Article #1 for Aged Care Notes 2023

Psychological safety – a key concept for quality and safety in your organisation

By Donna Dark, your governance guide (Lighthouse Advisory Services)

This article provides an overview of psychological safety and focuses on why it is so important for quality and safety in aged care organisations.

What is Psychological Safety?

Psychological safety is a concept that originated in the 1950s with the work of Edgar Schein and Warren Bennis and experienced a resurgence in the 1990s with the work of William Kahn, and later Amy Edmondson. The concept describes the consequences that people perceive when taking interpersonal risks in the workplace. From their experiences individuals determine if it is 'safe' to speak up about issues, disagree with a decision or point of view, and whether new ideas or ways of doing things are encouraged and acted on.

Psychological safety is not about being nice or comfortable. It is about openness – with clear expectations, trust and respect which helps team members feel secure to be themselves. It also involves taking risks and learning from it all to do things better. An organisation cannot decide it is 'psychologically safe' – the perceptions of its employees collectively will determine this.

Why is Psychological Safety important for quality and safety in an aged care organisation?

Where psychological safety exists, research has found it facilitates the sharing of knowledge and information and encourages innovative ideas and suggestions for improvements. It encourages team members to learn and perform, and positively impacts team effectiveness. These are all important aspects of promoting quality and safety.

Psychological safety also encourages team members to speak up about concerns or issues and to report mistakes and incidents when they do occur and learn from mistakes - all important aspects of a just culture.

How do we know if we have Psychological Safety in our organisation?

Ask. Amy Gallo's HBR article (see link in the resources section) provides Amy Edmondson's 7 item questionnaire which can be used to survey team members to assess their perceptions of psychological safety. The resources section provides a link to another tool that may be useful.

It is important to not get caught up in the measurement of psychological safety but rather focus on strategies to promote it with the goal of measuring the expected outcomes in team performance and effectiveness.

How can we improve Psychological Safety?

Suggestions include:

1. Encourage people to speak up –creating environments that promote this and showing how input provided influences decisions and outcomes in the workplace.

2. Leaders must model the behaviour they wish to see – own up to and learn from mistakes, be open to different ideas and ways to get things done, be willing to take risks.

3. Ask for input – don't wait to be told OR assume all is well.

Article #1 for Aged Care Notes 2023

4. Replace blame with curiosity. Use it as an opportunity to understand where the person is coming from rather than shutting the conversation down. Remember – everyone is watching how you react, and this will determine whether they feel safe to provide their feedback or input in the future.

How can I find out more about Psychological Safety?

The resources below that may be helpful to you in learning more about Psychological Safety and provide you with some ways that you can introduce the concept for discussion with your teams.

Resources

Books

Edmondson, A.C. (2018) The Fearless Organization. Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation and Growth.

Helbig, K and Norman, M (2023) The Psychological Safety Playbook: Lead More Powerfully by Being More Human. (A brand new release)

Podcast

HBR IdeaCast Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace

Coaching for Leaders Podcast: 404: How to Build Psychological Safety, with Amy Edmondson

Tools

The Fearless Organization Scan

Articles

Edmondson. and Lei,Z. (2014) Psychological Safety: The History, Renaissance, and Future of an Interpersonal Construct. Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behaviour

Edmondson, A.C and Mortensen, M. (2021) What Psychological Safety Looks Like in a Hybrid Workplace. Harvard Business Review

Gallo, A.(2023) What is Psychological Safety? Harvard Business Review

Hill, A. (2023) Psychological safety: the art of encouraging teams to be open

Newsletter

Psychological Safety Newsletter by Tom Geraghty

Videos

Building a psychologically safe workplace | Amy Edmondson | TEDxHGSE