

The importance of psychological safety in (virtual) group work

An introduction to understanding and building psychological safety

An interactive workbook to support online groupwork



This workbook is to be used **IN COMBINATION**
with a video available: [HERE](#)

Aim

This workbook and video have been developed to help people participating in online group work understand what **Psychological Safety** is, why it is important in group work, and how to build psychological safety in your groups to help make the online experience more productive and more enjoyable.

Key Points

- Learning is via this workbook and an interactive video ([HERE](#)) in combination.
- Please print this workbook so you can make notes in the spaces provided.
- Use the workbook whilst you are watching the video.
- Use the workbook and video in **ADVANCE** of your first 'online group session'. The notes you make in the workbook can then be used as part of the initial conversation you have with your group.
- You can access additional information which complements the content of the workbook and video via the links and references on page 6.
- The workbook and video take approximately 60 minutes to work through, however, you can stop and start the process to fit your needs.

Activity

Before you begin to watch the video, we ask that you think about a work situation in which you felt challenged, i.e. you thought the task given to you was difficult, and yet you still felt 'safe', i.e. you were happy to do the work because you knew you were supported by others and that it was a learning opportunity.

Use this space to write down some thoughts you have about that experience:



Hints:

- *What was the context?*
- *What was 'challenging' about the task/work?*
- *What helped you feel 'safe'?*

Note: Look at your answers to these questions, they may be of interest to you later...

...working in a virtual world is difficult.

- Getting to know each other in an online context is difficult, but it is worth making the effort.
- We recommend using a simple 'icebreaker' exercise to start the process - we suggest 'Two Truths and a Lie' ([HERE](#)) which is a quick and fun way to share some personal experiences which would help others to get to know you a little.
- Of course, there are many other icebreaker activities which you may already know and prefer to use. The key point is, don't start working together 'cold', introduce yourselves and get to know each other.

What is psychological safety?

"Psychological safety is a counterbalance for the ambiguity and insecurity that comes with change"

- It is normal to feel anxiety when faced with a new situation or change to an existing situation.

"A shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for risk-taking"

- Psychological safety is a group-level phenomenon and differs from 'trust' because psychological safety focuses on a belief about a group norm, whereas trust focuses on a belief that one person has about another.
- Psychological safety is about removing fear from human interaction and replacing it with respect and permission.

Do you dare to say something, to ask a question, to contribute an idea?

- Speaking-up in a group context means taking a risk: How will people respond to your comments? How will you feel when you see or hear their reaction? What impact will your comments have on how the group functions in the future?
 - Have a conversation about 'speaking-up' in your group. Most online meeting platforms have an option to 'raise a hand' or something similar—is this enough, or will you simply speak as you would in a 'normal' conversation?
 - Equally, how you respond will make a big difference, so consider the words you choose.
 - We recommend including this issue in your discussion on 'ground rules'.

Activity

- Watch a Ted Talk by Professor Amy Edmondson: [HERE](#)



'Impression management' ... a strategy for self-protection

When we work in a group...

No one wants to look:

Ignorant

Incompetent

Intrusive

Negative

It's easier to manage:

Don't ask questions

Don't admit weakness or mistakes

Don't offer ideas

Don't critique the status quo

Based on a theory developed by Erving Goffman: [HERE](#)

...we can also rob ourselves
and others of 'opportunities
for learning'

- It is likely, that if you don't understand something, others will feel the same.
- If we don't ask questions, we miss the chance to learn.

Activity



Take two minutes to think about a time when you were in a situation where you could have said something, (perhaps ask a question or admit a mistake) and yet you decided to say nothing. Write some answers to the following questions:

- *What was the context? (who was there, what was happening)*
- *Can you recall what you did or how you felt at that time? (did you speak-up, were you anxious)*
- *What was the outcome? (did you learn anything, what could have been different)*

Note: How are these answers different from the answers you give in the first activity?

There are limitations (and possibilities) in terms of the new communication channels...

- We recommend an early discussion of whether the group should develop a set of **ground rules** for your ongoing collaboration, this may include things like:
 - *Is it ok to take screen shots, how should people contribute to a conversation (can they interrupt), should cameras always be on, should people use 'mute' when not speaking, etc.*

What factors led to the development of a 'dream team'?

- Successful group work depends on many factors, however, psychological safety is a critical component found in all 'dream teams'.
- In a team with high psychological safety, teammates feel safe to take risks around their team members without being seen as ignorant, incompetent, negative, or disruptive.
- They feel confident that no-one on the team will embarrass or punish anyone else for admitting a mistake, asking a question, or offering a new idea.

Further information on 'Project Aristotle': [HERE](#)



Creating psychological safety is no easy feat... But it's made even more complicated in a virtual team.

Frame the Work

- Set expectations about failure, uncertainty, and interdependence to clarify the need for voice.

Emphasize Purpose

- Identify what's at stake, why it matters, and for whom it matters .

Demonstrate Situational Humility

- Acknowledge gaps in your knowledge or understanding.

Practice Inquiry

- Ask open questions and model intense listening.

Set Up Structures and Processes

- Create opportunities for feedback and input.
- Provide guidelines for your discussions.



Increasing psychological safety in your team can help make the experience more productive and more enjoyable.

Activity

Take some time to think about: a) What is important for YOU in THIS group in order to feel psychologically safe, b) What is important for OTHERS in THIS group, c) How will you ensure these are put in place?

Use the space below to write your answers (and remember to share these with others in the group):

References & Useful Links

- Icebreaker: <https://www.movingminds.dk/to-sandheder-og-en-logn>
- Edgar Schein: <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/faculty/directory/edgar-h-schein>
- Amy Edmondson: <https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/profile.aspx?facId=6451>
- Speaking up: <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199734610.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199734610-e-037>
- Psychological Safety—Ted Talk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhoLuui9gX8>
- Erving Goffman— The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Z0XS-QLDWM>
- Rework - Project Aristotle: <https://rework.withgoogle.com/print/guides/5721312655835136/>
- Fearless Organisation: <https://fearlessorganization.com/> (This website includes the seven question survey which could be completed pre/post participation in your group)
- Copenhagen Academy for Medical Education and Simulation (CAMES): <https://www.regionh.dk/CAMES/>
- Dansk Selskab for Patientsikkerhed: <https://patientsikkerhed.dk/>

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We value your feedback.

Please contact us if you are interested in further information about this workbook, or workshops on psychological safety, patient safety, simulation, and / or improvement methodology.