A Leader's Role in Creating Healthy Teams

Strong leadership helps create teams where people feel safe, supported, and able to thrive.

Tip Sheet | Psychological Safety | Leadership | Team Wellbeing

10 min read

Introduction

Learn how leaders can foster psychological safety through everyday actions, communication, and role modelling that build trust, support wellbeing, and strengthen team performance.

How to Use

Review the leadership qualities and daily practices, reflect on your approach, and identify one or two actions to strengthen psychological safety within your team.

Who It's For

Leaders, supervisors, managers, and team leads working in public safety.

When to Use

Use when building leadership skills, supporting team wellbeing, onboarding leaders, or improving team culture and communication.



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What is Workplace Psychological Safety?

Psychological safety refers to reducing the risk of psychological harm and creating conditions where workers feel supported, respected, and safe to engage fully at work. In practice, it means creating a climate where team members feel safe to:

- voice ideas and concerns
- admit mistakes and learn from them
- ask questions
- engage in honest, constructive discussions

— without fear of blame, judgment, or negative consequences.

When psychological safety is present, teams are more resilient, collaborative, and effective. Trust grows, learning accelerates, and problems are identified earlier—before they escalate. In public safety and high-pressure environments, psychological safety is especially critical for protecting mental health and sustaining performance over time.

Leaders play a central role in shaping this environment through what they say, what they model, and what they tolerate. Because of their position, leaders' actions often carry more weight over time.

The Leader's Role in Fostering Psychological Safety

Every interaction a leader has sends a signal about what is safe and acceptable. Leaders influence psychological safety by:

- setting clear expectations for respectful behaviour
- responding constructively to mistakes and concerns, with accountability focused on learning
- modelling openness about challenges and growth
- addressing harmful behaviours early and consistently

When leaders are approachable, emotionally intelligent, and consistent, employees are more likely to speak up early, seek support, and support one another—reducing stigma and preventing harm.

Conversely, when leaders are dismissive, unapproachable or unpredictable, silence can take hold. Workers may hide struggles, avoid raising risks, or internalize stress—undermining wellbeing, trust, and team cohesion.

Key Message

Psychological safety is not about lowering standards or avoiding accountability, it is about creating conditions where people can perform, learn, and recover without fear. When leaders model care, consistency, and courage, they make it safer for others to do the same.

Qualities of a Psychologically Safe Leader

The National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace identifies leadership behaviours as foundational to a psychologically healthy, safe, and productive workplace. The qualities below reflect both the Standard and evidence-based guidance from Workplace Strategies for Mental Health.

Key Qualities Leaders can Cultivate

Empathy	Leaders demonstrate genuine care for their team's wellbeing. They listen actively, validate experiences, and acknowledge the human impact of work demands.
Openness and Transparency	Clear, honest communication builds trust and mutual respect. Sharing information early and explaining decisions reduces uncertainty.
Respect for Diversity and Inclusion	Valuing different perspectives, identities, and lived experiences fosters psychologically safe environment where everyone feels accepted and valued.
Trustworthiness	Consistency, reliability, and integrity are essential. When leaders follow through, apply expectations fairly, and act ethically, workers feel secure bringing forward concerns.
Approachability	Approachable leaders make it easier for workers to speak openly without fear of judgment, encouraging early support-seeking.
Supportive and Encouraging	Supportive leaders focus on development and strengths. They offer constructive feedback, andrecognize effort that builds confidence.
Emotional Intelligence	Understanding and managing one's own emotions—and responding skillfully to the emotions of others—allows leaders to navigate difficult conversations with sensitivity and care.
Commitment to Wellbeing	Psychologically safe leaders prioritize mental health, support work–life balance, and address workplace stressors.
Flexibility and Adaptability	Effective leaders recognize that different people and situations require different approaches. They adjust expectations and support strategies as needed.
Modelling Healthy Behaviour	Leaders set the tone. By managing stress, maintaining boundaries, and seeking support when needed, they signal that caring for mental health is normal, accepted, and encouraged.

What Leaders can do Daily

Psychological safety is built through consistent, everyday actions. Leaders can strengthen it by:

- Invite input and genuinely consider it
- Respond to mistakes with curiosity rather than blame
- Check in regularly — not only when performance slips
- Acknowledge workload pressures and competing demands
- Address harmful language and behaviours promptly
- Recognize effort, growth, and learning — not just outcomes

Small actions, repeated over time, create meaningful change.

Leader Self-Check: Your Wellbeing Matters

Leading under pressure is demanding, and feeling stretched or depleted at times is common–not a personal failure. Leaders cannot sustain psychological safety for others if their own wellbeing is consistently compromised. Prioritizing your mental health sets the tone for the entire team and reinforces that wellbeing is a shared responsibility.

Practical Ways to Start

Get back to basics

- Check in with yourself regularly. Prioritize sleep, nutrition, movement, and activities that restore energy and enjoyment.

Stay socially connected

- Strong relationships are protective. Even a brief conversation with someone you trust can help you feel grounded. Participate in peer, family, or professional support networks when possible.

Ask for help when needed

- Seeking support is a strength, not a weakness. Leaders who ask for help model healthy behaviour and reduce stigma for others.

Self-Reflection Tools for Leaders

Mental Health Continuum Model
Reflect on where you are and what support may help.

Psychologically Safe Leader Self-Assessment

Warrior Health Online Self-Assessment Tool

Mental Health Services
Get access for supportive mental health services

References

- CSA Group. (2013). CAN/CSA-Z1003-13/BNQ 9700-803/2013 (R2022), psychological health and safety in the workplace. CSA Group. https://www.csagroup.org/article/can-csa-z1003-13-bnq-9700-803-2013-r2022-psychological-health-and-safety-in-the-workplace/ [csagroup.org]
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