

7 Misconceptions About Psychological Safety:

As the central measure of cultural health, psychological safety is exploding as an organizational priority. But there are seven dangerous misconceptions about it that you must avoid:

1. A Shield From Accountability. Non-performing employees tend to invoke psychological safety as an excuse for poor performance, a kind of diplomatic immunity from having to deliver results. Organizations that follow this pattern chronically move non-performers around, stuffing them into corners to mitigate risk.

2. Niceness. When we are collegial to a fault, what happens? We create false harmony and false compassion. This overemphasis on being warm, hospitable, and caring can create a layer of denial that stands between us and reality. This veneer of civility can have catastrophic consequences.

3. Coddling. Psychological safety means rolling everyone in bubble wrap. Rather than giving you the proper respect and autonomy you deserve as a human being, we indulge you with excessive care and attention. We overprotect you, leading to dependency, learned helplessness, and victimhood. Not so. Psychological safety means respecting your humanity, not increasing your fragility.

4. Consensus Decision Making. Another grave misconception is that psychological safety democratizes decision-making and gives everyone a vote. We are now making decisions by consensus because everyone is suddenly invested with authority and a seat at the table, not just to discuss issues, but to decide them.

5. Unearned Autonomy. People sometimes believe psychological safety represents a shift to universal and self-directed empowerment. It does have the potential to redistribute influence if people contribute more fully, but it doesn't mean you magically acquire a new level of autonomy. Autonomy must be earned through performance.

6. Political Correctness. Another distortion is that ushering in psychological safety means complying with the unwritten norms of political correctness. It does imply sensitivity for others' views and feelings, but it does not subscribe to a political agenda. Despite attempts to hijack and weaponize it, psychological safety attaches itself to no policy, no person, and no organization.

7. Rhetorical Reassurance. Finally, some leaders try to enact psychological safety with words, mistakenly believing they can decree it into existence by simply saying, "Psychological safety is a priority for our organization. Please speak up. Give us your honest feedback and candid input. It's now safe." Just making a declaration won't make it so.



Note #14