



## Psychological Safety

According to PwC's 2016 Global CEO survey, 55% of CEOs think that a lack of trust is a threat to their organization's growth (Zak, 2017). This is an alarming percentage, but an important question to consider when examining this topic is, as a leader, where do you start in order to increase trust with your employees? Over the next several weeks, our Quick Tips will focus on different techniques to create two-way trust between employees and leaders. The first technique in creating two-way trust is to develop an environment of psychological safety.

G. Riley Mills, co-founder of the Pinnacle Performance Company, mentions that leaders must create psychological safety within their organization so that team members feel free to take risks and make mistakes in their daily pursuit of excellence (Forbes, 2021). This idea of psychological safety often comes in play in any sport where players wrestle with the fear of failure versus a desire to succeed. Instead of athletes playing relaxed and taking advantageous chances in a game to foster positive results, they may play restricted and not reach their full potential. This mindset and type of playing environment are instilled in players by the coach. Some of the greatest upsets in sports history came from underdog teams playing at high levels because they trusted their coaches enough to take risks, maximize their skills, and played to win; not to avoid losing.

An interesting experiment on psychological safety is explained in Daniel Coyle's book called "The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups." In this experiment, run by Will Felps, who studies organizational behavior at the University of New South Wales in Australia, one individual named Nick was given the role to sabotage different group meetings using three negative character traits. These traits included acting as an aggressive jerk, a slacker who withholds effort, and a depressive downer. One negative participant often derails a team, and this was the case with almost every group that Nick was a part of. No matter what role Nick played, the group's performance was reduced by 30 to 40 percent. For certain groups, members even started to adopt the same attitude as Nick when he acted as a slacker or downer. However, there was one outlier group in this study, where no matter what tactic Nick utilized to negatively disrupt the group, he was unable to succeed.

This was because this connected group was led by a person named Jonathan, who built a foundation of safety and trust. Inside the group's meeting, Jonathan had a unique ability to reverse Nick's negative energy and allow the rest of his team to get involved. As Nick tried to act like a jerk, Jonathan would simply use specific body language, laugh, and smile, but not in a demeaning way. He would react with warmth, and then pivot quickly to ask simple questions to other members in the group in to elicit input and hear creative ideas from everyone. Some of these questions included, 'Hey, what do you think of this?' And 'How would you do that?' On the surface, these small behaviors may seem insignificant. The reality: however, is that employees are always watching how leaders respond and act. Psychological safety is what strong culture is built upon, and Jonathan was proof that it can lead to a group's success despite challenging circumstances.

-Josh

## References

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