How to build trust so that a work environment feels safe
Thursday 26 May 2022, 1.00 - 2.00 pm BST

What makes a work environment safe enough for you to be who you really are and perform at your best? How do leaders create an environment that supports high performing teams and encourages participation and diversity of thought and action? How do we have courageous conversations that challenge current practices? During this session our speakers explored how leaders should be equipped to understand their role in removing barriers and harnessing the individuality of their teams, whilst championing positive change through inclusive practices, processes and shared learning.

How safe do people feel at work these days?

·   During a live poll we asked the audience to consider how much they agree with the statement "People I work with never exclude others for being different" - interestingly, there was more or less a 50:50 split between those in the audience who agreed and disagreed with this statement, with very few people feeling neutral about the issue.
·   In a 2021 cross-sector survey by the Ethics & Compliance Initiative 'The State of Ethics & Compliance in the Workplace – A Look at Global Trends', 33% of respondents had personally observed instances of misconduct from colleagues, and there was a marked spike in the number of respondents who had experienced retaliation for speaking up about such behaviour, from the 2019 to the 2020 survey.

Why does it matter?

·   Within an organisation, **the more people feel safe, the more they are safe**. There's evidence for this from 2017 Gallup research 'How to Create a Culture of Psychological Safety', which found that organisations in which 60% of workers strongly agreed that their opinions seemed to count have 40% less accidents than the typical organisation surveyed, in which only 30% of staff strongly agreed that they felt heard.
·   **Performance** is connected to how safe people feel. At Google, Project Aristotle sought to ascertain what set the highest performing teams apart, and psychological safety was shown to be the key driver.
·   **Retention and reputation**: A 2022 MIT Sloan study 'Toxic Culture is Driving the Great Resignation' found that lack of inclusion (eg favouritism), disrespect and poor manager behaviour are all drivers for people leaving an organisation – and posting about it online.

Where should we focus our efforts?

·   The goal should be to **foster a culture where there is as little fear as possible** within teams. Do your people feel that it is safe to be themselves? In a great team there will be an atmosphere of openness and candour, the willingness to question and ask for help. Where fear is a driving force within a team, people will be impression-managing, masking what they think and feel, appeasing power rather than feeling able to speak truth to power.

What can we do practically?

·   There are many **helpful questions we can ask ourselves** as managers or colleagues. Do we compete or collaborate? Do we give credit to colleagues for the work they do, or have we ever taken it for ourselves? Do we have too much desire for control? Are we trustworthy?

How can we create a "speak up" culture at work?

·   During another live poll we asked the audience to consider how much they agree with the statement "Where I work, it is safe to bring up problems and tough issues" - although the majority of respondents agreed to some extent with this statement, 31% disagreed indicating the challenges that persist for many employees to speak up.
·   **From the top down**: It takes intentional leadership to move from an uneasy silence to authentic storytelling, honesty and voice praise and recognition of colleagues' work and achievement.
·   **From the bottom up**: Everyone is a leader, and the safest psychological work environments are where everyone is encouraged to speak up.

Tips for changing workplace culture

·   **It takes time**. Get into the habit of reflecting on every meeting, mentoring interaction and training session. How can we implement these daily experiences and interactions to bring to life what we have learnt.
·   **Draw on this time** to connect with your teams through listening and understanding, and embrace accountability even when things aren't so great, to help build trust. Draw on this time, to connect with your teams through listening and understanding, and embrace accountability even when things aren't so great, to help build trust.
·   **Find out what's important** to one another, personally as well as professionally, what motivates them, what's impacting them currently. It's easier to appreciate each person as a unique and special member of the team, and not just the work producer or the manager. This builds understanding, trust and, ultimately, solid working relationships.

Key takeaways

·   **Keep it simple**. Ask yourself continually what your impact is. If you are a manager, ask your team to let you know if your words or actions have a negative impact.
·   **Ask, "What do you need from me** that would make you feel more comfortable in asking any questions, sharing your views and raising any concerns?"
·   **Don't rush it**. Team and organisational cultures can take years to change, but be bold and lead. Communicate your shared your values, connect to the business outcomes and show empathy and flexibility.
·   **Show vulnerability. It's OK not to be perfect.**

--- **#WeAreNotNeutral** ---

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