School of Thought

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Principals who prioritise the psychological safety of staff maximise their potential

By Tim Perkins
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Why should we bother working to maximise the 'psychological safety' of our staff? As research indicates, the health of our school environment depends on it.

How fearless is your organisation? There is a lot of talk about our students being fearless and taking risks with their learning, but I wonder how free our teachers feel to be vulnerable and take risks with their teaching and general approach at school?

I particularly wonder about new teachers who are still finding their feet, who feel as though they are at the bottom of the pecking order and are desperate to secure a permanent contract. Are we potentially missing out on what they have to offer, as they feel as though they have to keep their head down and their mouth shut?

In order to maximise the skills, capacities and abilities of our staff, research tells us that we have to prioritise and maximise our employees' sense of psychological safety.

Staff meetings are a fascinating barometer and insight into the power dynamics and health of a school environment. A lot can be learnt by simply observing: who leads the meeting; who writes the agenda for the meeting; who makes suggestions for agenda items; who arrives at the meeting on time; does the meeting start on time; is there a form of 'soft' introduction (eg. a check in or positive affirmation) or is it straight to business; where do people sit at the meeting; who creates presentations; who speaks the most; who speaks the least; who asks questions; who responds to the questions;

who makes comments; how are those comments responded to and by whom; how divergent viewpoints are shared; how divergent viewpoints are responded to and by whom; who is never interrupted; who is regularly interrupted; whose ideas appear to be dismissed; whose ideas appear to be prioritised; who appears to interact differently in the staff meeting than they do in the lunch room; who is actively involved in the meeting; who appears to be otherwise occupied (eg. marking work or preparing resources); who has to leave early and how often do they do this; who is excluded from the meeting (eg. part-timers who don't work on the meeting day); who has done the requested preparation (eg. readings for the meeting); is consensus sought or are decisions made by decree; what proportion of agenda items are relevant to all participants; how much of the meeting could have been replaced by an email; does the meeting finish on time; who is involved in 'the meeting after the meeting'.

Observing some or all of the aforementioned aspects of the meeting, helps one to gauge aspects of the overall health of the organisation, particularly in relation to psychological safety and team dynamics.

In 2012, in their quest to build the perfect team, Google embarked on an initiative they called Project Aristotle. They brought together statisticians, organisational psychologists, sociologists, engineers and researchers to gather as much information as they could about the composition and characteristics of different teams at Google with the desire to find out what made the best teams tick.

They reviewed 50 years' worth of research data exploring how teams work best. They studied 180 different teams working at Google and amassed a vast amount of data but there were no clear patterns as to what type of group make-up (eg. personality types, skills, backgrounds, genders, management styles) led to teams being most effective.

What the researchers did discover however, was that group norms seemed to be the greatest influence. Norms are the traditions, behavioural standards and unwritten rules that govern how we function when we gather. They are how we interact with each other. Norms are what is often

pejoratively referred to as 'soft skills'. Intangibles. The glue that invisibly harmonises a team.

Interestingly, despite this finding, the researchers discovered that despite common successes, not all groups behaved in the same way. There were however two things common to each of the highly successful teams. Firstly, they displayed what the researchers referred to as equality in distribution of conversational turn-taking. Meaning that over time, pretty much all voices were heard in equal proportions. Secondly, the high achieving teams also had what the researchers called 'higher than average social sensitivity' or what we may more commonly refer to as 'heightened emotional intelligence' or EQ.

Simply put, team members displayed an ability to recognise and regulate their own and their colleagues' emotions.

In 1999, Professor Amy Edmondson from the Harvard Business School published a study on the concept of psychological safety. She described it as a 'shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking'. She went on to say that in a psychologically safe environment, there is 'a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up,' and further described it as 'a team climate characterised by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves.'

When the research teams at Google came across Edmondson's work, they realised that healthy, respectful communication and empathy were the two key factors behind the most effective teams. And it was not just related to team productivity, but perhaps more importantly, high psychological safety led to a greater sense of wellbeing amongst employees. They now rate psychological safety as the highest priority in their teams. As the second most profitable company in the world, perhaps we in schools have something to learn from them.

Now, it is fair to argue that a vast multi-national tech company is very different to a school and our motivations and goals are different, so it is pointless making comparisons. However, it is also fair to state that on a

more micro level, the teams that make up the vast Google empire are fundamentally no different to the teams that make up a school environment in that they are professionals striving to achieve their goals in the most productive way. What Google has, that the average Australian school does not, is the vast resources to do the type of research that will help them maximise their outcomes.

The good news for us is that because they have already spent their millions on this research, the results are available to be shared, free of charge, by all.

And considering the results are so manageable to address and achieve by any organisation, it would seem crazy to ignore them. To improve our teams we need to increase the level of psychological safety within our environment. We do this quite simply by developing our norms around communication and empathy. Considering that we spend so much of our time trying to develop these skills in our students, this is really something that we should be able to address in quite an expert way.

In a 2016 article in the *New York Times Magazine*, Pulitzer prize-winning journalist and the author of two New York Times best-selling books on leadership, Charles Duhigg, stated that:

"Studies show that people working in teams tend to achieve better results and report higher job satisfaction.' He also states that if an organisation wants to improve and evolve 'it needs to influence not only how people work but also how they work together."

In my work with schools around leadership, it becomes immediately apparent that almost all school environments need to work on their level of psychological safety.

In her 2018 book *The Fearless Organisation*, Amy Edmondson suggests that employees often: don't ask questions for fear of looking ignorant; don't admit to mistakes or weaknesses for fear of looking incompetent and don't make suggestions for fear of being seen as disruptive.

A simple litmus test that we use when we work with school leaders and teachers is to ask them to raise their hand if they have ever held back from raising a concern at school for fear of repercussions.

Slightly ironically, it is rare for someone not to raise their hand. The reasons people give for their silence are usually around not wanting to be seen in a bad light, not wanting to embarrass others, a sense of futility in that 'nothing will change anyway', a fear of being perceived negatively and a fear of damaging working relationships. Unhealthy.

If we go back to the staff meeting observations in the second paragraph of this article and look at them through the lens of what the answers would be in a school culture where there was a high level of psychological safety as opposed to a low level, we can start to see what the benefits might be if the psych safety was increased.

I would highly recommend reading *The Fearless Organisation* in which there is a very simple seven-question diagnostic assessment tool to gauge the psychological safety within your organisation and a very straight forward toolkit for developing psychological safety within your team.