



Helping people work better together

Psychological Safety

The Bedrock of Organizational Culture



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This white paper explores the critical role of psychological safety in building healthy organizational cultures and enhancing collaboration, outlining the solutions leaders need to understand, develop, implement, and sustain a culture of psychological safety. While psychological safety is paramount to fostering environments where individuals feel safe sharing ideas, asking questions, and challenging the status quo, a lack of psychological safety can have detrimental effects on workplace dynamics, employee well-being, and organizational performance. TIVC, an organization specializing in human enterprise optimization, has identified psychological safety as a key contributor to collegiality, teamwork, and mission success, reflected in the four-elements of our framework for psychological safety: inclusivity, curiosity, trust, and collaboration.

To help organizations increase psychological safety, TIVC has developed a holistic approach that improves and sustains an organization's psychological safety over time, making a long-term, positive impact on organizational culture.

TIVC's solution for increasing organizations' psychological safety includes baseline and progress assessment assessments, change management and strategic action planning, training, coaching, and developmental meeting facilitation. Our approach meets organizations where they are in their journey toward psychological safety, assisting in understanding current psychological safety levels and providing recommendations to create and enhance psychological safety through intentional leadership and inclusivity, curiosity, as well as trust and collaboration-building strategies.

TIVC's approach provides a robust, holistic solution set for organizations to assess, establish, optimize, and sustain psychological safety, fostering an environment where individuals can contribute, collaborate, and thrive. Through this comprehensive framework, organizations can enhance their performance, innovation, and overall well-being.

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INTRODUCTION

Research findings consistently reveal that a significant portion of the global workforce does not feel psychologically safe, leading to burnout, stress, and dissatisfaction^{1,2}. In a 2023 study conducted by Workhuman³, 48% of respondents reported experiencing burnout, 61% experienced elevated stress levels, and 32% felt lonely at work, all being associated with a lack of psychological safety in their jobs⁴.

Additionally, a 2021 study by the Workplace Bullying Institute⁵ found that an estimated 48.6 million Americans are affected by workplace psychological abuse.

There is now a growing body of research, including over 200 studies since 2020 alone, that informs our evidence-based understanding of psychological safety. This includes identifying factors that contribute to it and examining its implications for individuals, teams, and organizations⁶. The literature widely supports TIVC's view that psychological safety is crucial for understanding key organizational factors such as team performance^{7,8}, effective leadership, and ongoing organizational learning. Findings from this body of work also suggest that a lack of psychological safety poses significant risks to organizational innovation, creativity, and adaptability⁹. Low psychological safety can lead to more grievances, compartmentalization, and overall employee dissatisfaction, all of which negatively impact overall cultural health and the ability to reach strategic objectives. Organizations with low psychological safety also experience many issues which cause more direct financial repercussions such as costs associated with sub-optimal performance or higher turnover rates¹⁰.

In response to these challenges, workplace movements encouraging workers' rights to psychological safety in the workplace have developed. The End Workplace Abuse organization has, for example, introduced the Workplace Psychological Safety Act¹¹ aimed at securing workers' legal right to psychological safety in the workplace. The Surgeon General's recently released Framework for Mental Health & Well-Being in the Workplace¹², similarly asserts workers' rights to psychological safety in the workplace, emphasizing psychological safety's importance for ensuring individuals' mental health and well-being in the workplace¹³.

Enhancing organizational culture and ensuring a secure work environment can be achieved by organizational leaders prioritizing psychological safety, integrating it into the core of their organizational culture, and incorporating it into the organization's training and development strategy. Taking a proactive approach is beneficial as it can both increase key performance indicators and prevent issues before they occur.



PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY EXPLAINED

Benefits of Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is the shared belief within an organization that individuals can take interpersonal risks without fear of punishment or exclusion, which makes them more likely to speak up with new ideas, ask questions, express concerns, and take ownership of mistakes¹⁴. A psychologically safe environment encourages, recognizes, and rewards individuals for their contributions and ideas¹⁴. Psychological safety motivates employees to collaborate and share knowledge¹⁵, boosts their confidence to speak up with suggestions for organizational improvements¹⁶, and drives initiative toward innovation in developing new services^{17,18}. Research also suggests that psychological safety enables organizations and teams to learn more effectively¹⁹ and perform at high levels²⁰.

Psychological Safety in the Workplace

Psychological safety is the bedrock of organizational excellence and the foundation of a healthy, thriving workplace.

The outcomes of psychologically safe workplaces include a sense of belonging, a feeling of being valued, and the ability to contribute to an environment where mistakes are seen as opportunities for growth. In these environments, people can be authentic, innovate, and work together effectively, fostering team development and organizational excellence²¹.

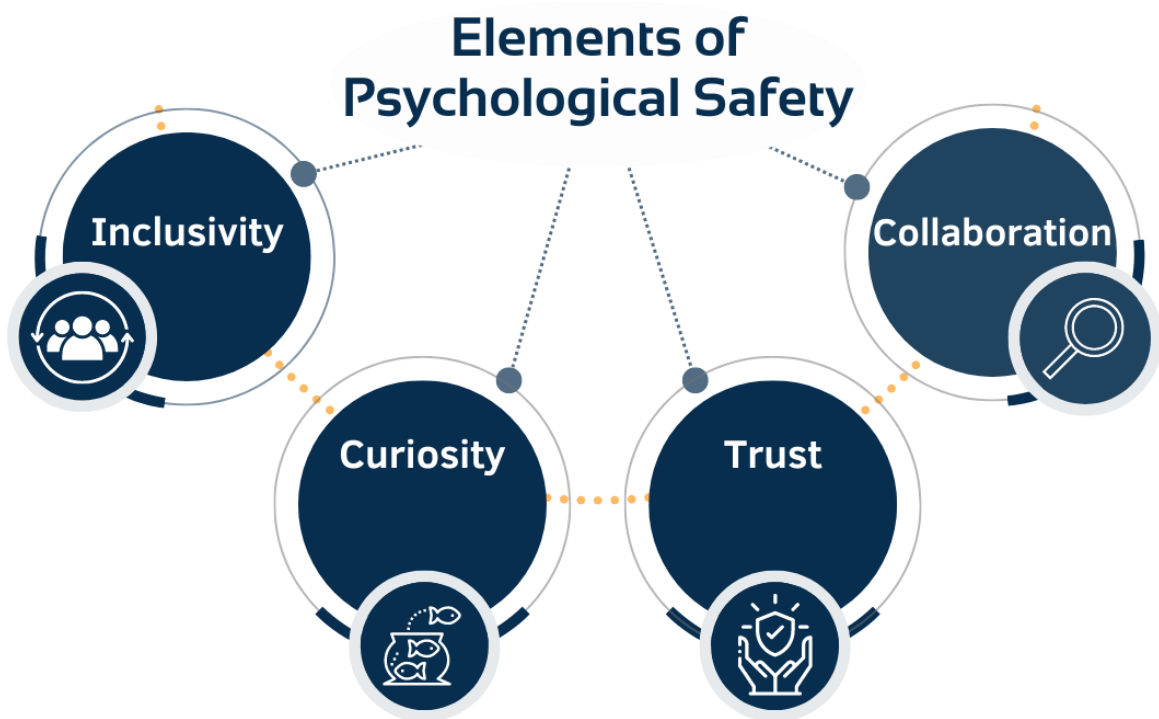
A lack of psychological safety hinders an organization's ability to stay relevant and succeed in complex markets. An organization's ability to innovate, develop new products, implement cutting-edge technologies, and formulate new strategies is critical to its' survival in competitive environments²¹. Psychological safety directly contributes to productive work environments by enabling teams to handle disagreements effectively and discuss difficult topics¹⁷. This openness encourages employees to share and experiment with new ideas, fostering innovation^{13,22}. The ability to constructively address conflicts creates opportunities for teams to enhance communication skills, develop resilience, and overcome challenges. In an ever-changing business landscape, psychological safety is essential for navigating uncertainties, facing challenges, and adopting new approaches²³. Fostering it enhances an organization's ability to innovate, adapt, and excel in a continuously evolving market.

TIVC's Psychological Safety Framework

TIVC's psychological safety elements are built on empirical research and assessment data. At TIVC, we first consider current levels of psychological safety through (a) the lens of leadership and the workforce and (b) the alignment between practices and the people they aim to support.

Our approach uses a four-element framework of psychological safety: **inclusivity, trust, curiosity, and collaboration**. These elements outline how organizations can create and enhance psychological safety by promoting a healthy and thriving organizational climate (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Elements of Psychological Safety



Leaders play a critical role and need to first model these elements for the rest of the organization. This demonstrates and fosters a psychologically safe environment for the collective team to engage effectively in, increasing their own psychological safety. These elements are critical to the foundation of psychologically safe teams, and it is up to leadership to set expectations, model the behaviors, and hold others accountable for doing the same.

Inclusivity



Inclusivity highlights behaviors and perceptions that align with a sense of belonging and a culture where people feel valued and empowered to engage, participate, and share their ideas, thoughts, and perspectives. Inclusion is a prerequisite for creating psychological safety, as it allows members to speak up, contribute, take risks, and be vulnerable in team settings²⁴. Team members who are included and welcomed in group and team settings feel more wanted and appreciated. This sense of belonging encourages engagement and leads to individuals more comfortably suggesting creative solutions and approaches in ways that can increase an organization's overall performance and adaptability^{25,26}. The effects also extend to individual-level employee satisfaction and personal growth by highlighting the value of their contributions²⁷.

When leaders exhibit more openness, accessibility, and availability, employees' psychological safety is significantly improved²⁸. Inclusion promotes an atmosphere that enhances employees' psychological safety and motivates both individual and group learning²⁹. The role of leadership in fostering such an environment is critical, as inclusive decision-making, active listening, and a commitment to diversity are key leadership behaviors that promote psychological safety³⁰. Understanding the intersectionality and diversity of teams is a crucial part of creating an inclusive environment that accounts for the varied backgrounds and identities of team members, further enhancing overall psychological safety³¹. TIVC has found that building psychological safety through inclusion creates an environment where differing opinions and perspectives are valued and leveraged to give organizations a competitive edge.

Trust



Trust is the degree to which individuals, teams, and leaders exhibit strong mutual confidence and participate in positive, respectful interactions, fostering an environment where psychological safety is prioritized³². It's closely tied to the belief that one's colleagues and leaders will support rather than undermine, respect rather than dismiss, and value one's contributions. Trust cultivates empathy and instills a mindset of positive intent, reducing power imbalances and encouraging honest communication. This, in turn, contributes to a more authentic and psychologically safe environment³³. Leaders and team members who trust one another are more likely to freely express thoughts, ideas, and suggestions without fear of being embarrassed, judged, or retaliated against. In doing so, they actively contribute to the foundation of Psychological Safety^{1,13}. A trusting team is more willing to be vulnerable with others, has confidence that they will not be harmed or put at risk by the actions of others, and is assured that their vulnerabilities will not be exploited^{34,35}. When trust serves as a core principle for group relationships, it strongly impacts the promotion of psychological safety. Compared with members at low-trust organizations, people in high-trust organizations reported 74 percent less stress, 50 percent higher work productivity, 13 percent fewer sick days, 76 percent more engagement, and 40 percent less burnout^{36,37}.

Curiosity



Curiosity is driven by motivation for continuous learning, openness to innovation, and commitment to valuing feedback⁶. This requires a willingness to take risks, embrace uncertainty, and engage with both intrinsic and extrinsic sources of motivation⁸. It also thrives on social interactions including collaborations, peer influence, and other social feedback loops³⁹. Environments that foster curiosity challenge conventional thinking and reject complacency, promoting a culture with healthy levels of dissent where questioning the status quo is a welcomed strategy for problem-solving and process improvement. By cultivating curiosity, organizations can fully leverage the innovation and creativity of their talent pool^{40,41}.

When leaders purposefully demonstrate curiosity, they set a powerful example that encourages other members of the team and organization to follow suit⁴². In these environments, team members feel comfortable and motivated to ask questions and are more open to others' suggestions, which contributes to more effective collaborations⁴³⁻⁴⁵. Asking questions with genuine curiosity invites others who might otherwise be more cautious to do the same⁴⁶. The adage 'there are no stupid questions' captures the importance of curiosity in making the workplace more psychologically safe. When leaders foster psychological safety and team members freely ask questions, they can more easily uncover insights and solutions that drive organizational success^{6,9,47}. This kind of leadership can transform organizational culture by cultivating an environment where curiosity thrives, leading to enhanced innovation, problem-solving, and employee engagement.

Collaboration



Collaboration supports psychological safety within teams and across the broader talent pool. By promoting open communication and mutual respect, it aims to break down silos, encourage engagement, and optimize the use of resources toward shared objectives^{13,48}. Many researchers use the terms, "cooperation", and "collaboration", interchangeably when describing climates that support dynamic relationships and psychological safety in organizational settings, but there are important differences between cooperation and collaboration^{49,50}. Cooperation is generally defined as working together to complete tasks⁵⁰. Collaboration has more to do with individuals being intentional about the act of working with others, where there is collective ownership over the outcomes, and the collaboration leverages collective talents and differences to achieve optimal results⁵¹. Cooperation is less intentional, while collaboration requires a deliberate focus⁵¹. Collaboration fosters psychological safety by valuing individual contributions and encouraging diverse perspectives within the team^{33,52}. This enables teams to work together more effectively and overcome barriers to effective collaboration. The relationship between collaboration and psychological safety is bidirectional. They influence each other, as collaboration fosters psychological safety, which in turn enables teams to collaborate more effectively^{13,53}. TIVC has found that when employees collaborate well, organizations experience higher employee engagement, lower turnover, improved performance, and increased organizational learning.

The psychological safety elements we outline involve intentional acts from all stakeholders within an organization. Leaders and managers model desired behaviors and hold others accountable for maintaining a psychologically safe environment. All members of an organization are responsible for contributing to and restoring psychological safety when it's lacking. When the work environment threatens organizational psychological safety, a team that collaborates effectively will be more resilient, and it is leaders and managers who set the tone and establish the necessary standards. By demonstrating inclusive behaviors, encouraging open communication, and addressing conflicts constructively, they can model and create a supportive atmosphere that enables teams to thrive. When leaders and management commit to maintaining psychological safety, it ensures that teams can remain resilient and sustain a positive work environment, even in the face of challenges.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

Because psychological safety is integral to a healthy workplace culture, fostering it requires an organization-specific, holistic solution. Shifting organizational culture is challenging, so leaders aiming to increase their organization's psychological safety must adopt a comprehensive approach, long-term approach rather than focusing on isolated or quick fixes.

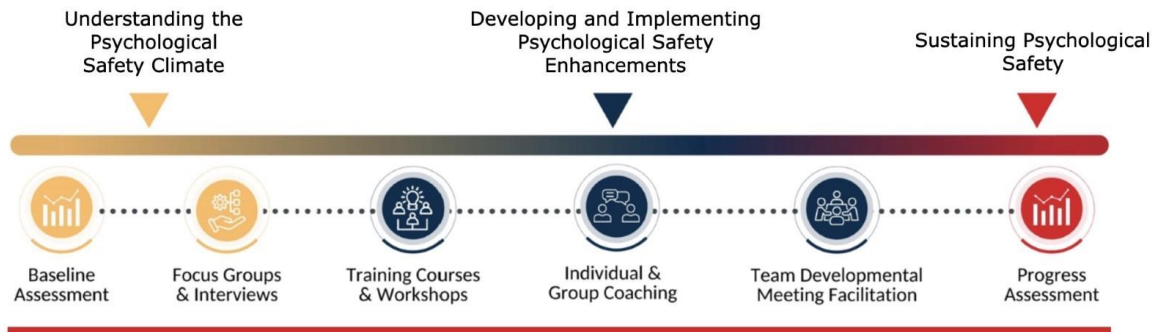
Leaders ready to create a long-term change by increasing psychological safety can address their organization's current state and develop strategies for progress by navigating these three interrelated stages:

1. **Understanding the Psychological Safety Climate:** Leaders assess their current psychological safety within the organization, identifying opportunities for improvement and areas where psychological safety can be enhanced.
2. **Developing and Implementing Psychological Safety Enhancements:** Leaders and team members are given tools to improve the organizational climate. They engage with training to develop new psychological safety skills and standards aimed at increasing the organization's overall psychological safety.
3. **Sustaining Psychological Safety:** Leaders reassess and continuously analyze the organization's psychological safety, recognizing successes and identifying areas for further growth. This ongoing stage ensures the development of a sustainable culture of psychological safety.

Across these stages of psychological safety development (Figure 2), leaders can employ several solutions, depending on the unique organizational needs and the psychological safety gaps. Through our robust

assessment process, TIVC identifies the appropriate solution set that will help leaders further the organization's psychological safety.

Figure 2. Stages of Building and Sustaining Psychological Safety



Baseline Assessment

For organizations beginning their journey to develop psychological safety, TIVC offers a baseline psychological safety assessment. It comprises 24 items, with 6 dedicated to each element of psychological safety. It measures these at the level of leadership and teams, identifying strengths and areas for improvement within the organization.

TIVC offers psychological safety assessments at Basic, Premium, and Premium+ levels, which provide increasing amounts of information. The reports can include segmenting by key organizational demographics and more sophisticated analytic approaches for generating insights. This assessment serves as a diagnostic tool to help inform the solution-set an organization needs to create, sustain, or restore psychological safety. Based on the results, TIVC works collaboratively with the organization to provide solutions that cultivate or improve psychological safety through recommendations, consultation, and/or training.



Focus Groups & Interviews

TIVC's team leverages findings from the baseline assessment to gain deeper insights through focus groups and interviews. The resulting qualitative data reveals the underlying drivers of the assessment scores, facilitating the development of targeted solutions.



Training Programs

Psychological safety training programs provide employees at all levels of an organization with an understanding of psychological safety and practical strategies for engaging with others in a way that fosters and supports psychological safety. With our programmatic approach to training, TIVC engages participants over time to build their skills in areas like communication, building trust, collaboration, and effectively leading a team to foster psychological safety. Additionally, we can evaluate an organization's or team's level of psychological safety throughout the training program to measure the impact of the training program. TIVC's psychological safety training programs help organizations to develop and sustain new psychological safety norms that create a long-term impact on the organization's culture.

In addition to psychological safety training programs, TIVC has curriculum in a number of other soft skills that support a culture of psychological safety. Soft skills like emotional intelligence, managing conflict, and cultural humility can be integrated with our psychological safety curriculum or provided separately, expanding an organization's capacity to foster and sustain psychological safety.

Finally, specialized training may also be appropriate depending on specific organization or team needs. For example, organizations that have a hybrid workforce benefit from training on leading sustainable hybrid teams and developing a psychologically safe culture for remote workers. Organizations struggling to fully integrate and cultivate engagement across a multigenerational workforce gain from intergenerational communication training. And organizations transitioning to a more positive work culture improve with interpersonal conflict training and change management programs, which support leaders and employees in finding effective new ways to handle conflict and change productively.

By tailoring our psychological safety training programs to address specific team and organizational challenges, TIVC targets our training program to the specific needs of participants. This customized approach allows us to make a positive impact and increase the culture of psychological safety over time.



Individual & Group Coaching

Because leaders are essential in fostering and sustaining an environment of psychological safety, individual and group coaching enhances overall team well-being and productivity. TIVC's coaching experts provide leaders with opportunities to address challenges and rethink limiting beliefs, enhancing their ability to foster psychological safety in their teams. Developing a culture of psychological safety may require changes in leadership style. Our coaching methods guide leaders in exploring and reflecting on how to best adjust, embrace, and lead within their evolving culture. Leadership coaching is especially

impactful when combined with other efforts to increase an organization's psychological safety, by supporting their change management, strategic planning, and training efforts.



Team Developmental Meeting Facilitation

To successfully sustain psychological safety, organizations can realign organizational practices, policies, and values to new psychological safety-centered norms. Team developmental meeting facilitation can provide organizations the support and guidance that makes systemic changes that improve and sustain psychological safety, including:

- Adjusting performance review processes
- Resetting meeting best practices
- Revising organizational strategy, mission, vision, and values
- Improving promotion processes

While commitment of leaders and team members to fostering psychological safety by establishing new norms and practices is important, it must also align with the organization's values. This alignment provides employees with autonomy and incentives needed for this culture to thrive.

Our expert facilitation services guide organizational leaders through a series of developmental meetings which explore and refine current promotion processes. By identifying ways to ensure the promotion process rewards and supports individuals who foster psychological safety, organizations can reinforce a culture of psychological safety effectively and sustainably. During developmental meetings, leaders engage in discussions facilitated by experts who help analyze and synthesize ideas, creating actionable documentation for implementation.



Follow-Up Assessment

The journey to develop psychological safety can have pitfalls, so TIVC offers organizations recurring assessments to continuously reaffirm psychological safety. By utilizing follow-up assessments, leaders can continue to gain new insights which help to shape values, norms, and practices, ensuring the effectiveness of sustained psychological safety. This helps organizations to attract and retain high performing, engaged employees. TIVC's evaluations and continued support in developing psychological safety sets leaders up for long-term success, sustaining the growth of psychological safety and improving areas that need attention.

CONCLUSION

TIVC's approach to creating and maintaining psychological safety provides organizations with a comprehensive, tailored solution to cultivate an engaged workforce and a culture that values every employee's contribution. We do this through a four-element approach to psychological safety: inclusion, curiosity, trust, and collaboration. TIVC's robust solution-set includes interactive workshops, training sessions, and continuous support programs that both generate and sustain the ongoing development of psychological safety. Incorporating the elements of the TIVC Psychological Safety Framework in your workplace ensures that employees feel empowered to share ideas without fear of judgement or negative repercussions. TIVC's dedicated team works with you to customize strategies and align with your organization's unique needs, ensuring that psychological safety becomes a core component of your organizational culture. Choosing TIVC means choosing to build a resilient, innovative, and collaborative workplace where every employee can thrive.



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