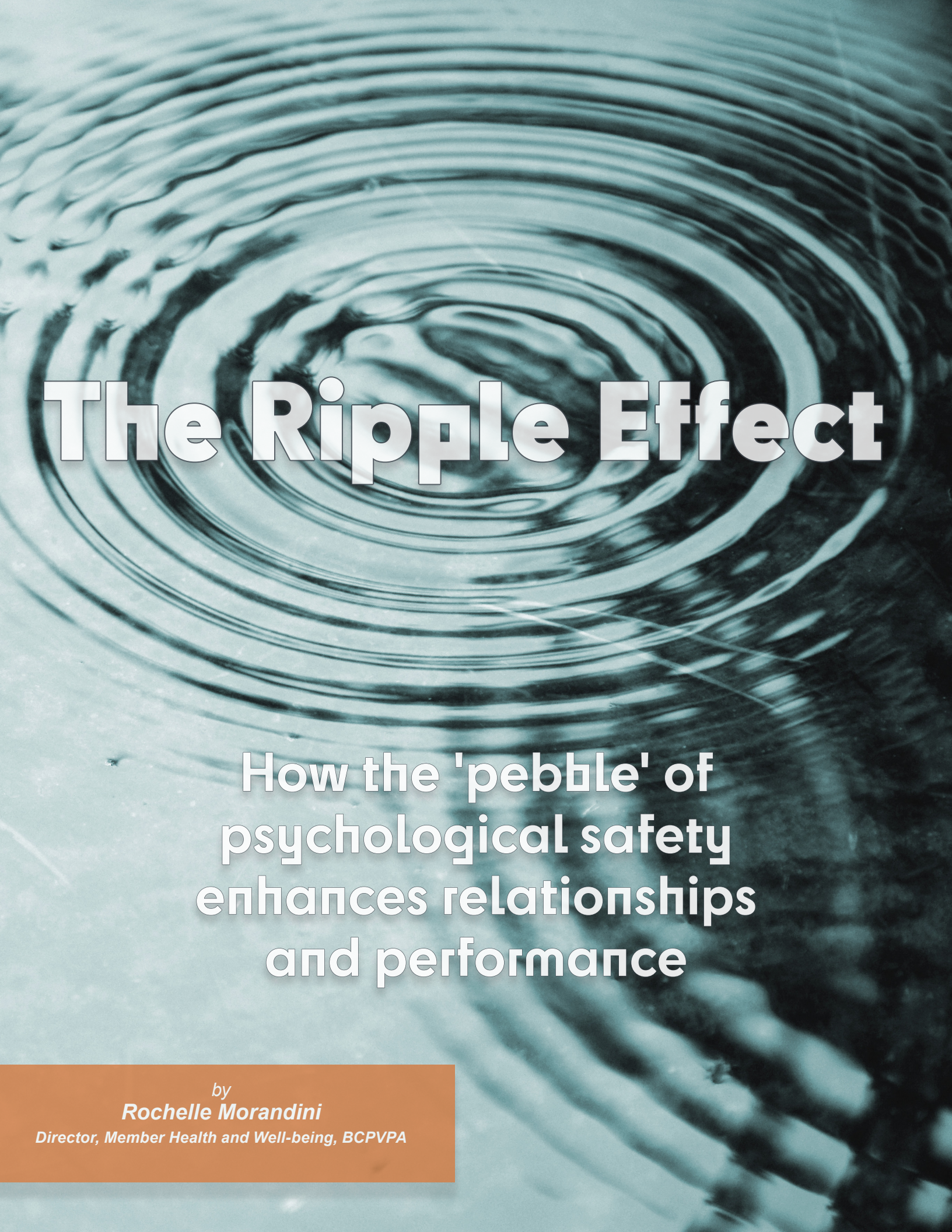


The background of the entire slide is a close-up, high-contrast photograph of concentric ripples on a body of water. The ripples are dark and light blue/grey, creating a sense of depth and movement. The center of the ripples is towards the top left of the frame.

The Ripple Effect

How the 'pebble' of
psychological safety
enhances relationships
and performance

by

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Students, staff, Principals, and Vice-Principals who work and learn in psychologically safe environments enjoy many benefits. They experience enhanced productivity, growth, connections, creativity, confidence, well-being, and much more. How safe we feel, as leaders, contributes to the climates in our schools. Subsequently, taking intentional steps to create a psychologically safe culture for staff not only elevates their work day, but ripples down to positively influence the learning experience of students.

A Recap of Psychological Health and Safety

We first discussed the concept of Principals' and Vice-Principals' psychological health and safety at length one year ago in the November 2021 *Principl(ed)* magazine, where we released the findings from the BCPVPA's **Thriving in Education** survey.

In the article, we referred to the National Standards of Psychological Health and Safety in Canada, and the thirteen workplace risk factors. We outlined the four workplace risk factors that the survey identified as having the greatest influence on a Principal's or Vice-Principal's ability to either thrive or succumb to burnout.

The November 2021 article explored the Demand/Control model, published by Karasek and Theorell in 1996, which concluded that workplace stress is highest in roles where the psychological demands are high (as is prevalent in the roles of school leaders), yet the individual's ability to control decisions and the environment is low. We continued to explore this topic in the March 2022 issue of *Principl(ed)*, when we looked at the four most influential workplace factors that impact a Principal's or Vice-Principal's ability to thrive, in the applied context of Steven Covey's concept of Circles of Concern, Influence, and Control. We described how school leaders can enhance their ability to expand their level of control and influence, and thereby reduce – and then accept – those things that remain within their Circle of Concern.

And, in our most recent efforts to support members in protecting their psychological safety at work, we

provided insight and instructions for identifying and reporting psychological safety risks in the August 2022 volume of BCPVPA's digital magazine, *Leading: Back to School*. In this article, we emphasized the importance of reporting trauma and violence, along with bullying and harassment situations. Reporting is important, as districts then need to take the recommended steps to prevent or mitigate harm, and to ensure that members receive quick access to support and resources including through WorkSafe BC where applicable. These three archived articles are all available on the BCPVPA website.

We now turn our attention to your role as a leader, and the creation of a psychologically safe culture within your school and/or working team. Creating a safe environment not only enhances relationships and performance amongst the adults, but cascades to significantly improve the learning conditions for students.

High Performing, Psychologically Safe Teams

Dr. Amy Edmondson of Harvard University is known for her research on high-performing teams and, in particular, the fact that high-performing teams feel psychologically safe. She defines psychologically safe teams as having:

“Shared belief by members of the team that they are safe for interpersonal risk taking”

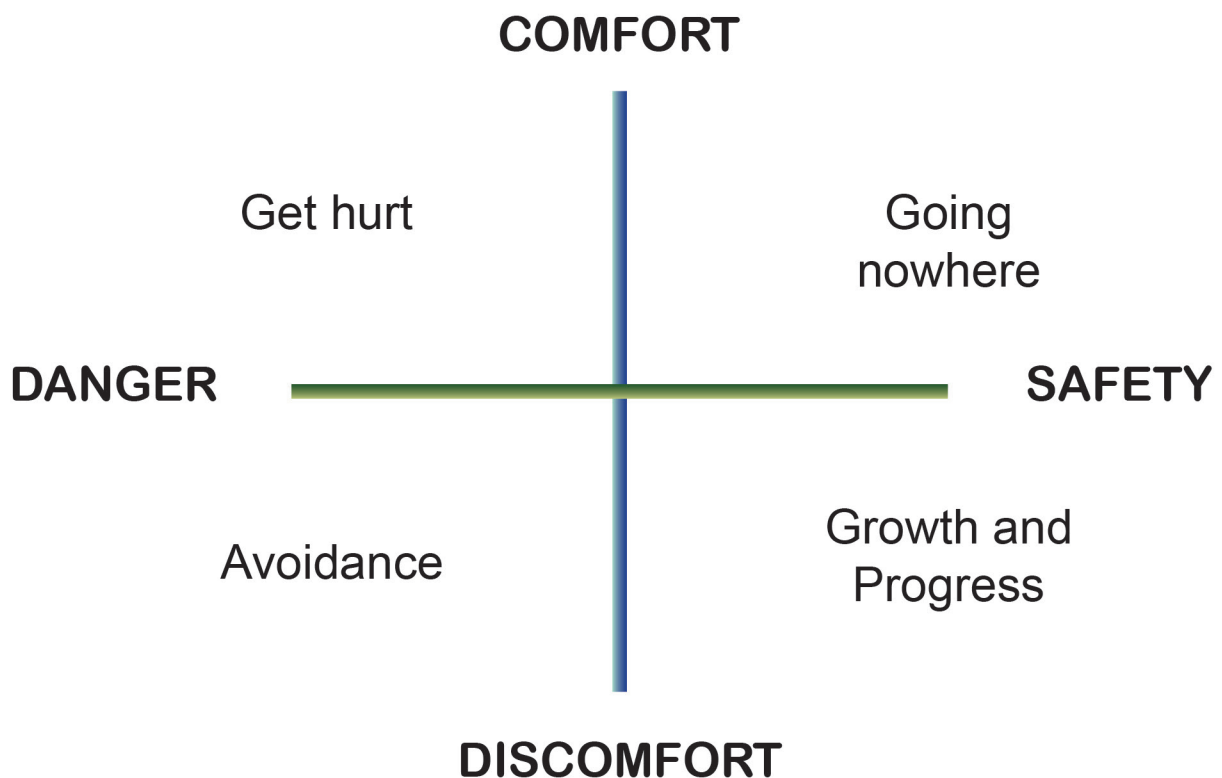
Encouraging psychological safety on your team means that:

- There is an absence of interpersonal fear, and an ability to speak up with work-relevant content
- All input, questions, and viewpoints are welcome
- Mistakes are okay, there is no embarrassment or punishment
- Teams are interested in learning, excellence, and in genuinely connecting to succeed as a group

- There is professional respect amongst the team
- Candor is required
- Creativity is enhanced
- Ideally, these conditions set everyone up for success

Candor is an important yet often fleeting concept. Being on a psychologically safe team where candor is encouraged does not mean that safety always equates to comfort.

Consider this diagram:



Courtesy Shane Snow bit.ly/SafetyVSComfort

View the diagram as it applies to a gym workout. If your workout is safe, but comfortable, you are likely not going to progress in your fitness levels. However, if your workout is safe, but you are feeling a little discomfort, that usually means that you are pushing boundaries in a safe way to help strengthen and improve. This same context applies to teams. If your team feels safe (a good thing), but always comfortable (no one pushes the boundaries or brings up concerns), the team stagnates and goes nowhere with respect to learning and advancing. However, where candor exists, and people speak up in a safe environment, this added pressure helps move a team forward in growth and progress.

Candor does require a sense of trust within a team. Admittedly, this takes time. As a leader, you have the ability to control as well as influence actions that promote trust. A key component to building safety and trust is to *be precise with information, expectations and commitments*. Team members are more likely to trust you and your word when you are mindful both about the information you share, and the expectations and commitments you set. Be accurate. Be realistic. Be thoughtful. Setting clear expectations and adhering to

your commitments will help employees trust you and be more open with you.

The open comments provided in our Spring 2021 **Thriving in Education** survey spoke to the environments where Principals and Vice-Principals were feeling safe, and the environments where they were not feeling safe. As you can see, our members' experiences align with the lessons shared by Dr. Edmundson about high performing teams.

Environments high in psychological safety:

- Input and contribution is encouraged from all team members
- Respect and appreciation
- Active listening and learning from each other is valued
- Freedom from chronic hostility and anger
- Members can speak candidly with ideas, questions, concerns, even mistakes
- No retaliation for speaking up
- Leverages the benefits of diversity, belonging

Environments low in psychological safety:

- Members fear to speak up or question
- Favourites and/or regular 'go-tos' for ideas and information
- Dismissiveness or exclusion
- Discrimination or unconscious bias
- Leaders who 'know it all' and do not acknowledge gaps
- Passivity or aggression
- Not feeling valued

Leading a Psychologically Safe Team

When you feel psychologically safe, your team will be best served in your ability to create a safe environment in which they can thrive. Always put your own mask on first! Take care of yourself, and be proactive in addressing psychological risks that may impact your well-being.

In your leadership role, and even in the most challenging environments, you can start to create a psychologically safe space for your team. It may take time. It may take a lot of time, depending on the history of your relationships, team members, even those who occupied the role before you. But consistency and sincerity will pay off, even if it is just one team member at a time.

Here are some leadership tips:

Demonstrate concern for team members as individuals:

Employ a regular practice of checking in with staff, and demonstrating your concern and interest in them as people. This simple action may help staff feel more comfortable speaking up because you appreciate them as an individual, not just for their work efforts.

Show your team you are engaged:

Be present in conversations and meetings. Actively listen – this is one of the most critical skills! Do not be distracted in meetings, or attend in 'physical body' only!

Encourage all staff to provide their input, ideas, and feedback:

Regardless of role, or length of service, provide all

team members equal access to the 'floor' in sharing their contribution. Be inclusive in asking for everyone's thoughts and ideas. Be self-aware, and do not seek to single out folks as your regular 'go tos'.

When your team arrives at a decision, pause to ask questions, and explore different viewpoints and considerations that may not have been voiced. Those who process internally may need more time to formulate their thoughts before voicing them, so practice pausing and encouraging input.

In consideration of team members who may not readily share their ideas in a meeting, offer multiple ways for staff to share thoughts. Encourage team members to share feedback via email, or through online collaboration tools such as Google Teams.

Ask questions, be curious, and show appreciation for ideas:

Seek to learn and understand more. Unpack and honour the perspectives of others. You may not always agree, but give space for them to safely share their thoughts.

Employees will openly share their thoughts when you establish an environment where they feel that all ideas are welcome. As you brainstorm, suspend judgement. Remember, you do not need to act on every idea; however, thanking people for their contributions and showing appreciation for their insights will go a long way in establishing psychological safety.

Let your team see that you understand:

Active listening is strengthened by the confirmation that you have understood your team members' points of view, their understanding of facts, and how they have applied this information to their conclusions and decisions. This removes any assumptions on the leader's part, and builds respect and trust.

There should also be an expectation of active listening on the part of your staff to further enhance understanding and respect.

It is okay to make a mistake:

This is a critical component of feeling psychologically

safe in a team. It needs to be okay to admit to a mistake – either as a leader, or as a team member – without the fear of punishment or retribution. When errors happen, the focus should not be on blame. Use collaborative language from a team perspective: "How can we make sure this goes smoothly next time?" or "What do we need to consider going forward". Do not fall victim to continuous analysis of what went wrong, but be solution-focused. This is not to suggest that individuals do not have responsibilities, but instead to demonstrate how we learn and progress forward as a team when difficult situations arise.

Promote positive dialogue and discussion:

Encourage team members to use positive language to inspire honest conversations. Affirmative language actually motivates you to succeed. Simple word changes like using "have not yet" in place of "can't", or "opportunity" instead of "challenge", can help your team members employ a positive mindset that empowers them to speak up without fear.

Be self-aware and expect the same from your staff:

When you are aware of how you think and behave, you can uncover biases that may impact your team's willingness to share their view. Self-awareness empowers you to understand how you typically respond to changes or challenges, and enables you to adjust your emotional response and learn to react in a way that opens discussion. Start demonstrating this ability and encourage – and progressively expect – the same from your staff.

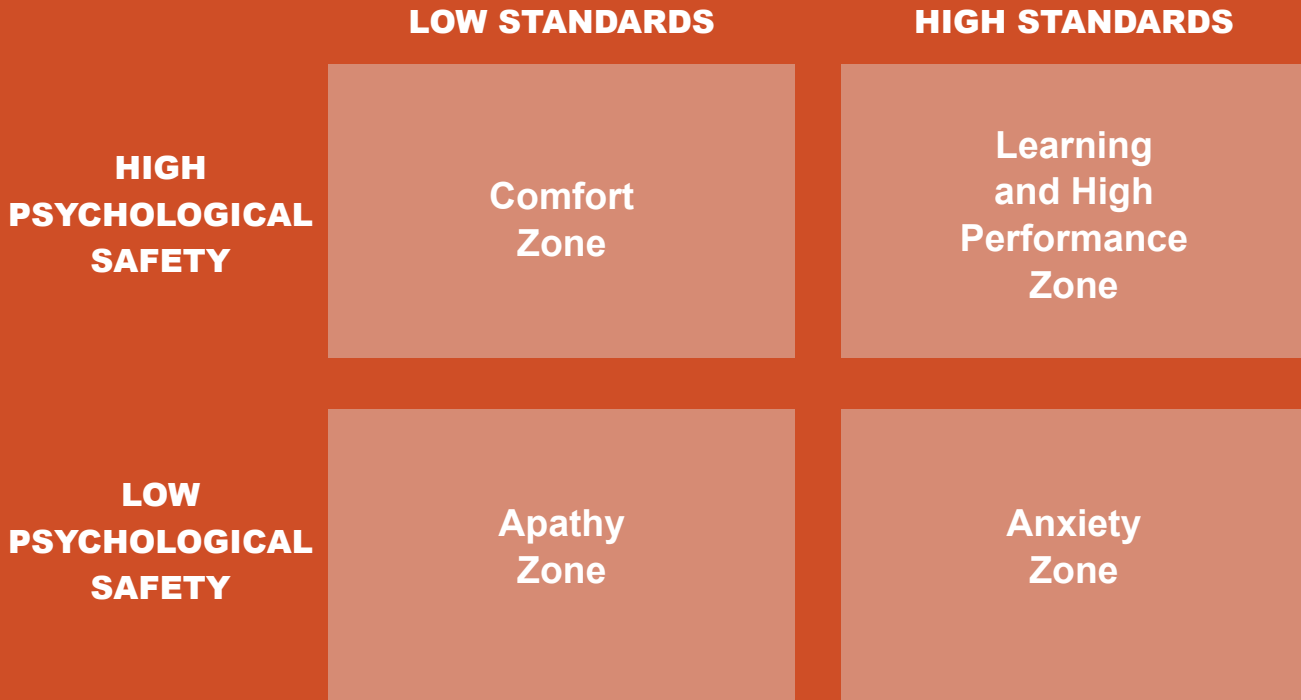
Include your team in decision making:

Your team needs to know that you are confident in your responsibility, but that you're flexible in your approach and open to their ideas and feedback. This will promote their involvement and influence (important for their psychological health) by helping them feel included in the decision-making process and, ultimately, will lead to better outcomes.

Be open to feedback:

When your staff feel psychologically safe, they will feel empowered to give feedback: up, down, and across. Invite your team to challenge your perspective and

WHERE DO YOU WANT YOUR TEAM?



From *The Fearless Organization*, Dr. Amy Edmonson

respectfully push back. Encourage candor. This may be uncomfortable at first, but healthy conflict will lead to better decisions and greater accountability.

Be a champion for your team:

Finally, it's important to support and represent your team. Be sure to share the team's work with senior leadership to increase visibility into what your team is doing, and give credit to staff when due.

And, importantly....

NIP NEGATIVITY IN THE BUD!

If you have a staff member who speaks negatively about peers, talk to them about it. Be clear in stating that staff are a team, and that negativity will not be tolerated. Letting negativity stand without comment can become a contagion. People start to think that others are talking about them. These behaviours are psychological safety killers.

Remember, it is okay, and encouraged, for leaders to show vulnerability. When you show vulnerability,

your team will feel more comfortable in being vulnerable with you. This lessens the pressure of always having the answers, and enables you to admit when you have challenges. You cannot do it all, and asking your team for help is a sign of strength rather than weakness.

You are invited to pause, access your growth mindset, then think about your current leadership style and consider the following questions:

What strengths do you bring to lead a psychologically safe team?

What skills and strengths should you apply more?

What actions should you do less?

What new behaviours do you need to learn and practice?

Who can help you?

A well functioning, psychologically safe team will:

- Give and receive feedback
- Ask difficult questions
- Raise issues and concerns
- Ask for help
- Disagree at times
- Offer solutions to problems
- Ask for clarification
- Admit errors

**In Conclusion:
The Flow of Safety
that Emanates from You!**

When your direct supervisor feels psychologically safe, they are more likely to create a psychologically safe climate for you at work.

Likewise, when you make efforts to enhance your own psychological safety, you are better equipped to provide this environment for your staff.

When your staff feels psychologically safe and valued, this positivity flows to students.

Students who feel psychologically safe are better able to access their brains' frontal cortex that promotes executive function, empathy, and connectiveness. This in turn results in:

- A learning versus closed mindset
- A growth perspective and progressive attitude to risk and failure
- A tendency to enhance active listening
- A willingness to ask questions and participate in open conversations
- A willingness to help others
- A shared sense of identity
- An increase in inclusiveness and welcoming of diversity

It may take many small pebbles of effort to set in motion the waves of psychological safety. Remember that the impact each pebble makes will touch many in the school community and, best of all, students will ride the swells!

Other Sources

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<https://symondsresearch.com/psychological-safety/>