3 steps to foster psychological safety, according to the leading researcher on the topic

By Kate Neilson

HRM – The news site of the Australian HR Institute (www.hrmonline.com.au)

HRM speaks with Harvard Business School professor Dr Amy Edmondson who offers practical tips for cultivating psychological safety in the workplace.

A three-step process to facilitate psychological safety

Most people buy into the idea but might struggle to put it into action. For these people, Amy Edmondson has pulled together three steps to get started. They include:

1. Model fallibility and invite participation

Leaders need to own up to their knowledge gaps or admit to mistakes for their teams to feel safe enough to do the same. Part of this is modelling the behaviour, but equally important, according to Edmondson, is remaining curious.

"People make a lot of statements, but they don't ask enough of the right questions. By asking questions, it would make it very awkward for me to not answer you… because you've invited me to speak," she says.

"By asking [certain] questions, you're also modelling fallibility because you're saying, 'I don't know. I want to know what you think.'"

2. Framing the work

This step is about getting people onto the same page.

"It's about explicitly calling attention to the challenge that lies ahead. You might say, 'This is going to be hard because there's so much uncertainty or because no one has ever done this before, so all ideas are welcome.' Or you might say, 'This [project] really matters to our customers, so we're going to depend on each other to get this right'. That's framing that the work is interdependent and important."

Putting a layer of meaning around the work clarifies why other people's voices matter.

"So, if I say something like, 'Catching an error early is really important', I'm framing [the work] in such a way that I'm saying, 'I need your voice.'"

3. Embrace the messenger

The final step is for team leaders to be aware of how they respond when people come to them with a mistake. Are they biting people's heads off? Or are they treating mistakes as a part of the journey towards innovation and betterment?

"How do leaders respond [to a mistake]? Do they respond with annoyance, disappointment, or frustration? Or do they respond with appreciation and say, 'Thanks for telling me and for that clear line of sight'? I always say a productive response is appreciative and forward-looking."

Fighting the instinct to say, "How the heck did this happen?" doesn't mean we shouldn't set aside time to get to the root cause of a mistake. However, Edmondson says leaders need to be cautious of when and how they say this.

It shouldn't be the first response and it shouldn't be accusatory because "your initial reaction really matters"; it sets the tone for future interactions not only with that individual but any bystanders, or colleagues they speak with.

With this three-step process in mind, if organisations are still unsure where to start, Edmondson says to focus on one goal.

"Whether that goal is to grow the business by X per cent or to move into a new market, start by articulating that and getting everyone on the same page about what it is that you're trying to do. From there, explain that it might not be easy and so that's why you're going to need to have very candid learning-oriented conversations."

Amongst all this, leaders need to be skilled in asking good questions, listening thoughtfully, and having the skills to gain perspective on the bigger picture, she says.

"And then the work of developing the team competencies is best done by using the actual work we have to do as the playing field. It's not going to an offsite to do a simulation – although, I do like those team exercises – but using the actual team context and the actual work we must do as an opportunity to get better."

What's the next step?

Edmondson has previously described psychological safety as the means to arrive at excellence.

"It's just one dimension, albeit an important one, that [we need in our workplaces], especially in this volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous world. There's another element that I sometimes think of as motivation or setting high standards or, you know, this shared ambition of purpose.

"There are different ways of thinking about the rocket fuel that makes us take off, right? And so, what I always want to be clear about is you need both the freedom from holding back [and] interpersonal fear and something else. And so, what is this something else that makes workplaces really engaging or enriching?"

The answer to this question is very context-dependent, but Edmondson invites HR professionals and workplace leaders to think about it.

Once you've secured the baseline for your people's psychological safety, ask yourself: 'What next'? How can we continue to ensure our people bring their best ideas to the table? How can we encourage them to be bold and fearless in their idea generation? And perhaps most importantly, how can we ensure they're doing work both we and they are proud of?