



STEOPLE

SUCCESS THROUGH PEOPLE

Effective Evaluation of Psychological Safety in Teams

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Executive Summary

Most teams and organisations aspire for high performance. This can be achieved by strengthening a culture of collaboration, teamwork and experimentation. Evidenced by academic and industry research, one key factor in creating such a culture is psychological safety.

Psychological safety is the shared belief that individuals feel safe to give their opinions and express themselves without fear of negative social consequences. In order to build psychological safety, organisations and teams need to first be aware of the current levels of psychological safety and the elements that contribute to those levels. An effective measurement method is therefore essential.

The following white paper explores the Steople Psychological Safety Survey, a robust assessment that measures the level of psychological safety in teams, and the relevant contributing factors. The paper will outline the development of the assessment and the Steople Psychological Safety model.

Effective Evaluation of Psychological Safety in Teams

In today's constantly changing workplace, organisations need to create and sustain a culture that fosters collaboration, teamwork, and experimentation. Importantly, your workplace success can be bolstered when your staff contribute new ideas, suggest improvements and foster innovation.¹ However, engaging in these contributions can feel like a risk to individuals. They can feel afraid of ridicule or rejection if their ideas fail or are not well received.¹ People naturally learn to decrease interpersonal risk (e.g., looking ignorant, incompetent or disruptive), by refraining from contributing new ideas. This consequently stifles learning, growth and innovation at individual, team and organisational levels. Building psychological safety is one way your organisation can counter individuals' natural aversion to interpersonal risk.²

What is Psychological Safety?

Psychological safety is best defined by leading researcher in the space, Amy Edmondson as “a shared belief held by members of a team/group that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking”.³

A psychologically safe work environment is one that welcomes employees to contribute new ideas, criticise existing structures, give honest feedback, ask seemingly naïve questions and feel that their individual voices are valued and welcomed.¹ Most importantly, a psychologically safe environment allows employees to contribute such ideas without fear of negative repercussions such as judgement, ridicule, failure or rejection.¹ In this way, psychological safety is crucial to leverage the knowledge and skills of your entire team to create sustained excellent performance and positive long-term organisational outcomes.

Why is Psychological Safety Important for your Organisation?

Psychologically safe work environments can lead to numerous economic and social benefits for your organisation. Higher levels of psychological safety enable individuals to feel comfortable to be themselves at work. This leads to a more collaborative culture and ultimately drives high performing teams.⁴

Collaboration is enabled when individuals feel safe in their role at work. Open communication is increased when individuals feel comfortable actively voicing their concerns and seeking and providing feedback.^{1,5} Leaders who act with integrity, coach their people, provide support, create inclusivity and normalise fallibility facilitate team learning.¹ For organisations, this means that psychological safety can lead to sharing of new ideas, increased creativity and innovation, risk taking, higher employee engagement, team learning and efficiency coordinating among workgroups.^{6,7,8,9}

Levels of psychological safety can vary, depending on whether it is measured at the individual, team or organisational level. Dyadic psychological safety is the environment between two people, team psychological safety is between the whole team, and organisational psychological safety refers levels across the entire organisation. The figure below shows the relationship between factors that influence psychological safety at different levels and the outcomes they can achieve.



Figure 1: Influencing factors and outcomes of different levels of psychological safety

Having high levels of psychological safety therefore improves overall job performance and assists your organisation to achieve its strategic vision. In fact, a study by Google showed that psychological safety was the most important factor contributing to team effectiveness.⁴ To start improving psychological safety, you first need to understand your current level of psychological safety.

Why Measure Psychological Safety?

You now understand that it is critical to foster psychologically safe work environments to achieve optimal outcomes for your employees, teams, and the entire organisation. But how do you know where to start?

To change anything, it is important to first increase your awareness. An assessment which assesses levels of psychological safety in any organisation is crucial to understanding the current climate of your workplace and develop targeted interventions that will have the greatest value and impact.

When assessing psychological safety, it is important that the method you use:

- Provides data that is practical and actionable as a team or organisation
- Reviews the drivers of psychological safety
- Is relevant to the context and industry of your organisation
- Has sound psychometric properties regarding reliability and validity

Some assessments exist to measure psychological safety; however, they do not meet all of the above criteria. Notably, after reviewing the available assessments currently on the market, it became clear that there were no comprehensive, valid, high quality and well researched assessments available globally.

This meant that there was no effective way to comprehensively measure baseline levels of psychological safety in a workplace or understand the pressure points that are holding teams back from improving their psychological safety. As such, developing a comprehensive, robust, and well researched measure of psychological safety was needed, which is what Steople has successfully achieved.

Introducing the Steople Psychological Safety Survey

Steople works with many different teams and organisations, helping them to understand and then enhance the levels of psychological safety. However, without an effective way to evaluate psychological safety, it was challenging to measure the amount of change in psychological safety and the effectiveness of interventions. We needed a robust, reliable and well researched assessment that enabled us to better help our clients improve their psychological safety. This is where our journey started to create the Steople Psychological Safety Survey.

To ensure the robustness of the assessment, we followed a comprehensive design, review and analysis process to ensure the survey and model were reliable, robust and sound, so it could be readily employed by different sizes and types of organisations and teams.

The Research Process

The Steople Psychological Safety Survey was built upon a review of the current literature, models, as well as subject-matter expertise, to ensure the survey aligned with the research into what psychological safety is, and what drives it.

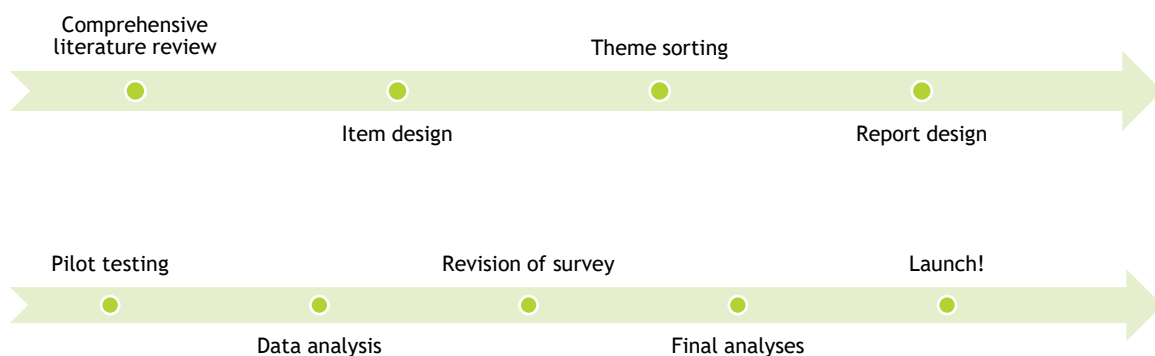


Figure 2: Process for the development of the Steople Psychological Safety Survey

After completing a thorough literature review, we designed the survey items and sorted them into themes based on our research. The items were then passed over to the Workplace Analytics Research Group at the University of Canterbury, who undertook an ‘item lab’ to provide feedback on the items and the last revision of the item list.

This process allowed us to create our final survey, based on our model of the six key dimensions of psychological safety.

The Steople Psychological Safety Model

We found that in order for teams and organisations to create psychological safety in their workplace, six fundamental factors must be exhibited:



- **Human Connection** - Knowing one's team members in a real and personal way, beyond just at a task-oriented level.
- **Inclusivity** - There is a sense of collaboration in the team, and there are active efforts to invite participation in discussions.
- **Courageous Authenticity** - Feeling comfortable in putting yourself out there and being vulnerable. This encompasses being yourself, speaking up, talking about mistakes, and giving and receiving feedback.
- **Open Mindset** - Being open to other's ideas and input, open to new ideas, and embracing challenges.
- **Respect** - Team members appreciate each other and their contributions, people feel valued, and it is okay to disagree.
- **Consistency** - People follow through on what they say they will do; and people are reliable

We piloted the survey in a sample of over 400 participants from across 6 different organisations. Statistical analysis of trial data, including factor and reliability analysis, concluded Steople had developed a reliable¹ and robust assessment, which can be readily employed with teams from any industry or organisation.

The final survey is a contemporary diagnostic assessment which affords leaders and teams the opportunity to gauge whether there is a team climate characterised by interpersonal trust and mutual respect.

Conclusion

We know that psychological safety is the key ingredient in developing high performing teams, and there has been extensive research demonstrating the importance of leaders taking time to build psychological safety. The Steople Psychological Safety Survey allows leaders and businesses to use a well-researched and reliable instrument to objectively measure the level of psychological safety within a team. By exploring the six fundamental factors, there is the opportunity for more targeted interventions that will drive levels of psychological safety and in turn, performance and productivity.

¹ Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$ (Human Connection); $\alpha = .94$ (Inclusivity); $\alpha = .91$ (Courageous Authenticity); $\alpha = .92$ (Open Mindset); $\alpha = .77$ (Respect); $\alpha = .93$ (Consistency)

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