



A Manager's Guide to Psychological Safety

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CONTENTS

- 01** Introduction
- 02** What is Psychological Safety?
- 03** The Role of the Manager
- 04** High Performing Teams
- 05** Ways to Build Psychological Safety in Your Teams
- 06** How to Build and Manage a High-Performing Team
- 07** Danton Training
- 08** About Danton

Introduction

As a manager, you want to get the most out of your team. You want them to work well together, help each other out and perform well within their individual roles. Psychological safety is a key part of developing the kind of culture that creates high-performing teams.

In this guide, we break down what psychological safety is, how it benefits the work environment and why understanding it can support your management role in getting the best out of people.



1. What is psychological safety?

Despite the name, psychological safety has very little to do with mental health and wellbeing. Instead, it's a term coined by psychologist Amy Edmondson to describe the conditions where people feel safe to speak up, contribute and share within a group setting.

Organisations like Google have reported that high levels of psychological safety are the main factor in developing a high-performance team. It's what helps their teams to problem-solve and innovate.

Psychological safety is not about creating a culture where anything goes. Instead, it's saying it's okay to get things wrong, where we don't assign blame and where mistakes are part of the learning process.

Having a workplace with high levels of psychological safety is good for business, but in specific circumstances, can also save lives.

Edmondson cites the catastrophic events of the NASA Columbia space shuttle disaster of 2003.

The catastrophic failure that led to the deaths of seven astronauts when the space shuttle disintegrated on its return into Earth's atmosphere. An engineer did have concerns about the shuttle but didn't voice them at meetings. NASA responded to this by creating a safety culture programme to encourage employees to speak up without fear of repercussions.

While your business is unlikely to be NASA, there are probably safety risks within your organisation that exist if people don't feel able to speak up. On a lesser level, mistakes can often be avoided when people share what does and doesn't work. This can only happen with high levels of psychological safety.

2. The role of the manager and psychological safety

As a manager, you don't always get to find out about what's really going on in your team. This is perfectly normal as what your team members will discuss between themselves will be different from what they disclose to you in an official capacity.

Even if you've been promoted from within the team to manage it, your role in the business is different now and so, you don't always get to see what's happening.

This is why a manager's role is critical to creating high levels of psychological safety.

How you manage and how comfortable your people feel in approaching you is the difference between someone speaking up and contributing or simply keeping their head down and getting on with their job.

You want to get the best out of your team. This means building those levels of trust so that if they do have a problem, they will come and tell you.

Or if they are struggling with their workload, they will reach out for help

As a manager, you also set the unspoken rules within your team, even if you don't realise it. If you work late, your team will see that as an expectation of them. If you're responding to emails out of hours, your people will start replying out of hours.

If your approach to management is that you are "the boss" who "instructs" everyone else, your team may not feel they can question if they see something wrong.

Whereas, if you manage in a way that gets the team to work well together, giving them autonomy to use their skills and experience together to come up with new ideas, contribute and discover new ways of performing their roles, then they are far more likely to be engaged, speak up and contribute.

Ultimately, how safe people feel to do all of these positive actions comes down to the manager.

Benefits of psychological safety

40%

reduction in
accidents at work

27%

lower employee
turnover

12%

increase in
productivity

Data from Gallup Survey:
<https://www.gallup.com/workplace/236198/create-culture-psychological-safety.aspx>

3. How does psychological safety help with high performing teams?

We know that psychological safety helps keep people safe, let's them speak up when something is wrong, and increases engagement, but how does it help develop high-performing teams?

When you have a diverse group of people working together, there can often be conflict. It is the role of the manager to manage this conflict. Not all conflict at work is bad. If everyone thought and acted the same way, you wouldn't get new ideas and better results. Having ideas challenged by someone means you come to a better outcome in the long run.

It takes a good manager to know when conflict within the team is positive, and when they need to act on it.

Bringing a team together that works to their best skills is essential to high-performance.

This is why we cover DiSC profiles in the first session of our Managing People Fundamentals programme. It covers the different management styles you have and the different personalities within the team. We all have strengths and weaknesses; these are neither good nor bad. When you put people in the right role to bring out their strengths and complement other skills, it can and does increase performance within the team as a whole.

Ultimately, you cannot have a high-performing team without high-levels of psychological safety.

4. Ways to build more psychological safety in your team

You can take inspiration from how other businesses have increased psychological safety within their business.

Google encourages its people to use 20% of their time for work on side projects that fall outside of their job descriptions. Famously, Google Maps and G Mail have both come from this initiative.

Astra Zeneca replaced annual performance reviews with ongoing performance management and now 85% of employees are receiving coaching as part of their role. Their managers have felt a 70% increase in confidence as well.

You don't always need big programmes to encourage psychological safety in your team.

Simple actions can also help including:

- Regularly celebrating wins. One start up uses a Friday Shout Out so employees can thank someone who has gone out of their way to help them that week or congratulate a teammate.
- Easy feedback. Letting employees give feedback and contribute ideas on notecards can help them say what they'd like to see, even if they are quiet in meetings.
- Make sure everyone has time to speak. There will often be strong personalities in a team that makes it easy for quieter people to hide in the background. Noticing who doesn't always get a chance to speak up and making space for them will encourage everyone to contribute.
- Huddles – Having a weekly huddle where everyone can share their pressure points and what's going well can give you a chance to see who might need extra help and where the team can pull together more.

5. How to build and manage a high-performing team

Managing a high-performing team is a long-term process that needs strong management skills. This is one of the hardest parts of the role because it comes down to your ability to understand the people within your team and create the right kind of culture to develop them.

Managers need to be good at managing conflict, and understanding how diversity works and what is needed to increase performance. As you've read so far, there are many techniques you can use from small actions to bigger programmes. The most important action that you can take as a manager is to make sure you've got the right skills and training yourself to better influence your people.



Training

Danton offers one-day training for Leading and Managing High-Performing Teams. It helps you put in the right actions within your team and understand where you might have a potential skills gap.

This one-day session is part of our Managing People Fundamentals Programme.

For new managers, we recommend the full programme. If you have someone who you think has management potential, then the one-day course gives insights into what's expected of them as a manager and can help towards that next step in their career.



Are you eligible for funding?

Your business may be eligible for SkillsBoost funding which can save you up to 50% of the costs of training. As an official SkillsBoost provider, we can help you apply. The trainee will need to live within Worcestershire to be eligible.

[Book a call with Duncan](#) to find out the best options for your needs.





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About Us

Danton offers management and leadership training as part of their specialist outsourced HR services. Danton was founded by Nicola Roke and has grown to include a growing team of HR consultants and experienced trainers.

We're incredibly driven about delivering for our clients because we're genuinely passionate about seeing businesses succeed through exceptional leadership and effective people management that both motivates and engages teams.

Testimonials

Thank you Duncan, Nat and the team at Danton HR for delivering such an inspiring course. Lots of practical content to be taken away and implemented. Thoroughly enjoyable and highly recommend

- Ormerod Rutter

Putting our managers through the MPF ensures that they have the leadership knowledge and skills they need to flourish. The practical elements of the training allows them to deal with the real world situations that they will face from day one in their new roles. They are much more proactive and require less support.

- USN

The change in Abi over the six months of the programme was really impressive. We now completely trust Abi to run the business with little or no input from us; she handles anything that comes her way brilliantly using the knowledge and practical skills that she learnt on the programme.

- Squiggles