Psychological Safety: Leading remote teams in a distributed world

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Introduction

The notion of distributed teams and its related challenges has long been part of the multi-site and multi-national corporate organization. It is however with the world-wide outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, that many traditional hierarchical organizations and other small to medium enterprises have realized the true impact of working in a distributed world – nowadays often labelled *remote work* or *working from home.*

The reality however, is that this approach to work will be with us for the foreseeable future, if not permanent in some form or another. Business leaders are fast learning that it is possible for their teams to *work from home,* and still maintain acceptable levels of efficiency and quality of work. Some indices show that many employees prefer this new way of work, as it brings a certain balance to their personal lives that were missing in the past.

Whether the classic morning-and-afternoon commute and 9 – 5 workdays will return or not, remains to be seen. What is evident, is that many companies are using their learnings and have started to migrate from strict command-and-control routines to a more employee friendly support structure that enables teams to *work from home.* For many leaders and organizations, this shift might not be limited to just *working from home,* but could usher in a policy of *working remotely: anytime, anywhere* - as long as the agreed output performance indicators are reached. This will especially benefit those individuals that do not have a good work setup at home, but still want to break free from the everyday routine.

Enter: The era of distributed teams and a new primary focus for their leaders called Psychological Safety.

History

Psychological safety is a buzzword that is seen in many popular publications on leadership and the future of work. In literature it is also a highly studied topic and considered as an enabling condition of modern day group dynamics in high performance teams. This relates directly to the new way of work in distributed teams, where people collaborate in various alternative ways to achieve a shared outcome.

The concept of psychological safety can be traced back to 1965, when MIT professors Edgar Schein and Warren Bennis argued that psychological safety was essential for making people feel secure and capable of changing their behavior in response to shifting organizational challenges.

William A. Kahn's study called "Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work" (1990) describes three psychological conditions: Meaningfulness, Safety, and Availability, and their individual and contextual sources.

Jump forward to 1999, where behavioral scientist Amy Edmondson modernized the phrase in her publication "Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams." Edmondson

defines psychological safety as "a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes."

For leaders, psychological safety translates to the ability to show your true self, without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status or career. This establishes a work environment where team members feel included in the team, accepted and respected. They are free to learn, experiment and to respectfully challenge the status quo without fear of being punished, embarrassed or marginalized.

A practical approach

Unlike the global pandemic that instantly changed the face of many workplaces, psychological safety is not a simple *flick of the switch,* but rather a journey that requires trust, empathy and experimentation. Unfortunately, there is no magic formula or instant solution – this, often being the reason why so many organizations and leaders fail to achieve psychological safety and benefit of an employee friendly culture.

Semco Style was developed from the practical experience of Ricardo Semler, in order to codify an approach that will enable self-organization, autonomous decision making and agility and achieve greater impact and performance, with happier and more engaged employees.

Practically, it equips leaders with a framework to lead, manage and inspire distributed teams and create an employee friendly culture characterized by psychological safety. It is underpinned by three concepts that are believed to be at the core of a psychologically safe work environment:

1. **Democracy.** Normally, it would be top management's responsibility to ensure that all aspects of the organization are under control. This leads to highly hierarchical command-and-control structures to ensure that objectives are reached.

   Democracy advocates for inclusion – utilizing the power and wisdom of first line employees doing the work. By no means does this mean that all decisions should be put up for a vote, but by including employees it makes them part of the process, giving real insights into practical problems and distributing decision-making to the appropriate levels. This creates the space for self-management to flourish and empowers people with the autonomy to make decisions themselves.

   Building trust and transparency is at the core of democracy and it requires that adults in the organization are actually treated as adults – responsible individuals that take ownership of their decisions and actions.

2. **Common sense.** Traditional work places are characterized by various layers with complex bureaucracies and silos that destroy any form of trust, stifle creativity and hamper efficient work flow. Employees become robots that only act on instruction and lose the ability to think for themselves. This causes a vicious cycle as it puts even more pressure on top management to make the decisions and keep control.

   Common sense means that a person has a reliable ability to act with sound judgement in practical matters, without sophistication or special knowledge. Unfortunately, *common sense is not that common!* If team members are expected to

act with common sense, it is essential to equip them with the correct skills that enhance their capability to make the appropriate decisions.

Reducing the complexity of bureaucracy is a continuous process that should involve the appropriate employees, with the end-goal of enhancing efficiency on team level. Leaders must create an environment where employees do not blindly follow orders, but are allowed to respectfully challenge the status quo. This is achieved by having a learning mindset that welcomes curiosity. Improvement should be driven through structured experimentation, where failures and mistakes are seen as learning opportunities and as long as it does not recur, it is free from negative effects or punishment. It is essential not to lose control, but to establish alternative methods that enable leaders to be in-control.

3. **Aligned self-interest.** In many organizations there is a disconnect between an individual's personal (self) interest and the reason for doing the work that they are employed to do. In return for certain remuneration, leave or days off between shifts, many people are willing to endure hierarchical command-and-control structures, complex bureaucracies and essentially functioning purely on instruction. The question is if the actions of people in different departments are consistent with what they're promising, and if they are being transparent about what they are actually doing and why they are doing it?

   Aligned self-interest calls for active engagement – an environment where team members feel included, accepted and respected. This will also require the ability to show vulnerability and have some critical dilemma conversations. In high performance organizations, the goals of the employee and the goals of the company are truly and fully integrated and aligned. Simplified, this means that people do not just work for the next pay-cheque, but rather understand and subscribe to the vision of the company. It becomes their vocation – a career that fulfills them and enables them to be themselves and contribute through their unique skill set.

   Again, this is not a switch to flick. Leaders must actively create the environment that fosters an extreme alignment between all stakeholders through clear definition of roles, expectations and perspectives in daily work. When people are clear about their needs and beliefs, there can be better alignment with their team and company interests. It is about finding shared interests and not about everyone pursuing exactly the same things, or about getting everyone onboard. Instead, it is about departments and stakeholders finding common ground on shared dreams or objectives.

Effectively leading remote teams in a distributed world is a core capability that is required in the future of work and psychological safety essentially becomes non-negotiable if there is any hope for the company to survive.

People acting with autonomy and sense of purpose react quicker to change! They learn fast and innovate faster. They are fulfilled workers that enhance their own environment and positively impact on the sustainable growth of the company into the future.

Unlock your potential as a leader and understand the levers of psychological safety in your team.

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