

7 Reasons for Psychological Safety in Healthcare Organizations and how Physicians Unconsciously Undermine it.

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Psychological safety is a cornerstone of healthcare quality and safety for several critical reasons:

1. Promotes Open Communication:

In a psychologically safe environment, healthcare professionals feel comfortable speaking up about potential safety concerns, errors, and near-misses without fear of retribution or ridicule. This openness ensures that issues are identified and addressed promptly, preventing harm to patients.

2. Encourages Reporting of Errors:

When staff members are not afraid of punishment, they are more likely to report mistakes. This transparency is essential for understanding the root causes of errors and developing strategies to prevent future occurrences. Reporting systems thrive in environments where psychological safety is prioritized.

3. Enhances Team Collaboration:

Effective teamwork is critical in healthcare settings. Psychological safety fosters trust and respect among team members, facilitating better collaboration and coordination. This collaborative spirit is crucial for delivering high-quality patient care and ensuring all team members' expertise is utilized.

4. Supports Continuous Learning and Improvement:

Healthcare is a dynamic field where continuous learning and adaptation are vital. Psychological safety allows healthcare workers to engage in honest discussions about what is working and what is not, promoting a culture of continuous improvement. This environment encourages innovation and the adoption of best practice.

5. Improves Job Satisfaction and Retention:

Healthcare workers who feel safe and supported in their workplace are more likely to experience higher job satisfaction and remain in their positions longer. This stability contributes to a more experienced and skilled workforce, which in turn enhances patient care quality and safety.

6. Reduces Burnout and Stress:

High-stress environments without psychological safety can lead to burnout, which negatively impacts patient care and safety. Providing a psychologically safe workplace helps mitigate stress and burnout, ensuring that healthcare providers can perform at their best.

7. Facilitates Patient-Centered Care:

When healthcare professionals are psychologically safe, they are better able to focus on patient needs and preferences. This patient-centered approach leads to more personalized care, better patient outcomes, and higher patient satisfaction.

Psychological safety is therefore essential for creating a healthcare environment where staff feel empowered to speak up, collaborate effectively, continuously learn, and focus on delivering the best possible patient care. This foundation not only improves individual and team performance but also significantly enhances overall healthcare quality and safety.

Unfortunately, psychological safety in healthcare organizations is often limited or absent due to prevailing, traditional, top-down, hierarchical organizational cultures. In this environment, front-line staff are afraid to speak up about safety issues for fear that they will be dismissed, stigmatized as “troublemakers” and experience negative impacts to their career and promotion prospects. Managers who maintain this top-down, hierarchical culture claim that increasing psychological safety results in an undisciplined minority of staff over-voicing personal and disruptive opinions.

These concerns can be mitigated with good communication skills and leadership strategies. Skills that need to be taught, because those in leadership roles who are internally promoted within a top-down organizational culture will tend to perpetuate it.

In healthcare, physicians should also be aware of the effect on psychological safety they have in committees and on multidisciplinary project teams simply because of their “physician” title. By default, society venerates its physicians as wise and intelligent. Their extended period of academic-focused, postgraduate education, and role in society as a healer of the sick, results in an aura of respect which accompanies them everywhere. This includes when participating in multidisciplinary teams where their medical expertise becomes less definitive and more complementary.

Jeff Bezos, the founder and CEO of the retail and technology behemoth Amazon, understands this. When attending meetings, he makes a point of always being the last to contribute to a discussion for fear that his opinion will seem like the final be all and end all of the matter and discourage further useful contributions from other meeting participants.

In multidisciplinary teams, including quality improvement teams, physicians need to be aware of the asymmetric power dynamic they generate simply by being in the room and change their behaviour appropriately. If physicians wish to encourage psychological safety in their teams, for all the benefits it brings, they should be aware of how they can undermine it unconsciously before weighing in with their opinions on autopilot.

By holding back, inviting others to contribute openly, and responding with encouragement, the whole team will benefit as will the care they give and ultimately the patients they serve.

If you'd like to learn more about psychological safety and the benefits it brings to organizations, try Amy Edmondson's excellent book *The Fearless Organization*, Wiley 2019.