DOES YOUR 'ZERO HARM' POLICY INCLUDE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY?

Take psychological safety up a level

1. Most people know intuitively whether or not their environment is psychologically safe. In the first instance, why don't you test the waters? Ask people. Recognise there is the risk in an unsafe climate that people might not be willing to give you bad news.

2. Reflect on your own experience of the organisation. How comfortable do you feel in owning up to mistakes in the presence of superiors? Do you feel able to speak your mind honestly, or are you often self-censoring? Research shows that people working in the same environment often have very similar perceptions.

3. Reflect also on the level of innovation or general sense of "innovativeness". Are people willing to take necessary risks associated with experimentation and growth? Innovating and risking are two reasonable proxies for a quick check of levels of psychological safety.

4. Finally, build an inclusive culture where everyone feels a real sense of being able to make valued contributions. The deeper sense of belonging that inclusion creates will give rise to many of the behaviours that promote psychological safety.

A question of focus

Workplace safety is a concern for most. Yet, many organisations across vastly diverse industries are physically safe but have seriously psychologically toxic work environments. If 'psychological safety' was a reportable indicator, those squeaky-clean safety graphs would look profoundly different!

Politicians are drawn to photo ops with high visibility (safety) vests which, though they're often spruiking growth credentials, subtly reinforce 'safe workplaces'. Many company reports trumpet zero or negligible "Lost Time due to Injury". 'Zero harm' rhetoric claims commitment to caring for people, referencing physical injury and disease. The focus is almost exclusively on physical harm indicators, even though psychological safety can be a significant risk in knowledge economy businesses.

Low psychological safety is a risk

Carefully reviewing video material of a key safety event, engineer Rodney Roca noticed some suspicious activity. However, the images were too grainy for a definitive identification. Roca emailed his supervisor, asking that another department assist with gaining clear video images. All caps in his email 'shouted' his sense of urgency and concern.

Roca wasn't impressed with the supervisor's refusal to assist. But, in an especially hierarchical culture, one didn't risk speaking out. Instead, Roca shared his frustration with colleagues. It wasn't the done thing to send messages higher up the food chain!

He had his chance to voice his concerns some 8 days later at a project review. Recalling his manager's rebuttal, Roca was too anxious to raise the issue in this much broader meeting. He hoped others, who also knew of the potential problem, would raise the concerns, but they didn't. If they weren't saying anything, then he wasn't either. It was just too risky. He felt too psychologically unsafe. A review would find 8 missed opportunities to rectify the fault.

One high price that was paid for low psychological safety

Roca was actually the NASA engineer first concerned about damage to space shuttle Columbia. The fateful sequence of events cost seven astronauts their lives. It also grounded the shuttle program for more than 2 years.

Yes, it was the missing section of protective foam that caused the space shuttle Columbia to burn up on re-entry into the earth's atmosphere. But, the Columbia Accident Investigation Board also found that NASA's culture significantly contributed to the disaster. A key part of that culture perpetuated a low level of psychological safety. One of the casualties of such a culture is people speaking out. They fear recrimination or retaliation, often with good cause.

What is psychological safety?

According to Harvard Business School professor, Amy Edmondson, psychological safety occurs when people feel free to express relevant thoughts and feelings. In her book, 'Teaming', she notes, "[it is] possible to give tough feedback and to have difficult conversations without the need to tiptoe around the truth". Essentially, she points out, psychological safety is a "taken-for-granted belief about how others will respond when you ask a question, seek feedback, admit a mistake, or propose a possibly wacky idea".

Three benefits of psychological safety

Edmondson lists a number of benefits of psychological safety, among which are having people speak up, enabling clarity of thought and promoting innovation.

First, if people feel they are safe to speak out, there is a far greater chance they will than if they were afraid of the consequences. Countless time UGM has worked in environments where people are afraid to speak their mind. Inevitably, there have been people with great ideas who were too afraid to express them. In those situations there are no winners – individuals work in fear and the organisations miss out on great ideas, sometimes game-changing.

Recent neuroscience research shows that when your fear circuits activate, they simultaneously redirect 'processing power' away from your higher-order thinking circuits. It makes good sense that you'd rather flee a potential threat than generate a whole range of creative or reflective thoughts about your situation. It's a learned response that we've inherited from thousands of years of honing survival capabilities. Importantly, fear is mostly not a good companion of creative and clear thinking, needed in the complex work environments of today.

Finally, both of the previous two core ideas link together to highlight that innovation suffers in the absence of psychological safety. A big part of innovating is risk taking. Usually, only a fraction of experiments succeed. For every big breakthrough there might be hundreds or even thousands of prior failures. If people aren't willing to risk failure, then experimentation and innovation is doomed. Similarly, they're unlikely to mention any failure which, itself, can be extremely costly.

Psychological safety and your team or organisation

Given the huge benefits of psychological safety and also the potentially devastating costs of its absence, what type of environment are you working in? If it's not particularly good, what might you do about it? The question becomes particularly relevant if you're in charge. Finally, is your organisation 'loud' about zero harm but 'soft' on psychological safety?