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Psychological Safety and Direct Support Professionals

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Let's start with a true story (all names have been changed to protect privacy and confidentiality).

Marcella is a direct support professional (DSP) in Iowa working at a site home that houses five women diagnosed with various mental health conditions. One of the ladies, Ms. Vee is in her 60's, has a history of stroke, depression, and anxiety. Veronica is a younger lady who has spent much of her youth in residential care facilities and is now finally living outside of a facility. Veronica has struggles with symptoms of schizophrenia. These are two very different ladies, with very similar initials.

One night Marcella is having a rough night. A couple of the ladies got into a verbal altercation. To make matters worse, Marcella burned herself while assisting the ladies with making dinner. When it came time to administer medications, she was distracted. Ms. Vee lined up first to get her medications as usual. Marcella pulled the medications out, which happened to only be marked with the client initials.

Before she knows it, she realizes that she has given Veronica's medications to Ms. Vee. A wave of panic goes through her. A few minutes later, Ms. Vee realizes that she has been given the wrong medications and starts to beg Marcella for her medications. She tells Marcella how she can't sleep without her proper medications.

At this point, Marcella has a decision to make. At each site house, there is a cell phone that goes straight to the on-call supervisor. But Marcella pauses, she thinks back to the last time she called on-call for a minor mistake, and was screamed at. Then she thinks back to the last time she texted on-call, and she received a snarky response. She's already scared and embarrassed that she has made such a mistake.

Marcella decides to take matters into her own hands. She doesn't get a hold of on-call. She looks up each medication on a search engine and tries to find any contraindications that could happen when combining the medications. According to her research, she couldn't find any. She decides to give Ms. Vee her own medications on top of the medications she has already given her. At 8pm she goes to check on Ms. Vee…

Many of you may be too young to remember Paul Harvey. He was an old radio DJ that used to tell the first part of the story in the morning, then the second part of the story in the afternoon. We will get to the rest of the story and how it ties into psychological safety later in this article…

How would you describe the feeling that you had when you were on a team that was truly positive and productive?

This is the question with which I start many Psychological Safety trainings. When people think back to that team, they describe feeling engaged, safe, energized, empowered, connected, inspired, successful, motivated…this list goes on.

No matter if you work in a small organization or a large one, each person yearns to work on a team where they feel valued for who they are. So how then, do you as a leader create such an environment? It all starts with psychological safety.

What is psychological safety? According to Amy Edmonson's definition, it is "the belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes, and the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking." This means that each individual can bring their unique self to work without negative consequences. Each person can try different things, take risks, and be supported. In psychologically safe teams, when someone makes a mistake, it is used as a learning opportunity – not a reason for punishment and embarrassment.

There is significant evidence that psychological safety significantly contributes to organizational performance. According to research, when psychological safety is present there is:

- 29% more life satisfaction
- 57% more collaboration
- 27% reduction in turnover
- 76% more engagement
- 50% more productivity
- 74% less stress

Why aren't all teams psychologically safe if it is so good for the team and the organization? What holds people back from speaking their mind and admitting when they have made a mistake? There is a phenomenon called *interpersonal fear*. Think about it this way – we all evolved in tribes. Because we are not the fastest, or the strongest animal, working together was the only way we could survive. This means we evolved to care what others think about us. (Yes, even those people who always say, "I don't care what people think of me.")

We know that, when someone experiences interpersonal pain, like humiliation or embarrassment, it lights up the same regions of the brain as physical pain. As Amanda Ripley put it in her book *High Conflict*, humiliation is the nuclear bomb of all emotions. No one wants to be humiliated, embarrassed, or isolated. It's painful.

Unfortunately, just taking the risk of speaking up, or asking to try something different can trigger interpersonal fear in people. Many times, people will avoid speaking up, or rocking the status quo because they don't want to risk looking silly, or feel like they are being judged. This happens with DSPs, but it also happens with the people they support. Think about how many times the people we support have had their voices silenced, or been told their opinion does not count. After a while, individuals give up and refuse to speak up.

That is why it is so important, not only for supervisors, but for DSPs working with the people they support to create an atmosphere of psychological safety. Let's break the large topic of creating psychological safety into four, simple, yet powerful steps.

1) **Ask and Pause:** It happens over and over that supervisors will throw out a question to the team, then share their recommendation before waiting for a response. This approach inadvertently silences others on the team. The team believes that the supervisor already has the answer they want, so why speak up?

   This also happens in the relationship DSPs have with the people they support. A person will have a goal, and the well-meaning DSP will go straight to how they think the individual should achieve that goal, without giving them a say.

   Instead, try throwing out a question and pausing. Whether you are a leader working with a team, or a DSP working with a person you support, speak last. This will give those around you a chance to weigh in with their insights, expertise, and experience.

   If the problem is a large one and needs significant consideration, give the team and/or person being supported a longer time to come up with an answer. Say you are working on decreasing medication errors within your team. Bring up the problem at the staff meeting at the beginning of the month and ask each person to write down three to five ideas (on their own) to bring to the next staff meeting. Have each individual share their ideas at the meeting before speaking as the supervisor.

2) **Reward Risk:** To be clear, we are not talking about rewarding safety risks here. We don't want staff rushing to clean up blood after an incident without gloves. The risk we are talking about here is trying something different. It is the opposite of the worst saying in organizations that goes something like this, "*but we've always done it this way*…"

   Praise staff for coming up with new ideas, even if you cannot implement them. Years ago, I worked under the director of quality. I had a great new idea to change our Annual Compliance Training (you know that training that you would rather stab your eye out with a pencil than go to – that one). Unfortunately, because of the regulations, we were not able to implement my initial idea. However, she encouraged me to keep thinking, and eventually, we radically redesigned the compliance training for seasoned staff.

   When you are a DSP working with someone you support on a goal, and they want to try something new, let them. (Again, as long as it is not a safety issue). Some of the ideas they will have will work great, some may not. But showing them that you are there to support them through the process is what matters. Letting the people you support have a choice about their ideas, actions, and goals helps to create that safe, person-centered environment that people crave.

3) **Role Model:** For many, failure brings up negative emotions. It does not have to be this way. There is another way to look at failing. **F.A.I.L. F**irst **A**ttempt **I**n **L**earning. In productive teams, failures are used as learning opportunities. Many times, we learn more from what didn't go right than what did.

   Using mistakes as learning opportunities is a core component of psychological safety. People want to know that, when things don't go as planned, they will be supported, not yelled at. Individuals want someone to walk them through the mistake and have it be used as a tool for growth not an embarrassment.

A lot of leaders and DSPs are under the incorrect assumption that they must be correct all the time. That, if they show any weakness to those they supervise or person they support, they won't be respected. This is just the opposite of what is true.

According to research in Tim Elmore's book, *8 Paradoxes of Great Leadership*, individuals want to work with people that are both confident and humble. This means being confident about the things you know, yet being humble enough to know when you need to learn more. Appropriately sharing times when you have failed not only shows humility, but it also shows vulnerability. It is that vulnerability that allows us to build close relationships.

I have failed many times during my career. One day a few years ago, I was hosting a webinar on "*High Conflict to Constructive Conflict.*" As per my usual style, I started with a story. Except this story was more on the personal side, instead of the professional side. It had a great example in it, it wasn't, however, appropriate for the audience. As soon as I got done telling the story, a lady wrote in the chat, "You Need More Professional Stories!!!!" I was soooo embarrassed. However, I used it as a chance to learn. From then on, I ran stories by a few people to make sure they were appropriate for my audience ahead of time.

4) **Provide On-Going Learning and Learn Together:** It doesn't matter if you lead a small team, large team, or the team you are on is just you and the person you support, learning together is a powerful tool. Gaining information together demonstrates that everyone has more to learn, and it is safe, and encouraged to do so.

   It could be watching short YouTube or TikTok videos together. It could be going to a conference together (I heard the NADSP puts on a really nice conference 😊). Maybe it's just sitting down with a person you support and searching for new recipes online. Keep the stream of positive and useful information coming to your teams and those you support.

Ask and Pause. Reward Risk. Role-Model. Keep Learning. These four steps will get you started on your continual journey to building psychological safety within your team. Just like trust, psychological safety isn't built in a day, or by just one action. It is something that needs to be maintained and nurtured. You may have worked with individuals that have had harsh supervisors that never listened to them before. Getting them comfortable to share their ideas will take time, and patience. It is possible. This is similar to working with people you support, many of whom have never felt really heard. It is not enough to simply take these steps; they must be repeated. And repeated again.

Now, let's tune back to the story at the beginning of this article.

As a recap, Marcella has given Ms. Vee not only Veronica's medications, but then her own medication on top of those. She has not let on-call know about the situation for fear of being punished.

At 8pm, Marcella goes to check on Ms. Vee, her door is open, and Marcella sees her slumped over in an unnatural position. She calls her name. No answer. She knocks loudly on the bedroom door that has been left open. Nothing. She goes to shake her arm gently – no response.

Ms. Vee is unconscious. Now, it is not just on-call that Marcella is going to have to notify. It is 911 Emergency Services. Ms. Vee was rushed to the hospital where she lay in a coma for three days.

The tragedy of this story is that it could have all been avoided. Think back to the decision points Marcella had when she could have texted or called the on-call supervisor before giving Ms. Vee additional information. If Marcella had felt psychologically safe enough to admit her mistake, this never would have happened. On-call would have told her that the correct process when someone has been given incorrect medications is to not give them any more, and monitor them. The severe contraindication that caused the coma never would have taken place.

You may have thought of psychological safety as just another "soft" or "human" skill that wasn't as important as documentation, compliance, or providing the person you support assistance to achieve their goals. However, having psychological safety, or rather not having it, can have serious consequences. In the case above, the lack of psychological safety nearly created a fatal situation.

Thank you for taking the time to read this article. It shows just how great of a leader you are that you have spent time gaining knowledge in order to improve.

Thank you for the work you do. Every day you are the key to improving people's lives.

About the author

Molly J. Mackey is an author, speaker, and trainer of leaders. She believes that, by intentionally intersecting the ongoing journeys of leadership and learning, we can create better leaders, and Better Leaders = Better Lives ™

Molly is the founder and chief learning officer of the LEAdeRNship Institute. Molly has over 18 years of business and speaking experience. She has a passion for business, strategy, leadership and learning.

Molly lives in Jesup, IA with her partner and has four children ages 2 to 17. Molly works with healthcare and human services organizations around the country to build better leaders and organizational cultures.

Her books include:
- *52 Powerful Reflection Questions for Leaders*
- *52 Powerful Reflection Questions for Emotionally Intelligent Leaders*
- *52 Powerful Reflection Questions for Teams*

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Answers to FAQ's about the journal

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