

TEACHING WITHOUT FEAR

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY CAN ALTER THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING LANDSCAPE



BY JAMES G. MARTIN

After teaching for 10 years, Judith is respected by her colleagues and supervisors. She is hard-working and committed to continually learning and growing. But beneath Judith's calm and confident surface is fear.

She believes that the school is sometimes headed in the wrong direction and she and her colleagues will fail at the important work of educating students. She has lots of ideas about what might help the school

move forward, but she refrains from expressing them during team and faculty meetings because she has seen some of her colleagues get labeled as “difficult” when they have spoken out.

Frustrated by the current direction and intimidated by senior colleagues who tend to agree with it, Judith has considered changing schools or even the profession altogether.

Judith is experiencing a lack of psychological safety — a state in which people feel free to be themselves (Edmondson, 2019). This includes a

willingness to speak freely and engage in productive conflict without fear of retribution. In too many schools, like Judith's, the absence of schoolwide psychological safety compromises professional learning and the success of teachers and students.

SAFE ENVIRONMENTS ENCOURAGE LEARNING

Research comparing teams that are more and less successful has found psychological safety to be the factor that makes the biggest difference (Duhigg,

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2016). Similarly, Stephen Krashen (1982), in his studies of English learners, articulated a theory of the affective filter, arguing that children who are fearful of making mistakes will not learn what is necessary for them to learn.

Like students, adults need to be in safe learning environments that support risk to remove the affective filter and allow optimal learning to occur. They must feel free to admit when they don't know something, and they have to feel that their ideas will be listened to and taken seriously.

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Instead of focusing on being nice, we must exhibit radical candor, a concept started in the business community that lies at the intersection of caring personally and challenging directly (Scott, 2019). We must feel cared about at a personal level at work, and our colleagues must feel the same. But along with this is a need for honest and direct feedback. We have to be able

to tell our co-workers, and even our supervisors, when their work is meeting the standard and when it is not.

Radical candor is not easy, as I can say from personal experience. For many of us in education, the caring personally part comes easily, but challenging directly is more difficult. We often let important feedback discussions go because we are afraid of damaging the positive relationships we have built. Yet when this aspect of psychological safety is lacking, little deep learning occurs.

We need to change such environments. We have to be willing to offer ideas and have those ideas challenged and critiqued. We have to be willing to ask questions about our colleagues' data and acknowledge that we all need help. Withholding criticism undermines the Implementation standard of Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning, which cites the importance of giving and receiving constructive feedback. It can even be perceived as an egocentric act because it prioritizes our own comfort over the progress of colleagues or the larger organization (Scott, 2019). Failing to challenge directly inadvertently communicates to

colleagues that we don't care enough about them to be honest when their work is not meeting students' needs.

ACTIONS THAT PROMOTE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

One of the best ways to build psychological safety is for it to be articulated as a value. Leaders, before giving feedback, must ask for feedback themselves. Once leaders establish that it is acceptable to ask for and receive honest feedback, this will be easier to replicate in other areas of the organization (Edmondson, 2019).

Leaders must also be conscious of how they receive feedback. If individuals in the organization sense that the leader bristles at feedback, they may be reluctant to share opinions openly. This is a lost opportunity for the leader to grow. More importantly, this attitude has the potential to filter down into the organization, affecting general psychological safety (Edmondson, 2019).

Teachers can solicit feedback at the team level, such as grade-level teams or content departments. It will be easier for everyone to challenge one another in supportive ways if it is established as

a team norm. In fact, the best place to start with psychological safety is on a team.

Even within organizations where psychological safety is lacking, teams can foster a high degree of psychological safety because there exist various interpersonal dynamics across teams. Psychological safety depends on local leadership, which might be exercised more easily on a team within a larger organization (Edmondson, 2019).

STRUCTURES THAT PROMOTE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

In addition to individual actions, the types of systems and structures we create can have a profound effect on the level of psychological safety in schools.

One of these is a listening tour, about which I learned at the 2017 Learning Forward Annual Conference. A listening tour is a way for leaders to gather information from others about their perceptions of the organization's goals, progress, and performance.

During listening tours, leaders purposefully leave their offices and talk one-on-one or in small groups to stakeholders, actively seeking input and feedback. This is a simple but powerful structure. It shows the leader trusts stakeholders and demonstrates the leader's willingness to actively seek feedback even when it is not offered.

Another structure is assigning someone in meetings to be the devil's advocate. Devil's advocate has long been used as a description of someone who challenges the direction of the group. Assigning someone to this role can lead educators to break out of our unhealthy patterns of always expecting compliance and instead expect some dissension in meetings, especially where important decisions are being made.

This sends the message that we are not expected to always agree and that disagreement actually pushes us to make better decisions. It also models a skill we aim to develop in students — developing arguments — and lays the foundation for building a psychologically safe classroom learning environment.

Teachers should be empowered to bring the things that make them most human to their planning and instruction.

It is also important to normalize failure. Most of us try to avoid failure. But failure is a natural part of our lives, and acknowledging it is a way to accelerate learning. In recent years, many educators have emphasized growth mindset in our schools (Dweck, 2007), asking students to trust their brains' biological ability to grow and stretch. At the same time, many of us educators are not embracing or modeling growth mindset in our own practice.

Perhaps we worry that our students will have low test scores, that we will be criticized and lose our jobs. This is the very definition of a psychologically unsafe environment, and one we must change at the systemic level. The best way we can create an overall school culture of risk-taking, for students and adults, is to let people know that it is OK to fail, especially if that failure is accompanied by innovation and fast learning (Edmondson, 2019).

In addition, we need organizations that encourage educators to bring their whole selves to the work. Teachers can tap into their own interests and the interests of students to create project-based learning experiences that advance creativity (Cooper & Murphy, 2016). I have worked with many teachers with strong interests, for example in theater, whose classrooms show no signs of this passion. When we encourage educators to teach programs with fidelity while overlooking their individuality and creativity, this translates into passionless classrooms and passionless students.

Teachers should be empowered to bring the things that make them most human to their planning and instruction. After all, how successful can teachers be in honoring student backgrounds if their own are disregarded?

BEYOND THE BASICS

Psychological safety is a precursor to effective professional learning, the kind that goes beyond simple sit-and-get workshops. If we want teachers to continue learning and try something new, they have to be able to acknowledge when they don't know something. If we want teachers to reach out to an instructional coach, they have to be comfortable admitting the need for help. Spending the time necessary to build psychological safety is a worthwhile investment. Without that, it will be nearly impossible for teachers and schools to move in significant, sustainable ways.

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- James G. Martin (jimgmartin29@gmail.com) is an instructional coach in the Granite School District in Utah. ■**