Podcast

Psychological Safety in the Workplace

By Tanya A. Bovée & Michael D. Thomas

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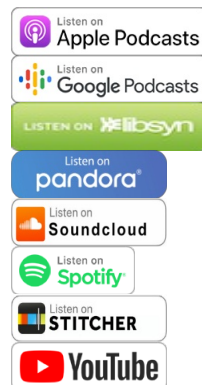## Related Services

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Details

November 13, 2020

Psychological safety in the workplace allows employees to speak up candidly with ideas, questions and concerns, and even make mistakes without fear of reprisal or adverse repercussions. The resulting security created by a culture that supports a safe workplace contributes to inclusivity and can improve performance as employees are able to be more engaged and connected at work.

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Takeaways

Psychological safety in the workplace allows employees to speak up candidly with ideas, questions and concerns, and even make mistakes without fear of reprisal or adverse repercussions. The resulting security created by a culture that supports a safe workplace contributes to inclusivity and can improve performance as employees are able to be more engaged and connected at work.

What Employers Need to Know

- Psychological safety is a term coined and defined by Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson. It involves creating an environment where employees feel empowered to express an idea or contribution fully, without fear of negative consequences to themselves, their status or their career. The concept becomes even more important during stressful times, such as a pandemic, because employers are looking for ways to maintain employee engagement.
- Employers can increase engagement by addressing three needs: belonging (making employees feel like they matter); security (being transparent about the health of the organization, how you are responding to the pandemic and the role the employee plays in the organization's future) and self-actualization (finding projects or assignments that encourage innovation or allow creative thinking).

- Benefits of psychological safety include:
  - Employee retention and attraction;
  - Improved collaboration;
  - Improved employee wellbeing;
  - High-performing culture;
  - Higher levels of employee engagement; and
  - Innovation.
- The costs of not creating psychological safety include:
  - Reduced engagement;
  - Silo-ing of ideas or at least not sharing ideas or cross developing them;
  - Possibility of increased turn over;
  - Perhaps more sick days and general absenteeism and leaves of absence;
  - Lower productivity;
  - Morale issues;
  - Greater challenges with employee learning; and
  - Greater likelihood of litigation because employees do not trust their employer.
- Creating psychological safety is difficult. But employers can do the following to foster it:
  - Encourage curiosity;
  - Lead with courage and vulnerability;
  - Provide training;
  - Conduct a climate study to monitor and assess the inclusiveness of the work culture;
  - Run a D&I diagnostic to identify areas of improvement;
  - Review internal processes for reviews, feedback and mentoring; and
  - Be transparent.

Transcript

Alitia (00:06):

Welcome to Jackson Lewis' podcast, We get work™. Focused solely on workplace issues everywhere and under any circumstances, it is our job to help employers develop proactive strategies, strong policies, and business-oriented solutions to cultivate a workforce that is engaged, stable, and diverse.

Alitia (00:27):

Our podcast identifies the issues dominating the workplace and its continuing evolution, and helps answer the question on every employer's mind, "How will my business be impacted?" Psychological safety in the workplace allows employees to speak up candidly with ideas, questions, and concerns, and even make mistakes without fear of reprisal or adverse repercussions. The resulting security created by a culture that supports a safe workplace, contributes to inclusivity and can improve performance as employees are able to be more engaged and connected at work.

Alitia (01:05):

This episode of We get work™ explores steps employers can take to foster psychological safety, in turn creating more mental space for employees to think

creatively, share their unique perspectives, and be more actively engaged in problem solving.

Alitia (01:23):

Our hosts today are Tanya Bovée and Michael Thomas, principals respectively in the Hartford and Los Angeles offices of Jackson Lewis. Tanya and Michael have both received a diversity and inclusion certification from Cornell University and conduct DNI training for clients.

Alitia (01:42):

Tanya has served on the board of Connecticut Asian Pacific American Bar Association for 16 years, and is the DNI Liaison for the board. A member of the National Bar Association, Michael presents and publishes on diversity equity and inclusion. His approach to DNI includes best practices, neuroscience, adult learning, experimental learning, dialogue, body awareness, and mindfulness.

Alitia (02:09):

Tanya and Michael, the question on everyone's mind today is, "How can fostering a culture of psychological safety impact my business?"

Tanya Bovée (02:20):

Thanks Alicia. That's such a good question. Hi everyone. I'm Tanya Bovée, welcome to We get work™. I'm so thrilled to have my colleague Michael Thomas here, Michael recently authored an article called Inclusivity and High Performance Begins with Psychological Safety.

Tanya Bovée (02:38):

Michael, I can't imagine that there's an employer out there that isn't trying to achieve high performance. Will you kick us off with defining psychological safety and why it matters?

Michael Thomas (02:51):

Sure, and thanks Tanya. I'm excited to have this conversation with you, and hear your thoughts on this important topic.

Michael Thomas (02:59):

So to properly leverage diversity, it's important to draw out and capitalize on different opinions. And so let me give you an example; if you bring together two or more people with different perspectives on a challenge who are both willing to both advocate for their point of view, and also really listen, they'll come away with a third solution that's distinct from what they originally came to the table with, and stronger and more committed to that third solution because they came up with that solution together, and their viewpoint and perspective was not only wanted and solicited, but it was valued when they shared it.

Michael Thomas (03:39):

And so trust is this essential starting point for true inclusion in any organization to encourage employees to share their unique perspective. And by trust, I mean more than just faith in a person's abilities. What I really mean is a vulnerability trust, sometimes called psychological safety.

Michael Thomas (03:58):

And so psychological safety is a term that was coined defined by Harvard Business School, professor Amy Edmondson. And it's a belief that you will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or even mistakes. And in short, it is how comfortable individuals are with taking risks and being vulnerable within their organization. It's both a climate and a shared belief which lays the foundation for every employee to bring their whole selves to work.

Michael Thomas (04:30):

And so nowadays we hear many different buzzwords. So we hear, "Diversity," and then we hear, "Diversity and inclusion," then, "Inclusion and belonging," and now it's, "Equity," and so forth. And at the core of all of these terms, it points to one key objective, and that's creating a workplace that leverages employees' unique identities and makes them feel part of a whole. And so psychological safety is about creating an environment where everyone's uniqueness can flourish.

Michael Thomas (05:00):

It's about employees feeling empowered to express an idea, or contribute fully without fear of negative consequences to themselves, their status, or even their career. And it includes being courageous enough to showcase their vulnerability, to own their mistakes, and to turn them into learning, and trust that their work environment and coworkers will not shame them for doing so.

Michael Thomas (05:23):

And now recognizing that people's diverse backgrounds shape their unique perspectives of the world, and therefore their contributions and insights, that seemed a little bit obvious. However, in high pressured work environments where key decisions and deliverables are expected daily, we often conform to the leading opinion, the most senior person in the room or the traditional way of thinking typically dominates. And as a result, that richness of perspective, and even uniqueness that each person brings to the table, falls to the wayside.

Michael Thomas (05:57):

And so psychological safety actually brings the focus back to the potential and power of tapping into every employee as a resource for innovation. And studies have shown that when leaders foster a workplace that promotes a speak up culture, employees are a lot more engaged.

Michael Thomas (06:16):

And one other thing, and this becomes really important, is that improving psychological safety has an even greater impact on employees who are members of marginalized groups, or who occupy a lower status within an organization.

Michael Thomas (06:29):

And so I know from personal experience as a black male working in primarily white environments, I often felt reluctant to speak up or ask questions, particularly in environments where I did not see myself represented in upper management, where I felt that it was safer to blend in than to stand up.

Michael Thomas (06:46):

And so leaders' tendency to promote or recognize people who are like them, or a specific type of talent, can contribute to this feeling of exclusion or lack of belonging. And so psychological safety can help break these patterns and habits and create a shift from unconscious bias to conscious inclusion.

Tanya Bovée (07:07):

Hmm. That's so interesting. You know Michael, what about the impact of the pandemic? It seems like psychological safety would be more important than ever, right?

Michael Thomas (07:19):

Yeah Tanya, I think that's really spot on. And what you think about it, psychological safety becomes incredibly important during the pandemic because employers are looking for ways to maintain or create employee engagement.

Michael Thomas (07:32):

And so if you think about Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, psychological safety touches upon three of those basic needs. So number one, a safety and security, it's that desire to be out of danger. Two, belonging, this desire to be part of a community. And three, self-actualization, which is the need to feel fulfilled or be able to maximize one's potential.

Michael Thomas (07:55):

Now during the pandemic, when employees are often working remotely, those three things are challenged. So belonging, it's harder to feel a part of an organization or community when you're working remotely. Security, it's hard to feel safe when there's so much uncertainty. And three, self-actualization, it's really hard to maximize your potential if you don't feel connected to your organization.

Michael Thomas (08:20):

And so employers can increase engagement by addressing those three needs. So belonging, make employees feel like they matter. Two security or safety, being transparent about the health of the organization during the pandemic, and how you're responding to the pandemic, and specifically what's the role of that employee within the organization's future? And three self-actualization, can you find projects or assignments that encourages innovation, or allows that employee to engage in creative thinking?

Michael Thomas (08:53):

And Tanya, I've defined psychological safety and really why it's important. And I know psychological safety is also important to you, so maybe you can discuss some of the benefits of psychological safety, and some of the costs for not a creating psychological safe environment.

Tanya Bovée (09:10):

Absolutely. When I first started managing the Hartford office of Jackson Lewis, I asked friends and colleagues for tips and tools to help me. And Ivan Fong, who's the general counsel of 3M recommended a book, The Speed of Trust by Franklin Covey.

Tanya Bovée (09:28):

And Franklin Covey's simple formula says that as the level of trust increases, the speed of delivery increases, while the cost of doing work goes down. In psychological safety, that plays a huge role for trust. So I really like how it is that you've broken that down.

Tanya Bovée (09:47):

Studies show that employees who feel both physically as well as psychologically safe, will be happier at work, able to innovate and collaborate, and also are more likely to be more productive too.

Tanya Bovée (10:01):

And to go through some of the other benefits, there is employee retention and attraction. So when a workplace has high levels of psychological safety, employees are more likely to stay in their jobs rather than look for new opportunities.

Tanya Bovée (10:18):

And it's also likely that they'll recommend their workplace to friends who are looking for employment. For employers who want to be employers of choice, as well as are really focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion, this can be such a tremendous benefit.

Tanya Bovée (10:36):

Another benefit might be improves collaboration. So a team works best when everyone is communicating and collaborating properly. Unfortunately, low levels of psychological safety in a workplace can [inaudible 00:10:51].

Tanya Bovée (10:51):

A workplace that has high levels, conversely, of psychological safety will encourage more communication and idea sharing for innovation, allowing the team, the group, to work like a well-oiled machine.

Tanya Bovée (11:07):

Another benefit can be improved employee wellbeing. So mental health is linked to an employee's physical health. A workplace with high levels of psychological safety

can give employees a healthier state of mind, and by extension, better physical health. A toxic work environment, on the other hand, can make them feel perhaps drained, demoralized, maybe worn out, and all those things can gradually reduce health as well as performance.

Tanya Bovée (11:41):

Another one is high performing culture. So employees who feel safe in their workplaces have better productivity compared to employees in toxic workplaces.

Tanya Bovée (11:52):

And then we also that there's higher levels of employee engagement. You touched on engagement originally. Psychological safety encourages employees to bring their whole self to the office. And as a result, we know that truly engaged employees aren't just fun to be around, they're also happy to help out; so going above and beyond, and they are bringing their whole selves to work.

Tanya Bovée (12:20):

Another interesting benefit of psychological safety is innovation. So companies report that psychological safety results in more failure. And that may sound totally counterintuitive to the point that we're trying to make, that psychological safety drives performance. But while there is more failure, that's because employees feel more comfortable coming forward with ideas. So that means more innovation, more creativity, and that equals more failure, but also so many more successes.

Michael Thomas (12:59):

That's fascinating, Tanya. And as you point out, trust is so important, and as we know, difficult to create, but often easy to destroy. But what about the flip side, or costs in not creating a psychologically safe environment?

Tanya Bovée (13:14):

The costs of not having a psychologically safe environment can be significant on the employee and the organization.

Tanya Bovée (13:21):

So with respect to individuals, the issue to think about is if team members can't bring themselves to speak what's on their minds, that is, they self-censor themselves, then they won't experience inclusion, and the group won't truly benefit from their perspectives.

Tanya Bovée (13:41):

If there are team members who don't trust each other, then they're going to waste time and energy thinking about what they should say, maybe what they shouldn't say, and wonder about the true intentions of their peers, their managers, when they're interacting with them. I think of this as, frankly, spending a lot of time in your head, versus using that energy to get things done. And this can have such a mental and physical negative impact on employees.

Tanya Bovée (14:11):

And about those costs, so there are costs to an organization that doesn't have psychological safety. It's the opposite of what we talked about in regards to the benefits, but a little bit more. So just to rattle this off, reduced engagement, for example, siloing of ideas, or at least not sharing ideas or cross developing them, we might expect to see some increased turnover, perhaps there's more sick days and general absenteeism, as well as leaves of absence, lower productivity, there might be some morale issues, greater challenges with employee learning, and a greater likelihood of litigation because employees in that instance don't trust their employer.

Tanya Bovée (14:59):

So Michael, this raises the question, why is it difficult for organizations to create psychological safety when we know that there are so many benefits?

Michael Thomas (15:09):

And that is a great question Tanya. And so many organizations preach the importance of bringing one's whole self to work, but very few actually practice it. And so why is that?

Michael Thomas (15:24):

So it's actually hard to create a culture where employees feel they can take risks without fear of failure, or without some adverse consequence. Put another way, it's hard for employees to trust their employers that if they take a risk or share their perspective, they will not be punished, or their career will not be impacted. Or for members of marginalized communities it is hard to trust that, for example me as a black employee, if I make a mistake or speak up, that that will not trigger a form of bias, that will negatively impact me or potentially my career. So I might choose to blend in rather than speak up and take those risks.

Michael Thomas (16:07):

And the truth is, is that the level of openness employees feel is directly correlated with leaders' own ability to be vulnerable, and also transparent. So there's really two things that I often advise leaders in trying to build psychological safety. So the first is to encourage curiosity. So get to know the people on your team, and try to understand their background and what shapes them. Invite unique perspectives during meetings, and invite contributions from everyone.

Michael Thomas (16:37):

So for example, if you're one of the most senior people in the room, ask the junior colleagues for their contributions first. Listen, more, talk less, and build on suggestions [inaudible 00:16:48] active listening and acknowledgement. And the second thing that I often advise is to lead with courage and vulnerability. So what does that mean? Be transparent in communication. So share success stories, but also showcase your challenges and how you overcame them. And even the time when you faced a project failure, what did you learn from that failure, and how can

you empower others to speak up?

Michael Thomas (17:12):

And I know from personal experience as an African-American professional working in primarily white environments, when leaders are transparent and discuss how they overcame challenges it actually gives me permission to trust, and to show up more authentically instead of blending in.

Michael Thomas (17:29):

And so psychological safety is challenging, as we talked about Tanya, to create, but everything is not doom and gloom. So Tanya, are there things that organizations can do to overcome barriers to creating psychological safety?

Tanya Bovée (17:43):

Yes, for sure. So many companies are doing diversity inclusion training these days. We do diversity, inclusion, and bias training where we talk about why diversity and inclusion matters, and what the moral and business cases. We talk about social identities, and how diversity and inclusion can be a game changer for an organization.

Tanya Bovée (18:06):

Michael, I know you also do trainings, and trainings that focus on bias. Can you talk about the importance of bias trainings?

Michael Thomas (18:16):

Absolutely. So bias can be a barrier to implementing a successful DEI initiative. So even if you have the best DEI initiative, if you have not worked on mitigating your known personal biases, those biases will limit your DEI efforts.

Michael Thomas (18:31):

So Einstein has this famous quote, and what he says is that you can't solve a problem with the same mind that created it. So part of bias training helps you identify how you think, and how your own thinking can create barriers to inclusion. And by discussing bias and ways to mitigate bias, we actually help leaders begin to view DEI with a new mindset.

Tanya Bovée (18:57):

That's right. You know, the training focuses on strategies to interrupt bias and changes that organizations can make to avoid bias. And Michael, what are some other things that companies can do to increase psychological safety?

Michael Thomas (19:13):

So beyond training, we also conduct a DEI diagnostic, and DEI climate studies, and this is really a deeper dive into DEI. And so the DEI at diagnostic begins with an orientation session to help us understand the client's current DEI structure and performance.

Michael Thomas (19:32):

We then provide an initial document and data request, seeking documents and data related to DEI, followed by us reviewing and assessing that material provided, and then conducting some interviews with knowledgeable executives, and following up with some clarifying questions as needed.

Michael Thomas (19:50):

And once we have assessed the information provided, the process then concludes with our analysis, and a very interactive presentation of our findings and recommendations.

Michael Thomas (20:00):

And so the climate study, the climate study is a tool that allows an organization to monitor and assess the inclusiveness of the work culture. It involves interviews and surveys that solicit information regarding how people feel about their jobs, their personal experiences, their work group relationships, and the organization's attitudes towards diversity. And the outcome of these interviews and studies often reveal how people assess their environment, growth opportunities, and the inclusiveness of the organization, and management's attitude towards diversity.

Michael Thomas (20:35):

And so Tanya, are there some additional things that organizations can do?

Tanya Bovée (20:39):

Yeah, absolutely. I love the idea of a DNI assessment or a climate survey, our partner Weldon Latham 00:20:48 and the Corporate DEI Group is keeping busy with in-depth DNI assessments.

Tanya Bovée (20:53):

And I know that our colleagues, Monica Khetarpal, and Susan Friedfel, and Nick Simpson are doing more and more higher ed climate surveys these days.

Tanya Bovée (21:04):

But to address your question, so another way that companies can work on psychological safety is to review internal processes. So for example, are new employees being taught the culture of the organization and what is expected of them, or is it trial by fire? Is there a culture of blaming, or is it rather a culture of problem-solving? Are goals clearly communicated to employees, and are the tools provided to employees to achieve those goals, as well as enough time to actually meet those goals?

Tanya Bovée (21:42):

Another one is, do employees have mentors? And here I think of a mentor as a coach, as well as an advocate. So someone they can bounce ideas off of without judgment, someone who will advocate for them.

Tanya Bovée (21:56):

Another one is, are there positive role models in the workplace? Is there equity in the workplace? For example, are work assignments divvied up in an equitable way? Do employees feel like they're paid fairly? And is there equity in how information is communicated? So think of the knowledge management.

Tanya Bovée (22:17):

And Michael, we've talked in the past about the importance of transparency. I think that's such a big one when I think about psychological safety. So do the leaders convey the vision of the organization? Do employees feel empowered to help the organization achieve that vision? When change is communicated, is it explained in a transparent way, or at least the most transparent way possible? If a leader makes a mistake, does a leader own up to it and fix it? Do the company and managers meet their commitments?

Tanya Bovée (22:55):

For example, if the company or a manager promises to do something by a certain date, is that commitment met? Are employees asked for their feedback and input. And another one, are the leaders open to that feedback? Are employee ideas welcomed and valued? Do employees feel comfortable about asking questions? And not only that, but does management work to answer those questions? It may be as simple as the answer is, "I don't know yet." And that's okay, so long as the employee can trust that someone will run down that answer for the future.

Tanya Bovée (23:35):

Another is, is positive dialogue encouraged? So for example, instead of something presented as a challenge, could it be presented an opportunity? Is there transparency on how performance is evaluated and what the process is? Do employees know what the definition of success is within the organization? And is there room for different types of success in the organization? And by that, I mean not every employee will define success the same way. And is that okay?

Tanya Bovée (24:12):

Another piece for psychological safety is whether or not employees know how they can advance. So for example, is there a secret handshake? And maybe not, but all kidding aside, does the organization communicate the tips and tools on how to navigate the organization? We're also hearing that so many companies are grappling with engagement, something that you mentioned earlier, particularly with so many employees who are working remotely. So to that point, do employees feel engaged? Do they feel like their organization cares about them as people? And this last one is critical, particularly in the middle of a pandemic.

Michael Thomas (24:57):

Wow Tanya, that's just a lot of information, and really some compelling insights into this incredibly important and timely topic. But working with you, Tanya, I am not surprised. It is always a pleasure hearing your perspective. And I have really

learned a lot.

Tanya Bovée (25:14):

Me too. Thank you so much for sharing your perspective, and really in such a personal way.

Michael Thomas (25:20):

Oh, of course, and I look forward to continuing to work to address the ever-changing and challenging world of DEI related issues.

Tanya Bovée (25:27):

Absolutely. So do I. So thank you so much for joining this podcast with me and talking about such an important topic, and thank you to everyone for joining us.

Alitia (25:39):

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Alitia (26:00):

And as a reminder, this material is provided for informational purposes only, it is not intended to constitute legal advice, nor does it create a client-lawyer relationship between Jackson Lewis and any recipient.

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