# Cultivating psychological safety

## ACTIVATING HUMANNESS IN HEALTHCARE

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In the United States, the healthcare environment is experiencing unprecedented change while responding through crises; and yet healthcare leaders continue to search for ways to succeed in creating environments where staff feel engaged and empowered to provide exemplary patient care. An environment where healthcare staff members feel free to speak up, voice their ideas, take risks and experiment is essential.

Psychological safety is a key differentiator in creating environments where individuals and teams learn together and adapt their responses to increase performance.[1] Healthcare leaders are responsible for ensuring psychological safety is infused into and permeates the teams they lead.

A focus area of leadership today is on staff perceptions of the consequences associated with interpersonal risk taking in the professional environment and the effect this risk taking has on performance. In today's Volatile, Uncertain, Chaotic, Ambiguous (VUCA) healthcare environments, "fear is the enemy of flourishing,"[2] and those healthcare leaders who create space for psychological safety to flourish will benefit. Amy Edmondson, professor at Harvard Business School, defined psychological safety as "a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking."[3] This definition shifted the concept of psychological safety from an individual focus to a group level construct; the team shares the belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes.[4]

## LITERATURE AND EVIDENCE

When leaders are intentional about cultivating and practicing psychologically safe behaviors, they are activating humanness in healthcare through themselves and others. In a knowledge-intensive industry such as healthcare, five types of human exchange are prevalent if psychological safety is present:

1. Knowledge is readily shared
2. Questions are easily asked
3. Help is offered and sought as a regular practice
4. Errors are readily admitted
5. Feedback is constantly solicited and openly received.[5]

Humanness in healthcare is limited or lost if staff members do not feel free to engage in these forms of interaction for fear of being rejected or marginalized; being seen as incompetent or ignorant; or being labeled as negative, disruptive or creating conflict.

Several studies have been conducted to understand the impact of speaking up in organizations and two key approaches exist: predicting the occurrence of speaking up and focusing on the reluctance to speak up. Findings suggest that the ability for an individual to speak up is mediated by a perceived sense of psychological safety being present.[6] Markus Baer and Michael Frese added to the construct of team psychological safety to include the formal and informal practices that guide and support trustful interactions within a work environment where a climate exists for employees to speak up without fear of rejection or negative consequences.[7] In terms of reluctance to speak up, James R. Detert and Edmondson examined the notion of implicit voice theories, which are taken-for-granted beliefs in which individuals remain silent and withhold ideas, suggestions and concerns because of perceived interpersonal risk or inappropriateness of speaking up within a hierarchical organization.[8] Implicit voice theories operate at a level below the consciousness and are an automatic response to processing stimulus cues and choosing a response perceived as self-protective.

The ability for staff members to speak up is critical to team learning, team effectiveness and organizational performance. Daphna Brueller and Abraham Carmeli studied the impact of high-quality relationships and team performance in 178 service sector teams. High-quality relationships were defined by three capacities:

1. Higher emotional carrying capacity (self-disclosure and self-expression)
2. Capacity of the relationship to withstand strain
3. Degree of connectivity.[9]

The authors confirmed their hypotheses that high-quality relationships between team members and between team members and their manager cultivated high levels of team psychological safety, which, in turn, positively impacted team learning. Team learning was positively associated with team performance.[10] These results underscore the critical role of leader and manager behavior in cultivating psychological safety through deepening emotional connections and displaying openness and flexibility with the teams they lead.

Alexander Newman, Ross Donohue and Nathan Eva conducted a systematic review of the psychological safety literature summarizing key variables and clarifying important practical implications for organizational outcomes. Psychological safety was identified as a multilevel concept occurring at the organization, team and individual levels and is predictive of learning and performance outcomes across all three. Antecedents of psychological safety at the individual and team levels are centered on "supportive environments," which include supportive leadership, colleagues and organizational practices. Psychological safety was the moderator between supportive environments and key outcomes such as knowledge sharing, engagement, creativity, innovation and performance.[11]

Psychological safety was found to be especially critical in environments where speaking up prevented errors and improved patient safety. Multidisciplinary teams at Mayo Clinic and other large healthcare organizations rely on psychological safety as a foundation to their success. Teamwork is at the core of Mayo Clinic's Model of Care and is demonstrated in the integration of multispecialty care and within interdisciplinary partnerships and teams. For Mayo Clinic to accomplish its strategic goals, it requires all staff members, regardless of organizational role or rank, to work together as a trusting and collaborative team.

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**TABLE 1.** ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES, PROCESSES AND BEHAVIORS PROMOTING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

| Establish the foundation | Cultivate capacity | Activate humanness |
|---|---|---|
| • Model the organizational values<br>• Practice the Model of Care<br>• Promote the Model of Professionalism<br>• Define leadership capabilities<br>• Engage in dyad/triad leadership<br>• Commit to safe behaviors | • Create a culture of learning<br>• Focus on staff engagement<br>• Practice emotional intelligence<br>• Engage in conflict resolution<br>• Leverage change management tools<br>• Initiate individual and team assessments<br>• Promote coaching and mentoring | • Be accessible<br>• Demonstrate vulnerability<br>• Invite participation<br>• Learn from failures<br>• Listen<br>• Use empathetic language<br>• Hold self and others accountable |

## CREATING AN ENVIRONMENT OF SAFETY

Leaders at Mayo Clinic are charged with creating environments where humanness in healthcare can flourish and demonstrate physical and psychological safety. As an organization with more than 150 years of growth and maturity, Mayo Clinic leaders and staff have designed (and continue to redesign) structures, systems and processes to promote an environment of safety. These structures, systems and processes can be categorized into three overarching strategies (Table 1).

The three strategies depicted in Table 1 contribute to establishing an environment where psychological safety thrives. The tactics listed under each strategy are based on strategies employed by Mayo Clinic and are described in more detail in the following sections.

**Establish the foundation.** Environments founded on a strong commitment to organizational values, evidence-based models and capabilities offer fertile soil for psychologically safe behaviors to grow and develop. The primary value at Mayo Clinic — "the needs of the patient come first" — is supported by eight core values: respect, integrity, compassion, healing, teamwork, innovation, excellence and stewardship. These values are modeled throughout the enterprise, embedded in decision-making and leader and team collaboration, and reinforced using a variety of educational methods and research. The Mayo Model of Care and Model of Professionalism ensure a comprehensive, integrated and compassionate team approach to holistic care. Organizational policies also provide support and further delineate expectations for all team members by defining behaviors.

Effective leadership is a key to organizational success; the Mayo Clinic Leadership Model identifies four foundational capabilities for all leaders to exemplify:
1. Inspiring values
2. Engaging colleagues
3. Bold and forward thinking
4. Driving results.

Each specialty department has a staff-selected physician chair (or leader) who is partnered with an administrative colleague — together these leaders form the dyad leader partnership.[12] This dyad is responsible for aligning departmental initiatives with the organization and cascading the operational plan to the frontline. In the clinical practice arena, the physician and administrator are joined by a nurse administrator forming a leadership triad. Mayo underscores the highest standards for patient safety, expecting each staff member to follow five safe behaviors in their daily work: pay attention to detail, communicate clearly, have a questioning and receptive attitude, hand off effectively and support each other.

**Cultivate capacity.** The components in Table 1 offer the foundation for embedding expectations that support an environment of success and safety. There are several ways Mayo Clinic leaders leverage the foundation and take these components to a level deeper by cultivating capacity in their staff. Annually,

the organization conducts an enterprise-wide all-staff survey measuring staff satisfaction on key topics related to engagement, culture and overall satisfaction. Leaders practice effective bidirectional communication and co-design customized interventions with individuals and/or their teams. Additional listening strategies such as focus groups, online discussion forums and team and staff meetings provide additional insight into the pulse of the work environment. Annual performance appraisals with 360-degree feedback are an expectation for all employees, including assessment of behavioral performance against the eight core values and individual goal setting for the coming year.

A variety of educational offerings are available for all levels of staff to cultivate a culture of learning. Curricula are designed to build team and individual capacity as well as accelerate readiness for future roles.[13] Content and topical areas include but are not limited to emotional intelligence, effective communication, leading and managing change, effective coaching and mentoring, empowering staff through engagement, leading and managing through crises, creating inclusive environments and developing talent for the future. Individual and team assessments are available upon request with customized interventions in alignment with departmental and organizational strategy.

The structures, systems and processes embedded into daily practice allow for psychological safety to permeate the environment and ultimately impact individual, team and organizational performance.

**Activating humanness in healthcare.**
While psychological safety is everyone's responsibility, it is imperative that leadership, from CEO to front-line supervisor, model behaviors that create and sustain a psychologically safe workspace. Leaders have the opportunity to learn from others, to serve and listen, to build trust, to hear and respond to feedback and discover the values of others.[14] Three examples, specific to healthcare, are offered:

1. In the operating room, the scrub nurse during the "surgical pause" can raise a question, but it's how the surgeon responds to that question that creates a safe environment.
2. In the laboratory, technicians can ensure their colleagues have a voice in creating a standard operating procedure; but if their supervisor relies only on her favorites and their opinions, other technicians will learn it doesn't matter what they say.
3. In research, a biostatistician may have the support of her colleagues to inform the principal investigator he lacks sufficient data to take his results to the bedside. The investigator can reject the biostatistician's viewpoint, and, in turn, limit team members from speaking up in the future.

Leaders make it a point to describe the importance of psychological safety in the workplace, explicitly communicating the interdependence each has to the success or failure of an initiative. They explain the rationale behind a decision, the urgency and compelling purpose of a change, and the behaviors needed for collaboration. Leaders create a space for staff to speak up with innovative ideas, and encourage discussion, drawing out the ideas of everyone on the team. In a study conducted at Mayo Clinic, fairness and empowerment were strong predictors of excellence and innovation. More fairness increased psychological safety and trust. More psychological safety and trust increased empowerment, which positively influenced excellence/innovation.[15] The study provides evidence that employees need to feel they are being treated fairly to feel safe in the workplace.

Given the critical role of leaders in setting the stage for psychological safety to take root and grow, Edmondson identifies specific behaviors for every leader to foster (see Table 2, page 45).[16]

Table 2 identifies five leader behaviors, along with the experiences of leaders at Mayo Clinic. Specific behaviors in action are described along with tangible signs that psychological safety is present in the workplace. Frequent acknowledgment of accomplishments and sharing insights gleaned during failures contributes to a safe culture of learning.

## TABLE 2. LEADER BEHAVIORS THAT CULTIVATE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

| Leader behavior[16] | Cultivating psychological safety (Leaders in action) | Signs the work environment is psychologically safe (Examples from Mayo Clinic) |
|---|---|---|
| **Be accessible** | • Be present and approachable through word and action.<br>• Intentionally make yourself visible to the team.<br>• Deepen the emotional connection by getting to know your team members.<br>• Designate office hours for drop-in discussions and keep the commitment to be there and be present. | • As a leader, you are frequently approached for curbside consultations by colleagues and your team members.<br>• Team members know how to contact you and aren't afraid to do so.<br>• Leaders are seen frequently in their work area, e.g., rounding.<br>• Team members know your values, and you know theirs. |
| **Invite participation** | • Establish a supportive environment where face-to-face, phone or virtual interaction is expected.<br>• Set expectations that everyone will contribute verbally with or without an invitation to speak.<br>• Initiate daily huddles that cover personal anecdotes (to build relationships) and work-related metrics.<br>• Get curious when it comes to problem-solving by inviting each member's input.<br>• Challenge beliefs and assumptions that may be preventing people from speaking up.<br>• Thank those who speak up and tell them the impact of their willingness to do so. | • Curiosity is the driver versus a culture of silence. Team members ask open-ended questions of each other to understand a decision, challenge a belief or assumption or get clarity on their role.<br>• All team members speak up and are equally comfortable leading as well as participating.<br>• Team members know what strengths their colleagues possess and routinely tap each other for those strengths to get the work done.<br>• Trust between team members and leader is palpable. Visitors to the work area/unit note that "something is different."<br>• No one is punished or humiliated for speaking up. |
| **Display fallibility and acknowledge limits** | • Be willing to share that you don't know everything.<br>• Admit when you are wrong. Self-disclosure of limitations demonstrates grace, humility and vulnerability.<br>• Share your story — what you hoped would happen and what actually did. | • Team members feel free to admit their mistakes.<br>• When a team member has concerns about an idea or proposal, they are able to bring it up for discussion and the dialogue centers on the idea, not the person. |
| **Highlight failures as learning opportunities** | • Actively address failures when they occur without judgment.<br>• Establish a regular cadence of measurement and analysis using small tests of change to highlight problem-solving and the continuous improvement cycle. Talk about these at a daily huddle or during rounding. | • Team members understand and can verbalize that failures are treated as learning opportunities in their work area.<br>• Team members conduct small tests of change allowing the team to experiment and take calculated risks to identify practical solutions for local problems.<br>• The team demonstrates confidence and agility in change and engages everyone in identifying sustainable solutions. |
| **Set boundaries and hold people accountable** | • Initiate discussion on team norms and expectations for behavior and work with agreements and commitment from the team. Hold yourself to these same norms and expectations. Regularly revisit these agreements in projects, team meetings or one-on-one discussions, ensuring alignment and commitment.<br>• When transgressions to norms and agreements occur, address these immediately and directly to stop the undesired behavior.<br>• Help all team members set goals for their individual growth and engage them in discussion around goals for the work area. | • "I" statements are used frequently by the leader and the team members, indicating ownership of next steps or taking accountability.<br>• There is consistency in word and action among the leader and team members.<br>• When a team member is not demonstrating their values in action, there is enough trust present that peer-to-peer discussion occurs.<br>• Team members know there are clear boundaries and any transgressions will be addressed.<br>• Team members go above and beyond normal expectations. They are excited to do the work and the work is aligned with organizational goals. |

## CONCLUSIONS

Cultivating psychological safety and activating humanness in healthcare begins with one leader and a commitment to making a difference. One leader can:

- Model inclusion by inviting staff to speak, listening to those comments and acknowledging contributions
- Model their own vulnerability by admitting a mistake, saying they don't know, asking for help and acknowledging they were wrong
- Model curiosity through the use of open-ended questions, allowing others to consider perspectives different from their own or to voice concerns and challenges.

One leader is enough. Leaders aren't always in formal, titled roles; they are found throughout the organization; indeed, those who work to create psychologically safe workplaces are leaders.

Humanness in healthcare is activated by behaviors that bring to life the structures, systems and processes that ensure psychological safety is present in all facets of the work environment. By cultivating an environment of psychological safety, space is created to hear all voices, all hopes and all fears. Allowing all voices to be heard brings forward self-expression, productive discussions, and, when needed, thoughtful handling of conflict. ■

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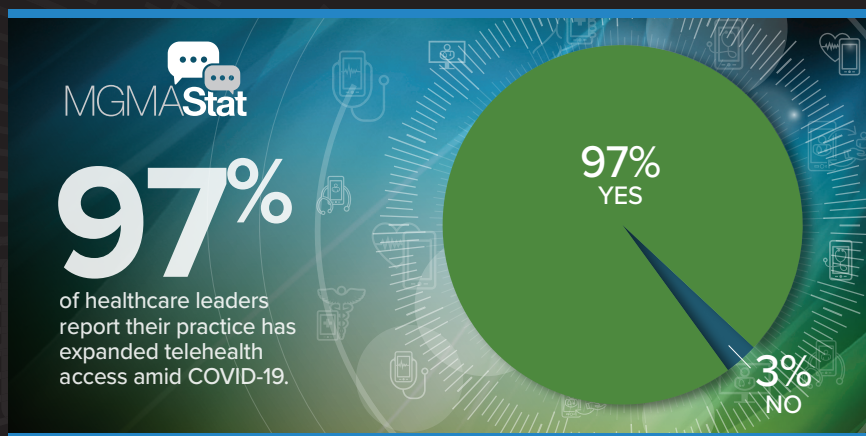
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