

Three Techniques to Destroy Psychological Safety ^{1, 2}

Mei Lin

Who doesn't want to work or lead a smaller team?

I don't know about you, but I know I want to be in a great team, lead amazing transformations, create a positive impact, and the work could be well compensated.

However, it is more complicated than you could imagine. Top companies and researchers are working hard to crack the secret.

As Project Management professionals, Agile has been a trending buzzword in many industries. Psychological Safety is one of the most critical core values for Agile. The maturity of its organization's Psychological Safety directly impacts how the team interacts and communicates, embraces the trusted environment, is eager to be responsive, willing to adjust behavior for better results, feels motivated, and continually seeks excellence.

Psychological Safety

Kahn William stated that "Psychological safety is being able to show and employ oneself without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status or career" in 1990, in the article "Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work."

Also, Psychological safety was defined as "a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking" by Edmondson, Amy in the 1999 article "Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams."

When the Team feels they could work and perform without fear of negative consequences, the environment will boost creativity among employees and foster positive possibilities for mental health and their projects.

¹ *Editor's note: Second Editions are previously published papers that have continued relevance in today's project management world, or which were originally published in conference proceedings or in a language other than English. Original publication acknowledged; authors retain copyright. This paper was originally presented at the [14th UT Dallas PM Symposium](#) in May 2022. It is republished here with the permission of the author and conference organizers.*

² How to cite this paper: Lin, M. Y. (2022). Three Techniques to Destroy Psychological Safety; presented at the 14th University of Texas at Dallas Project Management Symposium in Richardson, TX, USA in May 2022; republished in the *PM World Journal*, Vol. XI, Issue XII, December.



Let's imagine you are walking toward a conference room. Your manager and directors are reading your proposal. Suddenly, you found an admiring error. From the moment you realize it to the conference room. What might be in your mind?

Your heart rate goes up from 80 to 180 per minute; you are stressed out and praying for them to overlook the mistake and give you some blessing on their feedback. The good idea might go nowhere due to this admiring mistake.

Or

You look at the mistakes and know they will focus on the overall project and ask you to clarify the error. You are not worried about negative feedback because you know we are working for the same Team, and the mistake is easy to correct before release. A good idea is a good idea. The feedback loop is critical to making it a great idea.

In this scenario, you can see from the lens of psychological safety readiness for this Team. After the great success of the [Google's Project Oxygen research](#), the People Analytics team at Google applied the studies trying to discover further the secrets of an effective Team in 2012. Google published the result of Project Aristotle in 2016 based on 180 teams identified 180 teams in various projects stated that the most critical factor in building high-performance teams is with higher psychological safety.

Of course, the other four other vital dynamics to make the Team effective are dependability, structure and clarity, meaning, and impact.



- Psychological safety – Will my mistake or failure negatively impact my ability and skills? Do I want to take the risk of negative consequences? Am I safe to be who I am and speak up about what I know?
- Dependability – Can I count on my Team? When mistakes are made, will my Team support me or complete what they promised, and they could count on me?
- Structure and Clarity – Does the Team have a common S.M.A.R.T goal and the same understanding of how to accomplish the goal?

- Meaning – is there a positive output or value I contribute to my Team based on the work I perform? Is there a meaning or purpose to the work I do?
- Impact – Do I see my or my team’s work contributes to the organization's goals and help reveal bigger impact?

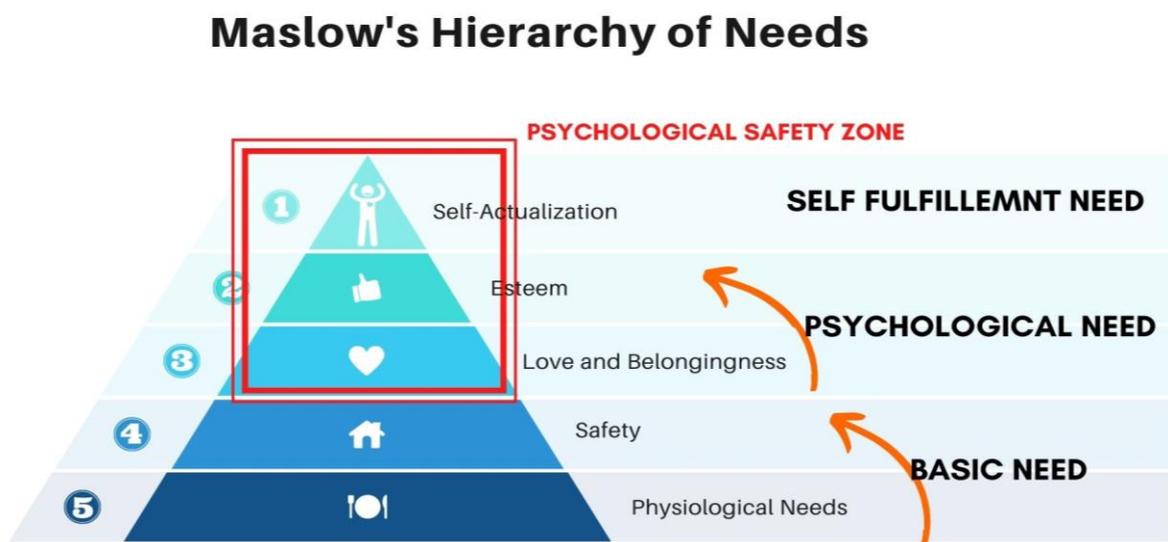
Project Aristotle research team found that what mattered for a highly effective team was how the team worked together and interacted with each other and less about who was on the team.

Psychological Safety aligned with Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, there are five tiers in Maslow's motivational pyramid in psychology.

Self-actualization is the dream place every leader should drive for. The love, belongingness, and esteem tiers are the target zone for Project management professionals who need to pay additional attention beyond our traditional scope, timeline, and budget.

Companies are looking for talents and paying high/ top dollars to retain those great talents. People don't leave for the lower salary; they go for a better place to fulfil their psychological needs and can feel a sense of self-actualization.



Data and research show that the cost of a lack of fostering a psychological safety environment is like building a great house on top of a questionable foundation. You might have the best talents

to build a house without trust and sufficient psychological safety. You might lose the whole house or the potential opportunity to have a better house

Psychological Safety is all about People - Agile won't work without it.

In 2001 February 11-13, the [Agile Manifesto](#) was introduced by 17 brilliant software engineers during an outing at The Lodge at Snowbird ski resort in Utah.

“We are uncovering better ways of developing software by doing it and helping others do it. Through this work we have come to value:

- Individuals and interactions over processes and tools
- Working software over comprehensive documentation
- Customer collaboration over contract negotiation
- Responding to change over following a plan

That is, while there is value in the items on the right, we value the items on the left more.”

Those pioneers actively seek some alternative to change the existing software development process and break the unresponsive approach. We have heard the buzzword, Agile, in any professional conference, meeting, on people's bookshelves, and in almost daily conversations at the workplace.

From now day, Agile is no stranger for all professionals beyond software development. In the Agile Manifesto, there are four core values of Agile.

- individuals and interactions over processes and tools;
- working software over comprehensive documentation;
- customer collaboration over contract negotiation; and
- responding to change over following a plan.

Those four values articulated in the Agile Manifesto extend to 12 key principles.

1. Satisfying customers through early and continuous delivery of valuable work.
2. Breaking big work down into smaller tasks that can be completed quickly.
3. Recognizing that the best work emerges from self-organized teams.
4. Providing motivated individuals with the environment and support they need and trusting them to get the job done.
5. Creating processes that promote sustainable efforts.
6. Maintaining a constant pace for completed work.

7. Welcoming changing requirements, even late in a project.
8. Assembling the project team and business owners on a daily basis throughout the project.
9. Having the team reflect at regular intervals on how to become more effective, then tuning and adjusting behavior accordingly.
10. Measuring progress by the amount of completed work.
11. Continually seeking excellence.
12. Harnessing change for a competitive advantage.

Three techniques to destroy Psychological Safety

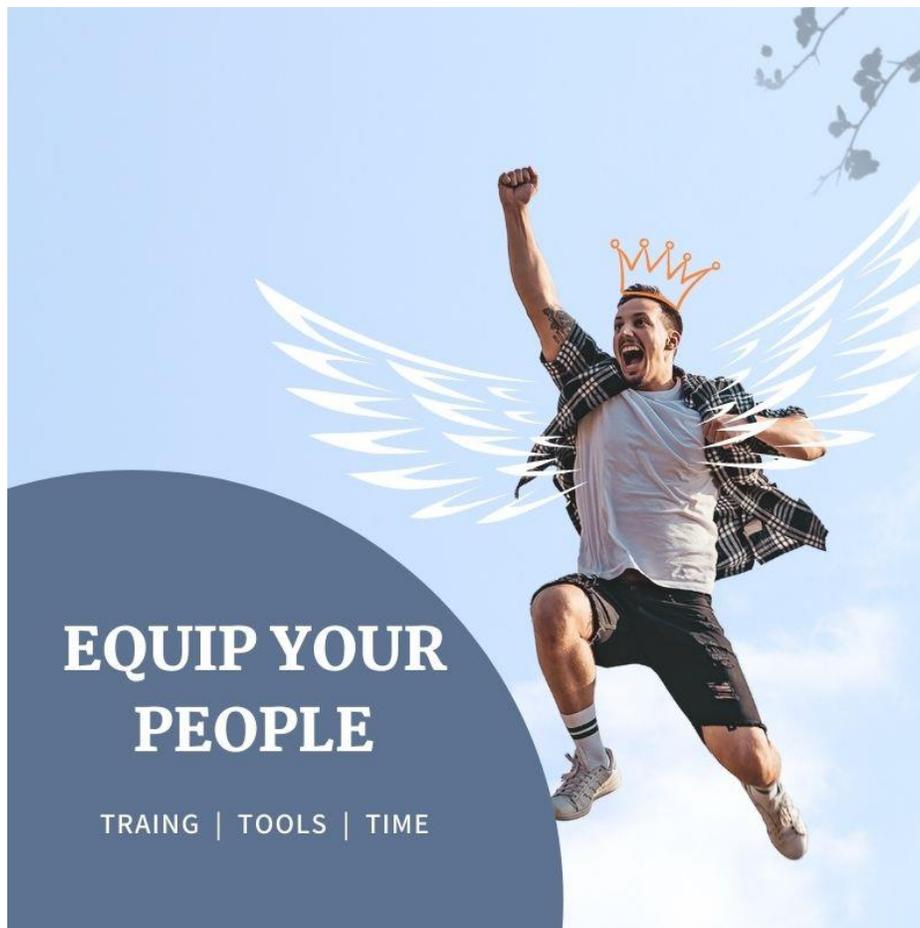
Two dimensions of creating trust and Psychological Safety

There are thousands of ways to ruin trust and create a psychological safety hazard environment for your team and organization. Often, it could be challenging to measure the team's psychological safety, and the uncertainty would be discouraged for many during the implementation. There are two dimensions to establishing the team's Psychological Safety.



On the personal individual level, each talent has its unique way of feeling safe in the workplace. From the top-down, creating the workplace psychological safety could heavily rely on the leadership team. It would need a great deal of courage to take the leap of faith and risk. No one, no academia, no research paper, no survey should define you how you would feel safe expressing differing opinions with the Team or the Organization. Be confident in being who you are and be respectful when taking risks. People make mistakes; practice communicating with your best intentions and proactively sharing doubt with your team.

Each individual or team will need to determine how to protest and foster psychological safety. A healthy discussion could be valuable as necessary.



From the leadership point of view, there is no perfect checklist to check all boxes. Psychological safety is not created or built based on one training or workshop. The key is the day-to-day interaction and response from leaders they look up to. The organization plays an essential role in fostering an excellent environment for their talents.

Rome was not built in a day, and the same thing applies to the trust and well-balanced psychological safety workplace. Organizations and leaders can start by:

- supporting the individual talent to feel safe expressing different ideas
- taking a stand for equipping their Team to navigate roadblocks and learn new skills,
- encourage all levels of talents to be supportive of each other day at a time.

Research also supports that talent who work with a higher psychological safety team are most likely to stay with the organization.

Also, those great talents will continuously utilize the power of diverse new ideas with their Team, bring in more revenues, and be rated more effective twice as often by their leaders.

Three techniques to easily destroy trust and Psychological Safety based on my personal experience.

Warning, please try to avoid applying these three techniques since the damage would be hard to control.

If you are practicing these techniques every day, now is the time to ask yourself, is there an alternative for your team?

If your organization is utilizing any of those techniques, you have two options:

Option one - take a great deal of risk to be the change-maker for your organization. You would be a hero to many, and they would never forget.

Option two – It is time to find a place that gives you space to be the most authentic you.

1. Set up the wrong performance Metric

The easiest way to damage the team's Psychological Safety is to set up the wrong performance metric. When the performance Metric shows people that only the sales revenue matters the most, people will follow the clear message and only focus on boosting numbers. Forbidding the team or individual to challenge the metric and maintaining the status quo are destructive and effective ways to destroy the team's Psychological Safety.

2. Punish the person who makes mistakes or brings up problems and tough issues.

When a team member makes a mistake, just hold it against them as often as possible. The action will destroy the person's self-confidence and send an unambiguous signal to everyone, the absolute unwritten norm in the organization.

When a team member brings up problems and challenging issues, ignore it or put it into the parking lot list that you will remember ever. Then, in no time, no one will want to bring any constructive feedback or idea to the Organization.

3. Do what I said not what I did.

The team observes and learns from the actions of their leaders. The organization might have the best team Psychological Safety plan/ training in place, create an organization policy, and even set up a top-level well represented committee to foster the team's Psychological Safety. When an incident happens, the result doesn't align with the existing policy and training. All existing processes and approaches would be seen as window dressing, resulting in a massive wave of distrust among the team.

Summary

One size doesn't fit all. There are many ways to create a team's psychological safety.

No one is perfect; when a mistake happens, taking the problem learning path and using it as a learning opportunity to create the team's psychological safety together turns mistakes into valuable lessons in the long run.

Ask more about how we can prevent it in the future instead of blaming someone or a team.

Trust and team psychological safety are the foundation for a high-performance team.

Harvard Business School Professor Amy Edmondson suggested three possible ways for leaders to enable the team's Psychological Safety:

1. Look at the work as the process of learning problems instead of executing problems since the future is uncertain. The world is changing rapidly, and the best way to be successful is to have everyone contribute their best ideas.
2. Understand that no one is perfect and acknowledge your mistakes. It could be something as simple as "I might miss something here. Can you help me to process it or understand this better?" Those actions can help others to model your behavior and be willing to share their thoughts.
3. Be a curious leader by asking a lot of questions. Most people remain silent and listen when there is a "leader" in the room. The behavior would encourage them to ask questions and potentially speak up and be more engaged by asking questions with the team.

References

- Amy C Edmondson (1 June 1999). "[Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams](#)" (PDF). *Administrative Science Quarterly*. 44 (2): 350–383.
- Amy C Edmondson and Zhike Lei. (2014). "[Psychological Safety: The History, Renaissance, and Future of an Interpersonal Construct](#)". *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*. 1: 23–43.
- Amy C Edmondson (2018). [The fearless organization: Creating psychological safety in the workplace for learning, innovation, and growth](#)
- Amy Edmondson, Aaron De Smet, Kim Rubenstein, Gunnar Schrah, & Mike Vierow. Psychological safety and the critical role of leadership development <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/psychological-safety-and-the-critical-role-of-leadership-development>
- Center for Creative Leadership - What Is Psychological Safety at Work? <https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/what-is-psychological-safety-at-work/>
- Dr. Jacinta Jiménez, PsyD(March 4th, 2022) Why psychological safety at work matters and how to create it <https://www.betterup.com/blog/why-psychological-safety-at-work-matters>
- Laura Delizonna (August 24th, 2017) High-Performing Teams Need Psychological Safety. Here's How to Create It <https://hbr.org/2017/08/high-performing-teams-need-psychological-safety-heres-how-to-create-it>
- Megan Martin (May 28th, 2021) Fostering Psychological Safety In The Workplace <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2021/05/28/fostering-psychological-safety-in-the-workplace/?sh=189b486f4773>
- Manifesto for Agile Software Development <https://agilemanifesto.org/>
- Timothy R. Clark (Feb 21st,2022) "Agile Doesn't Work Without Psychological Safety <https://hbr.org/2022/02/agile-doesnt-work-without-psychological-safety>
- William A. Kahn (1990-12-01). "Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work". *Academy of Management Journal*. 33 (4): 692–724. doi:10.2307/256287. ISSN 0001-4273. JSTOR 256287.
- re:Work (Google) Guide: Understand team effectiveness <https://rework.withgoogle.com/guides/understanding-team-effectiveness/steps/introduction/>

About the Author



Mei Lin

Plano, Texas, USA



Mei Lin is an Agile Hybrid Project and PMP certified Project Management Professional who is passionate about implementing digital technology and infrastructure solutions with global teams that bring value to organizations. She builds empowered and collaborative teams that focus on delivering on-time, on-budget, and value, based on understanding the needs of the business and team members first.

Mei Lin is Immediate past president of the PMI Dallas chapter and holds the following certifications: PMI - PMP®; PMI - ACP®; PMI - PBA®; Agile Hybrid Project Pro Micro-Credential; Disciplined Agile Senior Scrum Master; Certified Disciplined Agile Instructor; Lean Portfolio Management; Toastmasters Distinguished Toastmasters (DTM*2); Six Sigma Black Belt Professional; Six Sigma Champion; Lean Six Sigma Green Belt; Lean Management.

She is an author, speaker and innovative, growth-oriented, multilingual servant leader. She is a continuous improvement enthusiast and a lifelong learner, who also cares about other people, the earth and the environment.

She can be contacted at mei.lin.pmp@gmail.com