

40. Psychological Safety Compass

What types of psychological safety do I want to create for people in my organization?

Key Definitions

People experience *psychological safety* when they do not fear negative social reactions, such as disapproval, rejection, blame or retribution. In a psychologically safe team or organization people feel they are not running the risk of being harshly judged by others and therefore will dare to be more outgoing and proactive, instead of withdrawn and careful.

Key to psychological safety is a sense of inclusion and fairness – *inclusion* means a person is fully admitted to a social group as a respected member, while *fairness* means that a person is treated in a reasonable and equitable manner. Generally, the more *diversity* in a team or organization, the more challenging it is to ensure inclusion and fairness.

Conceptual Model

The *Psychological Safety Compass* outlines the four main social fears that undermine people's psychological safety, as well as the four linked types of safety that need to be created to allow people to function optimally as team members. The four types of psychological safety differ along two axes – vertically whether they focus on people's sense of inclusion or fairness, and horizontally whether they focus on what the individual is/does or on how the individual relates to others. As a compass, the model encourages leaders to measure safety and take actions in all four directions, instead of seeing psychological safety as one monolithic phenomenon.



Key Elements

The four related types of psychological safety are the following:

1. **Acceptance Safety: Avoiding the Fear of Disapproval.** To dare to show yourself as you genuinely are, you need to feel that other team members will accept you without judgement.

You need to sense an openness to take you as you are, instead of measuring you against some unwritten criteria of how you should be. If the fear that you don't meet the norms subsides, you no longer have to wear a mask, or worry about losing face, but can be your authentic self, warts and all. You can be vulnerable, honestly admitting your weaknesses, and you can be different, without being branded as an oddball.

2. **Connection Safety: Avoiding the Fear of Rejection.** Being accepted, or maybe just tolerated, doesn't necessarily mean that other people will happily be in your presence and enthusiastically talk with you. To dare to interact with other team members, you need to feel that they see you, value you and welcome you to connect. You need to sense an openness to get to know you, involve you in conversations and hear what you have to say. Once the fear of rejection and being locked out subsides, you can more easily approach teammates, speak up and even ask others to help you.
3. **Activity Safety: Avoiding the Fear of Blame.** Anytime you do something, there is a risk of it being wrong or going wrong. But at the same time there is a social risk of being blamed for what is perceived as wrong by other team members. This blame can lead to shame, loss of standing and even punishment. To dare to do things, particularly more risky things such as solving complex problems or engaging in innovative ventures, you need to feel a tolerance for mistakes and even an admiration for taking action. Only once the unfair threat of blame is off the table, will you readily act, as well as admit when things go wrong.
4. **Challenge Safety: Avoiding the Fear of Retribution.** 'An elephant in the room' is when there is an uncomfortable issue you shouldn't bring up. If you do break the silence, retribution by teammates is often swift. In the same way, you risk being punished by contravening other group rules, or asking uncomfortable questions, surfacing awkward problems, and stating unorthodox opinions. So, to dare to speak up, you need to feel there is room to challenge the status quo without fear of retaliation, or that there is even respect for the person who opens up the dialogue and pushes people out of their comfort zone.

Key Insights

- **Psychological safety is about avoiding four types of social fear.** In any group, people run the risk of being harshly judged by others and suffering the consequences. There is a threat of *disapproval* (not being accepted for who you are), *rejection* (not being welcomed as a group member), *blame* (found at fault for something that happened) and *retribution* (being retaliated against for challenging the status quo). People experience psychological safety when these four fears are absent.
- **Psychological safety requires inclusion.** To feel psychologically safe, a person needs to feel they can show who they genuinely are (acceptance safety) and that they will be welcomed to participate in the group (connection safety). Together this creates inclusion.
- **Psychological safety requires equity.** To feel psychologically safe, a person needs to feel their actions will be judged fairly (activity safety) and their uncomfortable questions will be viewed as useful (challenge safety). Together this creates a sense of fairness.
- **Leaders need to manage all four types of psychological safety.** Psychological safety is a fuzzy topic for many leaders, making it attractive to simplify by only focusing on one type. Yet, the four types are different, and all require specific attention.
- **Even with safety, courage remains important.** Full psychological safety is impossible, as some social risk will always remain. Therefore, leaders need to also stimulate people to show social courage to be and act despite their fears. Leaders should help to create safety, but without becoming *curling leaders*, sweeping away all team members' challenges.

Meyer's Management Models

Insightful Tools to Kickstart Your Thinking

Publication Schedule

<i>July 2019</i>	<i>Mind the Gap Model</i>	<i>Change Management</i>
<i>August 2019</i>	<i>Digital Platform Map</i>	<i>Digital Strategy</i>
<i>September 2019</i>	<i>Interaction Pressure Gauge</i>	<i>Interpersonal Interaction</i>
<i>October 2019</i>	<i>Revenue Model Framework</i>	<i>Revenue Model Typology</i>
<i>November 2019</i>	<i>House of Engagement</i>	<i>Organizational Engagement</i>
<i>December 2019</i>	<i>Confidence Quotient</i>	<i>Trust Building</i>
<i>January 2020</i>	<i>Competition Tornado</i>	<i>Competitive Strategy</i>
<i>February 2020</i>	<i>11C Synergy Model</i>	<i>Corporate Synergy Management</i>
<i>March 2020</i>	<i>Leadership Fairness Model</i>	<i>Leader-Follower Interaction</i>
<i>April 2020</i>	<i>Strategic Agility Model</i>	<i>Strategy Process Approach</i>
<i>May 2020</i>	<i>Control Panel</i>	<i>Corporate Control Dimensions</i>
<i>June 2020</i>	<i>Rising Star Framework</i>	<i>Talent Management</i>
<i>July 2020</i>	<i>Strategy Development Cycle</i>	<i>Strategy Process Steps</i>
<i>August 2020</i>	<i>7I Roles of the Corporate Center</i>	<i>Corporate Organization</i>
<i>September 2020</i>	<i>Storytelling Scripts</i>	<i>Leadership Communication</i>
<i>October 2020</i>	<i>Strategic Bets Framework</i>	<i>Strategic Decision-Making</i>
<i>November 2020</i>	<i>Rebound Model of Resilience</i>	<i>Organizational Resilience</i>
<i>December 2020</i>	<i>4C Leadership Capabilities</i>	<i>Leadership Competences</i>
<i>January 2021</i>	<i>Digital Product Model Dial</i>	<i>Digital Strategy</i>
<i>February 2021</i>	<i>Digital Distribution Model Dial</i>	<i>Digital Strategy</i>
<i>March 2021</i>	<i>Empowerment Cycle</i>	<i>Employee Empowerment</i>
<i>April 2021</i>	<i>Innovation Box</i>	<i>Innovation Approaches</i>
<i>May 2021</i>	<i>Knowledge Sharing Bridges</i>	<i>Best Practice Sharing</i>
<i>June 2021</i>	<i>Followership Cycle</i>	<i>Leader-Follower Interaction</i>
<i>July 2021</i>	<i>Everest Model of Change</i>	<i>Change Management</i>
<i>August 2021</i>	<i>Fruits & Nuts Matrix</i>	<i>Priority-Setting</i>
<i>September 2021</i>	<i>Powerhouse Framework</i>	<i>People & Organization Strategy</i>
<i>October 2021</i>	<i>Strategy Hourglass</i>	<i>Strategy-Making Steps</i>
<i>November 2021</i>	<i>Disciplined Dialogue Model</i>	<i>Interpersonal Communication</i>
<i>December 2021</i>	<i>Team Building Cycle</i>	<i>Team Building Process</i>
<i>January 2022</i>	<i>Market System Map</i>	<i>External Analysis Framework</i>
<i>February 2022</i>	<i>Strategic Alignment Model</i>	<i>Business Level Strategy</i>
<i>March 2022</i>	<i>Creativity X-Factor</i>	<i>Creativity Enhancement</i>
<i>April 2022</i>	<i>Organizational System Map</i>	<i>Organizational Analysis</i>
<i>May 2022</i>	<i>Corporate Value Creation Model</i>	<i>Corporate Level Strategy</i>

June 2022	Change Manager's Toolbox	Change Methodologies
July 2022	Sustainable You Model	Personal Sustainability
August 2022	Value Proposition Dial	Business Level Strategy
September 2022	The Tree of Power	Organizational Power
October 2022	Psychological Safety Compass	Team Dynamics
November 2022	Strategic Action Modes	Strategy Process
December 2022	Corporate Management Styles	HQ Management
January 2023	Reasoning Routines Model	Thinking Skills
February 2023	Activity System Dial	Value Creation Analysis
March 2023	Customer-Centricity Circle	Organizational Design
April 2023	New Learning Curve	Personal Learning
May 2023	Partnership Distance Model	Interorganizational Relations
June 2023	Needs Radar Screen	Motivation Analysis
July 2023	New Pyramid Principle	Presentation Approaches
August 2023	Stakeholder Heat Map	Stakeholder Management
September 2023	Embedded Identity Model	Personal Awareness