



At Sweeney Associates, we know leadership isn't just about setting direction—it's about shaping the environment where people do their best work. In today's fast-moving, multigenerational workplace, that means creating space for voices to be heard, questions to be asked, and ideas to be tested without fear. This month, we look at how leaders can foster psychological safety to reduce stress, fuel creativity, and build stronger, more resilient teams.

When Teams Feel Safe, They Thrive

How leaders can reduce stress and spark innovation

by fostering psychological safety

Estimated reading time: 5-7 minutes



In 2014, Google published findings from its internal “Project Aristotle,” a multi-year research effort to uncover [what made teams most effective](#). The results weren’t about who had the most talent, the smartest ideas, or even the clearest processes. The top predictor of high-performing teams was something less tangible but far more powerful: **psychological safety**.

At its core, psychological safety means people feel safe to speak up without fear of embarrassment, punishment, or retribution. It’s the belief that your team will not reject you for asking a question, sharing an idea, or admitting a mistake. When it’s present, innovation flourishes, collaboration deepens, and stress is reduced. When it’s absent, people stay silent, disengage, and creativity shuts down.

This isn’t just a “nice-to-have.” It’s an organizational imperative. In a year when workplace stress continues to climb and burnout is a constant risk, leaders who intentionally foster psychological safety create the conditions for resilience, performance, and retention.

Why Psychological Safety Matters

Think of the last time you sat in a meeting with an idea you didn’t share. Maybe you weren’t sure it was fully baked. Maybe you were worried about being judged. Maybe you knew someone on the team had a tendency to shoot ideas down.

Now multiply that silence by dozens of moments across a team, week after week. The cost of withheld ideas, unasked questions, and unspoken concerns is immense. Teams don’t just lose creativity—they lose trust.

According to research cited by [HR Magazine](#), psychological safety is directly tied to stress reduction. A sense of safety helps employees avoid turning challenges into self-blame and instead approach setbacks with curiosity and problem-solving. It’s not about eliminating pressure; it’s about creating the confidence that you won’t be penalized for trying, failing, or learning out loud.

What Psychological Safety Looks Like

Amy Edmondson, the Harvard Business School professor who coined the term, describes psychological safety as “a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking.” That can sound academic, but here’s what it looks like in practice:

- **Questions are welcomed.** Even basic clarifications are treated with respect, not eye-rolls.
- **Mistakes are acknowledged, not hidden.** Teams dissect them for learning instead of searching for blame.
- **Voices are balanced.** Leaders invite perspectives from quieter team members instead of letting the loudest dominate. (*Remember: in Predictive Index terms, individuals with a "lower B" may appear "quiet," but that doesn't mean disengaged. Often, it signals a more introspective and reflective nature—and their insights carry weight when given space to share.*)
- **Feedback is specific and constructive.** Critiques focus on the work, not the person.
- **Curiosity is rewarded.** Exploring a "what if" is seen as valuable, even if it doesn't pan out.

When these patterns become habits, trust compounds. Over time, the team stops worrying about protecting themselves and starts focusing on creating together.

What Gets in the Way

If psychological safety is so powerful, why don't more teams have it? Because it requires leaders to confront behaviors that are often ingrained in organizational culture:

- **Perfectionism.** If "getting it right" matters more than "getting it out," people won't take risks.
- **Hierarchy.** When senior voices dominate, junior team members default to silence.
- **Speed over reflection.** In fast-paced environments, slowing down to ask questions can feel inefficient.
- **Unacknowledged conflict.** When issues are swept under the rug, the message is clear: it's safer to stay quiet.

As leaders, it's tempting to think psychological safety is built by telling people, "You can speak up here." But permission without follow-through falls flat. Safety is not declared; it's demonstrated.

How Leaders Can Foster It

So how do you, as a leader, create this kind of environment? Start with intentional habits:

1. **Model vulnerability.** Admit when you don't know something. Share lessons learned from your own mistakes. Leaders who go first give their teams permission to do the same.
2. **Respond with curiosity, not judgment.** When someone raises a concern, resist the urge to explain it away. Ask follow-up questions. Show that their perspective matters.
3. **Normalize feedback.** Make giving and receiving feedback a routine part of team life—not just something saved for performance reviews.
4. **Distribute airtime.** In meetings, intentionally invite those who haven't spoken. Psychological safety is built when all voices are valued, not just the loudest or most senior.
5. **Celebrate learning, not just results.** A failed experiment that generated new insight should be recognized as progress.
6. **Address breaches directly.** If someone shuts down a colleague, don't let it slide. The silence of a leader in those moments is often louder than the comment itself.

The Payoff

When leaders commit to psychological safety, the ripple effects are profound:

- **Better performance.** Teams with high psychological safety are more likely to achieve ambitious goals because they share information freely and adapt quickly.
- **Lower stress.** Employees know mistakes won't define them, reducing anxiety and improving well-being.
- **Stronger engagement.** People are more likely to stay with organizations where they feel valued and heard.
- **Increased innovation.** With fear off the table, creativity can flourish.

It's a cultural investment that pays compounding returns—not just in business outcomes, but in human outcomes.

Try This with Your Team

If you're wondering how safe your team feels today, start small. In your next meeting, pause and ask:

- "What's a question we haven't asked yet?"
- "What assumption might we be making that we should test?"
- "What's a small risk we could take this week that would help us learn?"

Then, listen with curiosity. Take notes. Show you value what you hear. Over time, these moments send a clear message: this is a place where it's safe to contribute, to question, and to grow.

Tools to Help

At Sweeney Associates, we believe fostering psychological safety is inseparable from building strong leaders. Our work with tools like the **Energy Leadership Index (ELI)** and **Predictive Index (PI)** helps leaders better understand themselves and their teams—so they can communicate more openly, adapt more effectively, and build the trust that underpins psychological safety.

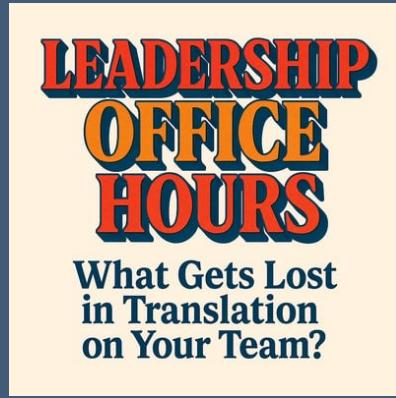
If you'd like to explore how we can help your leaders create safer, stronger team cultures, let's talk.

Closing Thought

Psychological safety isn't about eliminating stress or shielding people from accountability. It's about creating an environment where accountability and learning can coexist. As leaders, our role is to lower the cost of speaking up and raise the value of learning together.

That's where the best teams—and the best leaders—thrive.

Portions of this newsletter were developed with the assistance of generative AI tools and reviewed by the Sweeney Associates team for accuracy and tone.



Reminder: Leadership Office Hours – September 30 at 2:00pm ET

Our first **Leadership Office Hours** session is coming up soon, and we don't want you to miss it. Join us for an informal, practical, and conversational space to talk about the leadership challenges and opportunities you're facing right now.

No slides. No pitches. Just real conversation.

If you haven't already, be sure to [sign up here](#) to reserve your spot.

Sweeney Associates, sattd.com, Virtual, Offices, 817-520-8200

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