Creating a Psychologically Safe Environment

CMS — CENTERS FOR MEDICARE & MEDICAID SERVICES

Psychological safety is defined as "a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes."

Dr. Amy Edmondson, the Harvard Business School professor who coined the term, found that teams with strong psychological safety are less afraid of the negative consequences that may result from taking prudent risks, making mistakes, sharing their opinions within their teams, and being candid with each other. Among her many findings, she concluded that psychological safety occurs when people feel they are seen, heard, and valued.

WHY DOES PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY MATTER TO OIT?

Team members can integrate the knowledge and talent they bring to their team.

Team members will take initiative and consider the full scope of the situation.

Team members feel respected, see the value of their work, and feel accepted for their contributions.

Employees are less likely to look elsewhere for employment. They collaborate and share knowledge to solve problems more effectively.

Psychological safety enhances employee engagement and instills trust.

KEEP IN MIND:

That psychological safety isn't a "one and done" endeavor. It is the outcome of the many different things we're doing so that everybody feels safe to ask the tough questions, challenge ourselves, and better deliver on our shared commitment to the agency and the American public.

"Creating and nurturing a psychologically safe environment is a continuous improvement process that is always evolving, and we all need to do our part to make it happen. Psychological safety is vital to building a more resilient organization. We owe it to ourselves and to the people we serve to create an environment that brings out the best in all of us."

- Rajiv Uppal, Director and CMS Chief Information Officer (CIO)

HOW WE'RE MAKING OUR WORKPLACE PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE

We are working to **make meetings more interactive** so that information sharing happens quickly, and conversations are open-ended. If you're in a meeting, please make the effort to ask questions. If you don't understand why we're doing something, ask. If you need more details to make the topic more applicable to your work, ask for them. Take advantage of these meetings and opportunities to make them more valuable to you.

We're trying to **establish more feedback loops** to encourage dialogues and idea sharing. You can take advantage of these opportunities by attending open panel discussions with senior leaders, responding to OIT employee feedback surveys, and reading or sharing content from Slack and in *News from OIT*.

Earlier this year, we introduced **gamification activities** to help you adapt to change and learn new skills by deploying game-like strategies in non-game situations. Did you know about it, and did you participate? Watch Slack and *News from OIT* for news about future gamification opportunities.

We recently released a **video interview with OIT senior leaders** that will draw attention to why we're changing and what we're doing to embrace new ways of thinking and working. Watch it on *YouTube*, comment on the video, and join the discussion in our #oit-all Slack channel.

We've embarked on a **cultural assessment journey** to learn more about our identity as an organization. It's the equivalent of holding a mirror to OIT and asking everyone: "Who are we?" "How do we communicate, interact, and collaborate?" and "What is working and what isn't working?"

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO BUILD A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE ENVIRONMENT?

1 Allocate time in meetings for attendees to be heard.

OIT is a meeting culture. We all have too many meetings, but it's one of the ways that we get things done. So make time for feedback in those meetings. Reserve a portion of every team meeting for open dialogues that encourage employees to speak up on issues that are important to them and the organization. Schedule regular "open mic" forums where employees can ask questions of leaders and subject matter experts.

2 Communicate directly and frequently with your teams.

There's no substitute for hearing important news and information first from a trusted manager. Utilize our new Know-Do-Share documents, which are designed to enhance the communications cascade, build credibility with your direct reports, and ensure consistency of messaging for relevant topics across OIT.

3 Make connecting a habit.

We've historically had a relationship culture. Now that we've been working remotely for two years, maintaining the connections that come from those relationships has gotten harder. Of course, connections don't just happen automatically. We have to make time to focus on connecting.

4 Make it easy to get help.

Lindley reports 75 to 90 percent of the support employees offer one other begins with a request. This can happen in team meetings with what some people call a "reciprocity ring." One person shares a problem they are having, and the group gives contacts, suggestions, and resources to address their request. Keep track of your requests in a shared spreadsheet and use a chat to provide support in between meetings.