Psychological Safety Influences Relationship Behavior

By John T. Eggers

Psychological safety is defined as people's perceptions of consequences for taking interpersonal risk at their place of work.[1] Psychological safety allows employees to provide input without fear of reprisal from others. When psychological safety exists, employees are rewarded for taking calculated risks, which typically results in more learning. When people feel safe psychologically, the likelihood of engaging in behaviors that lead to greater learning and positive change are greater. Kark and Carmeli suggest that psychological safety may function as the safety net for people to think and behave creatively.[2] Psychological safety also decreases the concern about being viewed as incompetent when asking for feedback and assistance on the job. Edmondson suggests that psychological safety facilitates speaking up when mistakes occur, because it fosters an environment in which one who makes a mistake and speaks out about it, will not be viewed as being inappropriate, but rather as an employee who wants to make a positive contribution to the organization.[3]

Psychological Safety and Effective Leadership

Psychological safety requires trust among leaders, followers and team members. For trust to exist, relationships must be transparent and vulnerable. If one is transparent and vulnerable, his or her interactions are "characterized by sharing relevant information, being open to giving and receiving feedback, being forthcoming regarding motives and the reasoning behind decisions, and displaying alignment between words and actions."[4] Transparency is also a process whereby one shares feelings, values and deep thoughts with another.[5] Leaders who are transparent create for their followers an environment of psychological safety, which promotes increased participation in decision-making and greater trust in the leader. When leaders act with transparency, followers perceive psychological safety, which may result in higher employee engagement on the job. When individuals are engaged, they may exhibit extra effort and assume more responsibility for outcomes.

Trust flourishes when people exhibit their vulnerability to others without knowing what may result.[6] Trust in a leader/follower relationship is reciprocal. The leader must work continually to create and maintain the trust of his or her followers and work just as hard to trust them. Dirks and Skarlicki define trust as "a psychological state held by the follower involving confident positive expectations about the behavior and intentions of the leader, as they relate to the follower."[7] It is the belief that followers have in their leader: that the leader will do the right thing and that he or she will "walk the walk" if they will. It means leaders do what they say they will. It is a demonstration of integrity — sharing values and beliefs with followers and giving followers the reward and recognition they deserve for meeting agreed upon expectations.

High-quality leader/follower relationships encourage learning and goal attainment in the workplace. They promote a healthy exchange of information, which can lead to improved problem-solving and process improvement. Employees in these relationships can talk about negative emotions without fear of harmful backlash.[8] When staff have shared goals and a shared knowledge of work processes, an awareness of how their roles/duties relate to each other, and a sense of mutual respect that allows for openness, chances are good that staff will not blame each other for mistakes. Environments of psychological safety allow staff to view occasions of failure as opportunities to learn.[9]

If a work environment is psychologically safe, individuals will be able to lower their defenses and increase their creativity. Leaders create this safety with their team, and in corrections, this may affect physical safety. Poor psychological safety could threaten physical safety in a variety of ways in the correctional environment. Staff may be hesitant to admit mistakes or errors in such areas as tool control, clearing counts, haphazard cell shake-downs, use-of-force instances, presentence investigations, parole progress reports, or dynamic risk and needs assessments.

Establishing Psychological Safety

Correctional leaders and managers must be willing to share their mistakes with their staff to promote organizational learning. Creating psychological safety requires more than being a manager. A manager typically maintains the status quo inside an organization. Management focuses on planning, directing, and controlling resources, and ensures that policy and procedure is adhered to. They deal directly with daily routine operations in the workplace.

On the other hand, leadership builds upon management. Leaders both manage and lead depending on the situation. Leaders focus on their self-awareness and the self-awareness of their followers. They are individually considerate, inspirationally motivating, intellectually stimulating, and charismatic with their staff. They help their staff be more aware of their thinking, feelings and behaviors in an

attempt to develop them into leaders. Leaders cause positive change inside their organizations by creating psychological safety.

Leadership is all about relationships. Fast-paced organizations, such as those in corrections, must mandate behavior that focuses on learning and action taking. The need to share goals, share knowledge, ask questions, seek help, and tolerate mistakes in the face of uncertainty, while creating a sense of mutual respect are things that occur in a high-quality relationship. Leaders and followers must know the needs, expectations, and wants of each other. Through psychological safety — transparency, trust, honesty, openness, and a willingness to learn continually — a higher degree of physical safety will be achieved.

ENDNOTES

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