# Establishing Trust and Psychological Safety in the Workplace:

## How to Use Coaching Skills To Foster Well Being, Increase Employee Engagement and Performance

**A GUIDE**

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Teams with high levels of trust and psychological safety are more effective, more engaged, and more energetic. Not only are they more likely to achieve optimal levels of performance, but they are also more likely to sustain those high levels.

As we look forward to the post-COVID New Normal, creating a safe and supportive environment in the workplace is more essential than ever!

Coaching skills and coaching as a leadership style will help you establish trust and safety in your workplace.

You lay the groundwork for a strong and resilient workforce by doing this.

Here's what I hope you walk away with after reading this - a better understanding of:

- Why psychological safety is the #1 common characteristic of high-performance teams

- How to evaluate your team's level of psychological safety

- An understanding of the telltale signs of distrust in the workplace

- The connection between psychological safety and resilience

- 3 key strategies that you can start working with this afternoon

I wrote this guide because, as workplaces prepare to welcome their employees back to the office, leaders need to ensure that their employees know that they are walking into a safe place, not just for their physical health, but their mental and emotional health as well.

More and more high-level executives want to be coached on how to support their employees during these times, and more and more junior managers have many concerns about what the new normal will be like.

Even Before Covid, the notion of psychological safety was coming to the forefront because it was being identified as a quality missing from workplaces.

Lack of trust and safety is the source of massive stress, and stress has a destructive impact on everything from engagement to productivity to creativity to the ability to manage conflict and more and more and more. You know this. I know this. Let's do something about it starting now.

So a word or two about what this guide is NOT.

I'm not offering you a magic wand, I'm not offering tips and tricks, and I'm not suggesting a list of fast, free, or easy hacks.

I respect you too much to waste your time with those worthless band-aids.

Today, I'm sharing something real: Establishing Trust and Safety is an act of leadership for your culture.

I'm going to talk about this topic from the perspective that I understand, know, and teach, which is how leaders can use coaching skills to weather this storm. Covid will pass, and other storms will follow, so the seeds that I'm sharing with you today are forever.

Let's start here.

## What is psychological safety?

Psychological safety is not a new idea.
In 1943, Psychologist Abraham Maslow explained a hierarchy of 5 basic needs human beings need to thrive.

First, you need to be physically safe.

Second, you need security, like a paycheque.

The first two are obvious, and most people just stop at: 'paycheque.'

But the top three needs are where we can thrive and be powerful in and of ourselves.

Lean in leaders. You can do a lot for your culture when you get this stuff:

#3 – People need a sense of connection and belonging to each other.

#4 – People need self-esteem and a sense of satisfaction from a job well done.

#5 – People need to self-actualize.

In the context of the energy people put into their workday, self-actualization means you have a sense of purpose, knowing that your work serves the world around you, that you have a vision for what will be better in your world because of your work - AND - you have a mission for how you are going to put your energy towards living your purpose and turning your vision into reality.

These are the 5 basic human needs, and today, more than ever before, the world must be based on the fact that for companies to thrive, people must thrive Leaders who get this will be at the helm of companies that come out on top.

Since the beginning of the Covid Era, people have been asking me for coaching on how to be more **resilient,** and many leaders want to help their employees build up their **resilience** to better cope with the stress caused by these turbulent times.

The quality of resilience needs a habitat to exist in, and that habitat is trust and safety.

What do I mean by resilience?

Resilience is the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties.

It takes a degree of inner strength, toughness, the willingness to reflect, integrate lessons learned, bounce back, pick yourself up, dust yourself off and get back in the game, stronger than ever.

Resilient people can receive constructive feedback and have the strength of character to make changes based on good feedback.

We all need to build up our resilience muscles. Just like the muscles of the body, in order to get strong, we have to make an effort on a consistent basis, no one can do it for us.

What you can do for others is to provide the right environment and develop your coaching skills.

The leader's job is to build a culture of trust and psychological safety, like a gym full of workout equipment for building the resilience muscle.

Amy Edmondson is an Organizational behavioural scientist and professor at Harvard Business School.

She is the one who first identified the concept of psychological safety in work teams back in 1999.

More recently, she published a book called "The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth."

Edmondson describes psychological safety as "a shared belief held by individuals that their team is a safe place for interpersonal risk-taking."

She also explains that team members who feel safe "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."

TEAM MEMBERS WHO FEEL SAFE...

"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."

AMY EDMONDSON, ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIORAL SCIENTIST AND HARVARD PROFESSOR
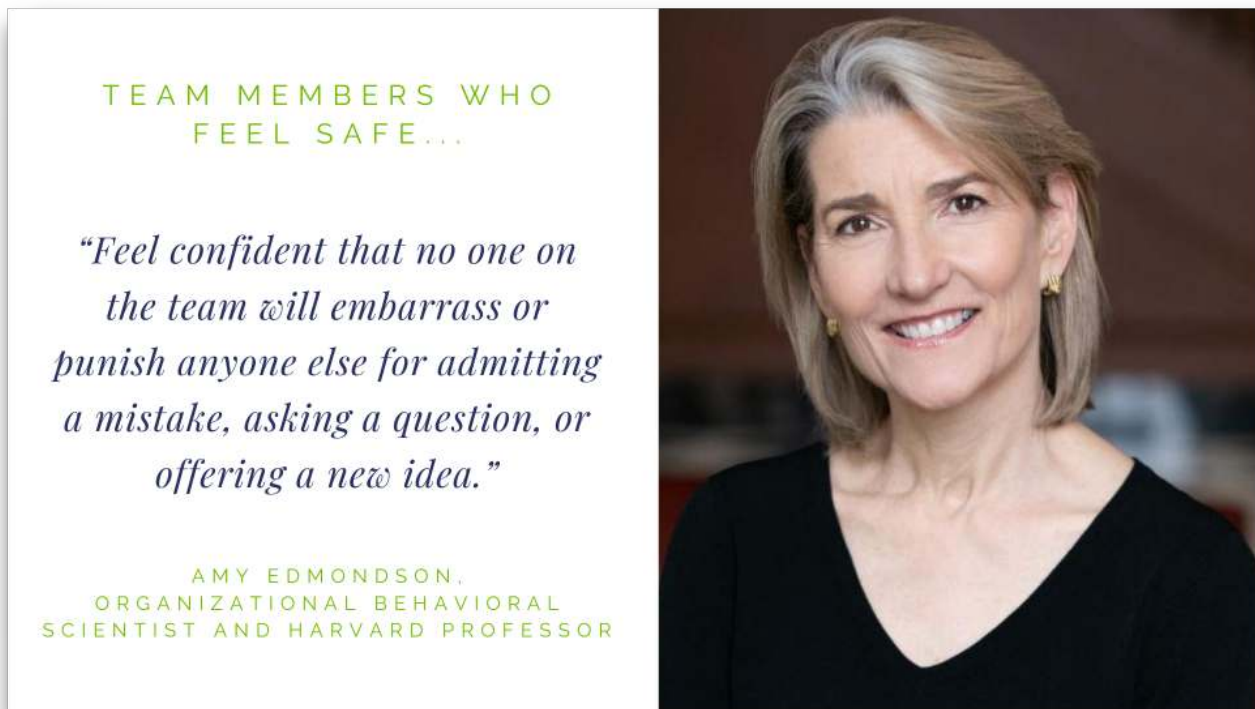
For the post-Covid new normal, I would like to add that psychological safety also means that employees can be transparent with their team and leaders about the challenges of the office and work-from-home integration. The questions that will arise around physical distancing at the office, mask-wearing, cold symptoms that show up at the office, and vaccinations, these concerns need to be taken seriously. Everyone must wholeheartedly demonstrate that they are doing all in their power to make the workday work.

# Why is it important?

Project Aristotle, a research study by Google, found that individuals on teams with higher psychological safety are less likely to leave. They're more likely to harness the power of diverse ideas from their teammates and bring in more revenue.

From an executive point of view, they're rated as twice as effective.

> *"In the end, there is one thing that determines the highest performance, and that is psychological safety. If the team knows it is psychologically safe — which (includes)... the climate of appreciation, being respected and accepted — there is high predictability for high performance."*
>
> HANS HAGEMANN,
>
> THE LEADING BRAIN: POWERFUL SCIENCE-BASED STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING PEAK PERFORMANCE.

## *Abraham Maslow would agree, don't you think?*

Low psychological safety can cause your employees to hide their mistakes, keep their mouths shut when they have legitimate concerns, and cover-up for their peers. They may even avoid speaking up when they have a great idea to suggest.

Imagine the long-term damage this can cause your company.

# What is trust?

Trust is a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon the positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another' (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998, p. 395).

This means:

- Being able to rely on someone to follow through as promised

- A sense that a person will consistently behave with leadership skills in a respectful, professional manner.

- A feeling of confidence in someone

Whereas a lack of trust is often expressed as:

- A sense of being 'kept in the dark.'

- Being anxious or uncertain of someone's motives or interests.

- Not knowing what reaction to expect or what mood the person will bring into the room.

- Never knowing what will satisfy the manager or provoke negative, unproductive feedback.

# Why is trust important?

Trust is motivating, and it's the job of leaders to know how to tap into what motivates people.

On teams where there is trust, people are more likely to be engaged and more energetic; people are happier, have a better sense of well-being, and performance is optimal and sustainable.

For example, The Harvard Business Review reported studies by the Queens School of Business and by the Gallup Organization that revealed disengaged workers had 37% higher absences, 49% more accidents, and caused 60% more errors and defects.

Organizations with low employee engagement scores experienced 18% lower productivity, 16% lower profitability, 37% lower job growth, and 65% lower share price over time.

Research shows that workplace stress leads to an increase in turnover. Lack of loyalty has a high price tag.

To build trust and faith in the system, institutions must step outside of their traditional roles and work toward new, more integrated operating models that put people — and addressing their fears — at the center of everything they do.

When trust is lacking, this affects productivity and organizational performance. For example, employees spend precious time and energy watching out for management and covering their own backs.

And managers spend their precious time checking up on employees. A breakdown in trust at work causes stress and anxiety on both sides.

Stephen M. R. Covey, author of many great leadership books, including "The Speed of Trust" wrote that "Lack of trust stops relationships from developing and destroys relationships that were once productive…

When trust goes down…speed goes down…and costs go up."

"There's no team without trust," says Paul Santa-gata, Head of Industry at Google.

He knows the results of the tech giant's massive two-year study on team performance, which revealed that the highest-performing teams have one thing in common: psychological safety.

A quick search on the internet will bring up countless studies on the benefits of trust and safety in the workplace, and they all point to the same conclusion.

Lack of trust and safety causes stress, and stress is destructive to the well-being of people and, therefore, the wellbeing of the company.

A Watson Wyatt study showed that high-trust companies outperformed low-trust companies in total return to shareholders—by 286%.

# How do you evaluate your team's level of psychological safety?

A person feels psychologically safe on their team when they feel that they:

- Don't always have to have the answer.
- Can be in learning mode by asking questions and asking for clarification.
- Can ask for feedback and know what they will hear will be meaningful, constructive, and helpful
- Can own up to mistakes, disagree, voice or try a new idea
- Feel respected for being intelligent and competent

And, that the learning environment is is free of people being ridiculed, rejected, disrespected, berated, intimidated, ignored, or bullied.

They are not stressed that being in learning mode will come back to haunt them with negative performance evaluations, for example being passed over for interesting projects, being passed over for advancement, or being exposed to the actual or implied threat of termination.

# How do you evaluate your team's level of psychological safety?

Symptoms of distrust show up in the way people describe their situation. In coaching mode, you listen for telltale verbal clues when people say things like:

- He's out for himself
- I feel burned
- There's too much red tape
- I'm walking on eggshells
- I have to watch my back
- I keep my cards close to my chest

You can also listen for complaints of:

- Being micromanaged
- Office politics
- Sabotage
- Not feeling heard, recognized, or valued
- Scandals, corruption, dishonesty, favouritism
- High turnover or inability to fill roles

# Take the pulse: Are you observing stress-related behaviour?

- People rush because there is never enough time

- Conflict

- Overextended behaviours like people being argumentative, goal fixated or overbearing

- Withdrawn, needy, obsessed by consensus

Just because these traits may be common and you may be used to them, it does not make it ok.

I know some leaders like to keep people on their toes, so they create stress on purpose. In 2013, HR Magazine's Chris Welford wrote, "The boss who manages through fear achieves the opposite."

Creating stress like this diminishes trust and safety and is backfiring on you whether you know it or not.

# To know for sure, get curious

Consider conducting a survey that includes discovery questions like these that Amy Edmondson designed:

1.  If you make a mistake on this team, it is often held against you?

2.  As a member of this team, are you able to bring up problems and tough issues?

3.  Do others sometimes reject you or people on this team for being different?

4.  Is it safe to take a risk on this team?

5.  Is it difficult to ask other members for help?

6.  Would anyone on this team deliberately act in a way that undermines your efforts?

7. When working with this team members, are your unique skills and talents valued and utilized?

If you decide to run a survey like this, please hire an objective, third party who will guarantee confidentiality to conduct this for you.

To build trust and safety, you need to demonstrate that you have taken the appropriate measures. I invite you to reach out to me if you want some coaching on making this exercise work for you.

## Let's review

So, so far we've touched on:

- The definition of trust and psychological safety
- Why it's important for the workplace and why it's the #1 common characteristic of high-performance teams
- How to evaluate your team's level of psychological safety
- How to know if there is a lack of trust and safety in your workplace

Up next, I'd like to teach you 3 key coaching strategies you can use to create trust and safety in your workplace.

Before I dive into this mini training, I'd just like to give a little context on coaching skills.

The International Coaching Federation governs the profession of coaching, this organization accredits legitimate coach training programs and legitimate coaches have earned their certifications and credentials accordingly.

I know that coaches and 'leader as coach' training is in growing demand these days, and I would be remiss if I didn't mention that if you consider it for your own company, make sure you check that the provider's credentials are intact.

I have written extensively on this topic, so I won't detail what kind of training makes great leadership coaches here today, but you can click here for some resources.

# Coaching Strategy #1
## Develop and Model Curiosity

Curiosity: A superpower that coaches cultivate through effective communication skills.

It's an important topic at The Coaching Academy For Leaders, and here is a look under the hood:

Being genuinely curious means that you drop your judgment and you embrace the beginner's mind. The mind that has no answers, no agenda and no map, only the sincere quest to explore, learn and understand.

It's challenging for most people to do this because it means letting go of the equity you have tied up in being the smartest, most experienced person in the room.

I'm being facetious, but honestly, curiosity is counter-culture to the workplace that rewards how intelligent people are and how quickly they can transform their knowledge into solutions.

But I call it a superpower for a reason.

Being the person who can ask powerful questions means igniting awareness that then leads to learning, which leads to innovation that leads to breakthroughs and growth.

That's a pretty spectacular person, don't you think? Don't you want to be that person?

My students consistently report back how hard it is to get into this habit, but they realize that it is well worth it once they do.

According to an article in Fast Company, Henry Evans and Colm Foster explain that asking questions in a certain way "allows others to feel that you respect them and are debating their ideas rather than judging them because of their ideas. Doing so promotes healthy conflict, and others will not hesitate to bring you even those seemingly whacky ideas that prove to be invaluable."

It takes a humble approach to be curious.

> "How does humility manifest itself in leadership and in life? A humble person is more concerned about what is right than about being right, about acting on good ideas than having the ideas, about embracing new truth than defending an outdated position, about building the team than exalting self, about recognizing contribution than being recognized for making it."
>
> STEPHEN M. R. COVEY,
> THE SPEED OF TRUST

# Coaching Strategy #2
## Break The Golden Rule

The coaching approach to establishing trust and safety asks you to break the "Golden Rule."

You've heard it before—treat others as you'd like to be treated. Unfortunately, when it comes to psychological safety, the opposite is true.

Treat others as THEY WOULD like to be treated.

Take the time to ask your team members and direct reports what they'd prefer regarding the frequency of check-ins, style of communication, type of feedback, etc.

Invest in robust psychometric assessments to help foster your ability to speed read others, your ability to take the pulse on when people are overextended and why, then build your capacity to flex your style to the needs of others in the appropriate way.

Psychometrics is a big topic and, sadly, out of the scope of today's training, but I recommend Lumina Spark and will be very happy to share some free resources about it.

[Click here for our resources.](#)

# Coaching Strategy #3
## Embrace Your Empathy

Empathy is another coaching superpower. But let's define empathy:

- SYMPATHY is acknowledging that the other person is going through an emotional or physical struggle and offering them comfort.

- EMPATHY is this and something more than just this. It's actually understanding what the other person is feeling because you've had a similar experience yourself, or you're able to put yourself in their shoes and feel strong feelings with them.

In coaching, empathy involves reflecting on a person's experience and how they feel about it. We don't judge their feelings. We just hold space and let them experience their truth.

Why? A person's experience and feelings about that experience are valid. Period.

Feeling validated helps them feel that they have a right to the emotions they are having, it helps them process, it helps them heal, move forward, and become more resilient.

To build your leadership skill of empathy, try an exercise called "Just Like Me" to put yourself in someone else's shoes.

The next time you are at odds with someone, for whatever reason, say to yourself that this person is:

 "Just Like Me,"

Say to yourself :

- This person has beliefs, perspectives, and opinions, just like me.
- This person has hopes, anxieties, and vulnerabilities, just like me.
- This person has friends, family, and perhaps children who love them, just like me.
- This person wants to feel respected, appreciated, and competent, just like me.
- This person wishes for peace, joy, and happiness, just like me.

Practicing this mindset allows you to wake up your inner empath. It will enable you to remember what coaches know: people are doing their best, striving for positive results while also trying to have their basic human needs met, just like you.

In closing, I want to go full circle to our talk about resilience.

We all know that resilience is important, especially in this age of complexity and change.

But for our employees to be resilient - they need trust and psychological safety. These 2 things go hand in hand.

Employees can easily disengage, hide below the radar, do the minimum and just do what they are told.

But we know that this is not sustainable for a business for employees to operate this way, and we know that employees will leave organizations when they feel that they can't learn, grow and develop.

For work cultures to be effective, employees need a new way of being well.

*"In a thriving culture, everyone needs to be awake"*

The employee's role in this era is to develop a sense of inner resilience - this takes effort that can only be made if they are in a trusting and safe environment.

Creating a coaching culture in your workplace is the best way to create that trust and safety that is so vitally important.

Learning HOW to coach is one of the most important skills you'll learn as a leader.

For those of you who are ready to go out and use these skills - I wish you all the success in the world!

For those of you who might want some help or guidance in getting there, and who want to skip over the trial and error, stay with me because I have something that will help.

The Coaching Academy for Leaders offers you an opportunity to begin your journey as a leadership coach and achieve extraordinary results for you and your team by building the ability to bring out the best in others.

Our program is accredited by the ICF and provides training just like what I've been teaching today - in fact, the training today is a bite right out of the curriculum.

For those of you who are looking to:

- Hone your leadership impact by developing skills such as emotional intelligence, self-awareness, executive presence, and handling difficult conversations

- Develop self-awareness and grow your rapport with others, quickly

- Build your employees to be resilient and agile in times of change

- Develop high-performance teams and bring coaching culture to your organization

The Coaching Academy for Leaders may be right for you. My students are people who want to:

- Use coaching as a communication style at work
- Learn coaching as a leadership style
- Develop a coaching culture within their organization
- Become a certified coach for career advancement or consulting work
- Coach colleagues or clients
- Be the best that they can be and bring out the best in others

You can learn more about <u>The Coaching Academy for Leaders</u> right here.

Here's to your success!
Corry

Corry Robertson, PCC
Director of Education, The Coaching Academy for Leaders

# Corry Robertson, PCC
## Director of Education,
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Corry Robertson is a leading global expert on **coaching culture, engagement and retention**, and a **Registered ICF Mentor Coach**, with a client list that includes Fortune 100 companies.
Corry has built a reputation for helping **HR, OD and Leadership Development professionals create coaching cultures within their organizations** to leverage the skills and mindset required to build high performing teams.

Corry is also the Founder and CEO of **The Coaching Academy for Leaders, offering ICF accredited coaching programs.** The Academy's unique proprietary method blends coaching competencies and leadership theory in a revolutionary way to help individuals and teams achieve high-level results.

Corry is an award-winning coach and is listed on Montreal's top 20 Coaches by Influence Digest. Her clients say working with her is deeply meaningful yet highly strategic and productive, uncovering solutions for complex challenges.

Corry's primary areas of expertise include **supporting executives and emerging leaders through human performance improvement**, organizational culture management, executive team development and leadership and high potential development programs.

## The Coaching Academy for Leaders

Leverage the most powerful and effective approach to enhancing human development and performance by enrolling in our acclaimed and one-of-a-kind "Leader As Coach" program.

Let's talk about how you can become an ICF certified coach and effect real and lasting change for yourself, your team, and your organization.

**Start a conversation today.**

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