

# PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IN THE WORKPLACE



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## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this course the group will be introduced to the concept of psychological safety and how it operates in workplace teams.

They will be introduced to Dr Amy Edmondson's framework of quadrants which is used to understand team dynamics and assess team performance. The quadrants are based on two dimensions: psychological safety and accountability/motivation/performance. This model demonstrates why you can't focus on psychological safety alone but must understand the intrinsic motivation of your team.

The group will learn to recognize each quadrant and how they can address the issues that are associated with it. They will also learn that at organisations and teams will move between these zones as circumstances change.

Each section is divided as follows.

**LOOK** – watch the videos and reflect on the content and message.

**THINK** – activities and questions linking the videos to their own experience and workplace.

**REMEMBER** – a summary of the key learning points.

Each section relating to the videos will last around 15 minutes.

**PRACTISE** – At the end of the series of videos there is a practical exercise which will bring the learnings together. Delegates should be encouraged to record any personal development actions on their Personal Action Plan sheet.

You may not be a Mental Health Professional and this course is only intended to provide a framework to introduce the subject and provoke discussion. If you or any of the team need assistance, please use your organisations management structure, Employee Assistance Programme, or mental health first aider, who will be able to direct employees who are struggling with mental health issues towards agencies able to provide counselling or advice.

## FEATURED VIDEOS

- What is psychological safety?
- The Team Comfort Zone
- The Team Apathy Zone
- The Team Anxiety Zone
- The Team Performance Zone

## FILM 1 – WHAT IS PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY?

LOOK (play video, 3 minutes)

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Give the group some background before you show the film. Dr Amy Edmondson's framework of quadrants is used to understand team dynamics and assess team performance. The quadrants are based on two dimensions: psychological safety and accountability/motivation/performance.

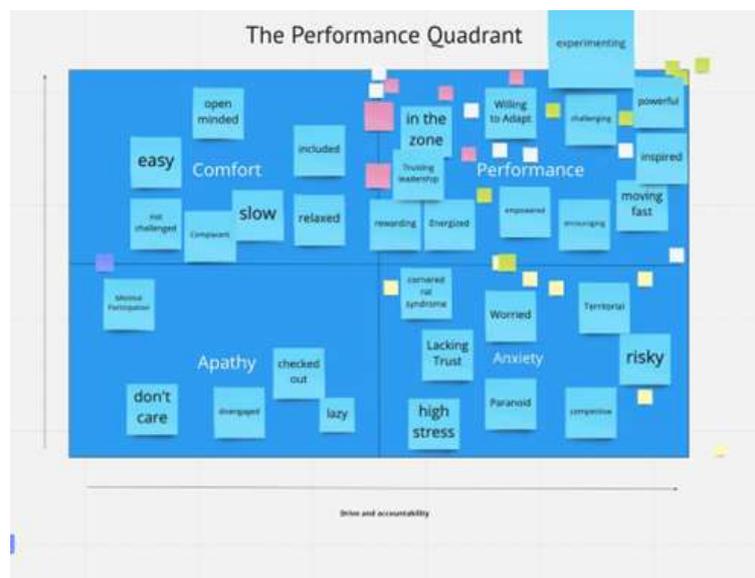
THINK (10 minutes discussion)

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Team psychological safety is a shared belief held by members of a team that it's positive to take risks, to express their ideas and concerns, to speak up with questions, and to admit mistakes — all without fear of negative consequences. This model demonstrates why you can't focus on psychological safety alone but must understand the intrinsic motivation of your team.

Ask the group to think about what it's like to be in a team in each quadrant. This will help introduce psychological safety as a concept to everyone present or reaffirm if the team already understands it.

Starting as the bottom left, in the "Apathy" zone, ask everyone to contribute post-its or virtual stickies with words that describe that zone. Move through each zone, and end with the top-right, the high performance or "learning" zone. Tell them you will return to this during the session. Example below.



Tom Geraghty, Iterum Ltd

REMEMBER

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Get comfortable with being uncomfortable. People often confuse psychological safety with feeling 'comfortable'. Having high levels of psychological safety in a team may mean having uncomfortable conversations. "The work" is to help teams feel safe enough to have these honest discussions.

## FILM 2 – THE COMFORT ZONE

LOOK (play video, 4 minutes)

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Set the scene for the team before showing the video. The comfort zone is a beautiful place, but nothing ever grows there.

THINK (10 minutes discussion)

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Focus the team back on your quadrant and ask them to review the words that they suggested in the earlier exercise. Do they have any additions or further thoughts on the words they came up with?

Explain that in the comfort zone you will see teams with high psychological safety but no real drive or motivation to succeed. As a team, they may not be reaching their full potential, but consider themselves high performers. In organisations like this, leaders tend to be acting as ‘caring parents’, too often shielding teams from real challenges or critical feedback. The team may be long-lasting, and achieve some of their goals, but can stagnate and have a low drive to change how they do things.

Ask the team to discuss how to prevent falling into this zone for too long.

Share the idea that challenges are a natural part of teamwork so they shouldn’t be ignored or ‘resolved’. A psychological safe space is not one with a ‘nice’ culture where you are holding back on something that may be challenging for others, that doesn’t help move things forward, or allow for team growth.

Teams high in psychological safety but low in motivation will not be performing at their best. Their high sense of team comfort may not provide incentives for the team to move out of this zone either. It’s not uncommon for leaders and teams who fear an overly toxic workplace to embrace a solution that swings too far in the opposite direction.

It’s important to note that teams do sometimes need refueling time where they can ‘rest and digest’ before moving back into the performance zone. But when people don’t receive stretch goals or receive the honest feedback that they need to hear, they aren’t given the opportunity to improve, and that can negatively affect the work of everyone around them. In the short term, both leaders and teams may feel more comfortable ignoring it. However, performance will suffer and can lead teams towards the apathy and anxiety zones.

REMEMBER

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The comfort zone is a beautiful place, but nothing ever grows there. Set stretch goals and encourage honest feedback. Set ambitious yet achievable goals that require the team to go beyond their current capabilities. These goals should push them to learn new skills, tackle complex challenges, and think outside the box.

## FILM 3 – THE APATHY ZONE

LOOK (play video, 4 minutes)

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Welcome to the apathy zone – if you can be bothered.! A team lacking psychological safety and motivation will experience dissatisfaction and reluctance towards their work. These teams are unlikely to accomplish significant outcomes and may witness a higher turnover rate as individuals seek more fulfilling opportunities and greater success in other teams.

THINK (10 minutes discussion)

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Focus the team back again on your quadrant and ask them to review the words that they suggested in the earlier exercise. Do they have any additions or further thoughts on the words they came up with?

In the apathy zone, teams do not have any motivation to perform, and there is no psychological safety. They may feel unhappy, reluctant to work, and not achieve anything meaningful. The kind of organisations which sit in this zone may be top-heavy in bureaucracy, and teams won't collaborate, but compete instead. As a result, you may see a high turnover of staff.

If phrases like "don't care" show up and there's an atmosphere of disregard, laziness, and quiet quitting then you need to act. Ask the team to discuss how you might remedy this? Make sure the responses cover these areas.

Model curiosity and invite engagement.

If you think your team is in the apathy zone, learn how to ask good questions and ask lots of them. The more you ask questions the more you build curiosity in yourself and others. This curious mindset is what you need to begin to develop psychological safety and create structures that give everyone a voice.

Respond productively.

Listen and acknowledge gaps in performance or unresolved issues. Then focus forward.

REMEMBER

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To avoid a long stay in the Apathy Zone, you'll need to find out the root causes. Take the time to understand the underlying reasons for the team's apathy. It could be due to unclear goals, lack of recognition, inadequate resources, or poor communication. Addressing these issues directly will be crucial in motivating the team.

## FILM 4 – THE ANXIETY ZONE

LOOK (play video, 4 minutes)

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Set the scene for the team before showing the video. In the is zone people show up for work in fear.

THINK (10 minutes discussion)

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Focus the team back again on your quadrant and ask them to review the words that they suggested in the earlier exercise. Do they have any additions or further thoughts on the words they came up with? Make sure these 3 are in there.

- Feeling like you can't speak up about an issue, share concerns or ask a question.
- Fear - you've been shot down before, so you don't speak up.
- Silence - you don't want to come across as 'challenging' or antagonistic.

In the anxiety zone, teams have both low psychological safety but are highly driven. Teams within this zone will experience high levels of stress, as in these cultures people are pitted against each other to perform. These teams often exhibit indicators such as frequent turnover of team members, increased burnout, elevated stress levels, and unhealthy conflict.

Team members are worried, territorial, competitive, and maybe a little paranoid. In an environment lacking trust, risks are taken without consultation and mistakes are covered up without discussion.

The antidote to this is to start building trust and open channels of communication. Admitting your own vulnerabilities and failures and asking questions to help the process is a good start. Ask the group to think about the kind of questions that might do this and then share the following from Jean Marie Di Giovanna.

1. What's the thing you see me doing that's helping me best contribute to the team?
2. What's the thing I do that's detracting from our success?
3. What's one thing I need to know about you that will improve our relationship?
4. What's one thing you need from me that will enable us to be successful?
5. What's one gift, skill, or talent I have overlooked under-valued, or underutilised?
6. What motivates you and how can we bring more of that to work?

REMEMBER

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Look back at the key points covered. If you are in the Anxiety Zone, starting to build psychological safety may require vulnerability and a willingness to reflect and adapt. Asking questions to identify what is causing anxiety is a good place to start.

## FILM 5 – THE PERFORMANCE ZONE

LOOK (play video, 4 minutes)

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Set the scene for the team before showing the video. In the performance zone it is safe to fail, trust is high, and people are learning and collaborating.

THINK (10 minutes discussion)

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Ask the group to discuss the quadrant and ask them to review the words that they suggested in the earlier exercise.

This zone represents a state of psychological safety within a team or organization where individuals feel comfortable taking risks, sharing ideas, and engaging in open dialogue. In this zone, people are encouraged to learn from failures, admit mistakes and collaborate effectively. It promotes a culture of continuous learning, growth, and innovation. Teams in this zone consistently deliver on their goals and typically have low turnover. These teams are confident in setting stretch goals for themselves and have a high drive for personal development.

The high-performance zone, or learning zone, is the sweet spot all companies crave. However, it's important to remember that teams do sometimes need refuelling time where they can 'rest and digest'. That may take them into the comfort zone before moving back into the performance zone. Changing circumstances and team dynamics can have an adverse effect and create apathy or even anxiety. The nature and quality of the conversations in your team should ensure that they don't last.

How the group answer these questions should give you a sense of the degree to which they feel psychologically safe:

1. If you make a mistake on this team, it is not held against you.
2. Members of this team can bring up problems and tough issues.
3. People on this team sometimes accept others for being different.
4. It is safe to take a risk on this team.
5. It isn't difficult to ask other members of this team for help.
6. No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.
7. Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilised.

REMEMBER

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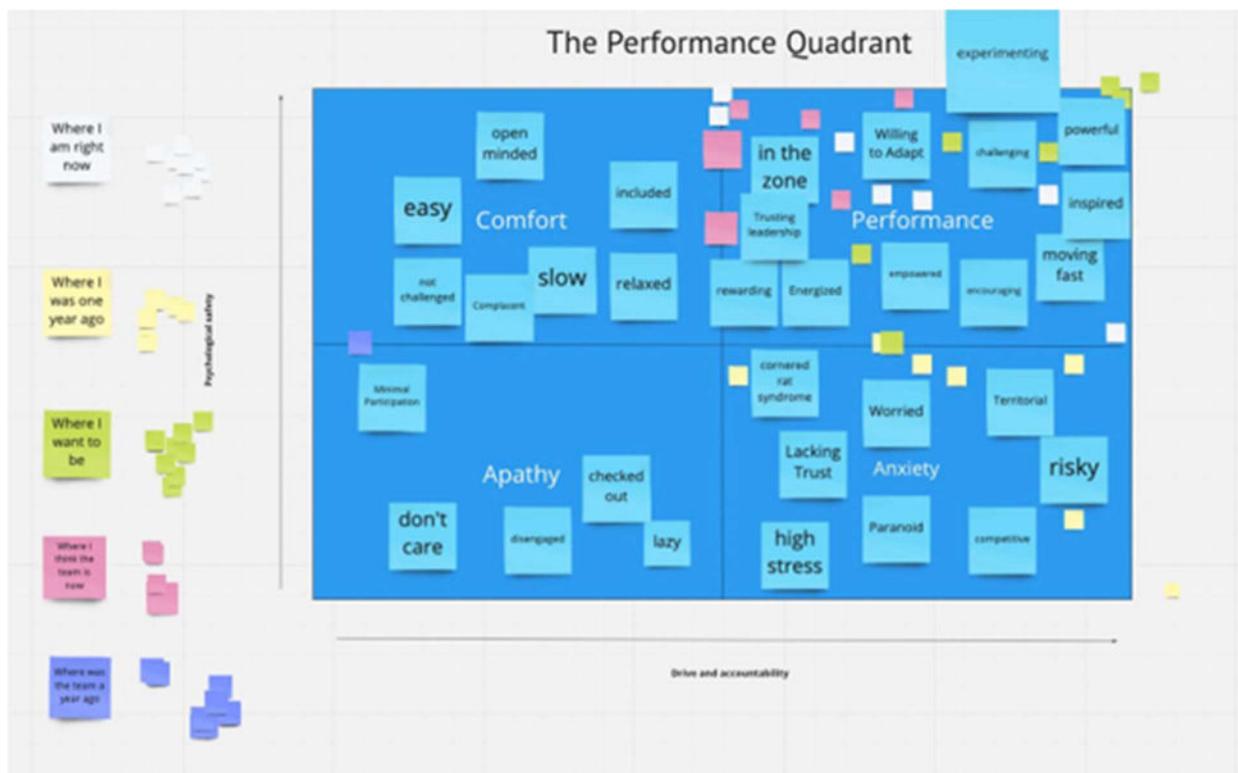
When your team is functioning in this zone highlight what people are doing to make it possible for the team to be here. Give people specific and timely praise.

## GROUP EXERCISE

Using different colour notes (blank, so they're anonymous) for each stage, ask people to first put a note on the board to show where they felt they were a year ago. Your context may suit a different time period of 6 months, two years, or whatever works: essentially, you're looking for "past state". Discuss any clusters, any reasons why, and what that was like.

Then move on to put a note where each person feels they are at present in their team, on average (given that we move around this matrix all the time, hour by hour). Discuss the present state and ask for contributions about what it's like on the team.

Finally, move to a different colour for the future state – "where do we want to be?". This will likely be somewhere in the performance zone, but might be towards the comfort zone, and that's ok. Use this stage to discuss what everyone can do on the team to help everyone get to that place.



Exercise developed by Tom Geraghty, founder and CEO of Iterum Ltd.