics such as mental health, imposter syndrome, or even development points that you're working on. These small steps build a more holistic work persona whilst still keeping your private life private.



## 2. Create regular feedback touchpoints



Feedback is your golden ticket to generating high performance.

Whether it's anonymous or real-time, ensuring that you regularly ask for feedback (and most importantly utilize it) is a fast way to build trust with team members and also understand how each individual works and likes to be managed.

Some may benefit from real-time feedback, even if it's direct, whereas others may prefer to receive feedback in a slightly softer way. Feedback like this will enable you to hone your emotional intelligence, too.

It's possible to retain a leadership style that feels authentic to you whilst at the same time being able to adapt and flex your style of communication depending on the needs of the person in front of you. Being aware of what does (and doesn't) work for them can only have a positive impact.



## How can I collect feedback?



Although anonymous feedback is useful, it doesn't allow you to break down the barrier that can sometimes be its byproduct. If someone is only comfortable giving you anonymous feedback, it shows that there could be distrust which should be recognized and amended immediately. The goal should be to create face-to-face, honest, open feedback with everybody in your team.



### 3. Encourage mistakes to be made (and frame them as learnings)



Making mistakes at work is inevitable, however, it's important to frame these mistakes as learning opportunities rather than something to be disciplined for. If there are severe mistakes made, you will have to address these formally and this, unfortunately, can be difficult to navigate.

However, the vast majority of mistakes made in the workplace aren't catastrophic and are instead part and parcel of leading a team. It's crucial to create a culture in your team where people aren't afraid to take risks, as this will give your organization a competitive advantage.



## How can I achieve this?



A great way to start building this mindset and culture within your team is by highlighting your own mistakes and using them as teachable moments for the team. They can be as big or small as you'd like, as long as there's learning from it then it's probably worth sharing.



## 4. Give the benefit of the doubt



Building trust within teams and creating psychological safety requires you to encourage autonomy, and check your judgement at the door.

As a leader, especially in the early stages of managing a team, we can make assumptions about people and create a false narrative in our minds. For example, if someone has a tendency to all of a sudden fall behind on projects, give them the benefit of the doubt that they're doing their best, and approach a conversation with them in an empathetic way, letting them know you are around for support should they need it.



## 5. Keep it confidential (especially in the beginning)



Although collaborative learning and feedback is important in any team, in the early stages you should always be mindful of peoples' boundaries and keep things confidential.

Again, this will build trust, create a culture of psychological safety, and allow you to have strong one-on-one relationships with team members (as well as colleagues who aren't direct reports).

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