How Psychological Safety in the Workplace Affects Employee Engagement

15Five | Genevieve Michaels | March 04, 2026



95% of workers who feel psychologically safe at work say they're satisfied with their job. 61% of employees who don't have that safety feel tense or stressed out on a typical workday and 41% of them intend to look for a new job within the next year.

This data from the American Psychological Association's Work in America Survey shows the clear link between psychological safety and employee engagement. Employees who are less engaged are less productive, less likely to innovate, and more likely to leave your organization. When you make psychological safety a priority, you're not just building an environment where employees can share their opinions without fear of reprisal; you're building a healthier organization across every potential metric you can measure.

In this guide, you'll learn more about both psychological safety and employee engagement, and how you can improve both.

Key takeaways:

- Psychological safety in the workplace directly influences employee engagement and performance
- Employees engage more when they feel safe to speak up, learn, and challenge ideas
- The benefits of psychological safety in the workplace include retention, innovation, and trust
- Managers play a critical role in creating and sustaining psychological safety
- Measuring psychological safety with the right tools enables meaningful, lasting change

What is psychological safety in the workplace?

Psychological safety, a term coined by Harvard Business School professor Dr. Amy Edmondson, is "a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes." Team members in an organization that prioritizes psychological safety exchange ideas freely, ask pointed questions in meetings, and take the initiative when tackling difficult problems.

A team working in an environment with little psychological safety might avoid sharing their perspective, hide their mistakes, and focus on doing the minimum amount of work to meet their role's expectations rather than taking risks or innovating.

Psychological safety isn't about always being comfortable, always being nice, or never holding anyone accountable for their mistakes. In fact, a team in a psychologically safe environment may experience more conflict as its members take risks and push the envelope. But these conflicts are more productive, take less time to resolve, and leave people feeling like they're still working towards a common goal despite disagreements, rather than butting heads over competing priorities.

Similarly, a psychologically safe environment encourages accountability, as managers and employees alike are expected to own up to mistakes and take responsibility for their actions, knowing they'll find support for solving any issues they encounter.

Why psychological safety in the workplace matters more than ever

While an employee's right to psychological safety in the workplace hasn't changed, the way their workplace has transformed in recent years has made establishing that safety more important than ever.

More than half of employees with remote-capable jobs have a hybrid work arrangement, meaning they might only be in the office a few days a week. While these arrangements bring massive benefits in work-life balance, flexibility, and broader access to talent, they also bring some challenges. Addressing these challenges is more difficult in an environment without psychological safety, as neither employees or managers feel they can be completely honest and transparent.

Other changes, like widespread rollbacks of DEI programs and market volatility in many industries add additional pressures on employees and their wellbeing. Psychological safety is essential for employees to have the resilience and adaptability necessary to deal with a rapidly evolving workplace. It gives them the space to take initiative, take risks, and weather potential changes or transitions within the organization.

Low psychological safety affects the organization at large, too. A work environment with persistently low psychological safety often leads to increased employee turnover, lower productivity, and lower overall employee engagement.

That link between engagement and psychological safety is especially crucial.

The direct link between psychological safety and employee engagement

Employee engagement is an employee's intellectual and emotional connection with their employer, demonstrated by motivation and commitment to positively impact the company vision and goals. Building employee engagement is one of HR's top priorities, since it impacts productivity, turnover, absenteeism, and even the company's bottom line. While there are a number of ways to keep employees engaged, establishing psychological safety is vital to these efforts. That's because psychological safety fuels:

- Participation and idea-sharing, by making employees feel safe enough to take risks and make mistakes.
- Emotional commitment, since employees feel like the organization holds their health and wellbeing as a priority.
- Discretionary effort, by making employees feel supported enough in their day-to-day work to innovate and push the envelope.

HR teams typically measure engagement through an employee's motivation, their sense of purpose, their satisfaction with their work, and their drive to go above and beyond in their role. When employees don't feel safe at work, they're less motivated, they keep their head down, and their work doesn't feel like it has a purpose; it just feels like a thing they do. It's difficult for an employee to feel particularly engaged when they're not safe enough to bring their full self to work.

Creating an environment of psychological safety isn't just essential to improving employee engagement, it also ensures you have a more accurate measure of engagement throughout the organization. That's because high engagement impacts:

- Feedback participation: Employees who don't feel safe at work are less likely to participate in engagement surveys and similar initiatives.
- Survey honesty: Employees are more comfortable giving candid feedback when they feel safe.
- Team collaboration: Psychological safety encourages teams to communicate openly and collaborate to solve problems.

Benefits of psychological safety in the workplace

Increased employee engagement

The direct link between employee engagement and psychological safety means that efforts made to build that safety impact engagement. When employees feel like they can bring their full selves to work and take risks, they're more likely to believe in your mission and get purpose from working towards it.

Stronger collaboration and teamwork

Collaboration relies on team members being honest with each other, trusting each other, and taking risks together. Low psychological safety makes that kind of work difficult, while a safe environment encourages everyone to work together and hold each other accountable.

Higher innovation and problem-solving

Employees that feel supported—in both their successes and their failures—are more likely to take risks, which leads to greater innovation. Problems become opportunities for personal growth and dedication rather than just another thing to deal with.

Improved retention and job satisfaction

Employee engagement is an essential element of job satisfaction, and high job satisfaction reduces rates of turnover. By helping employees feel psychologically safe at work, you retain more talent and save on potential recruiting costs.

Better manager-employee relationships

When employees don't feel safe at work, it's difficult for them to have open, honest relationships with their managers. Trust and accountability are essential to these relationships, and they're easier to build when psychological safety is a priority.

The 4 stages of psychological safety

Psychological safety isn't something that can be switched on or off. It progresses through stages, representing the level of safety employees feel. Each stage builds on the ones before it, meaning it's essential to go through them in order.

Stage 1: Inclusion safety

At this stage, employees feel included and valued. This stage is the foundation for everything that comes after it, since an employee can't fully contribute to their team if they don't feel like they belong. Employees at this stage aren't necessarily the most engaged, but they're rarely disengaged.

Stage 2: Learner safety

Learner safety means employees feel safe enough to ask questions and make mistakes. That might mean speaking up in a meeting when something isn't clear, trying to fulfill new responsibilities, or even learning new skills. At this stage, employees are more engaged, and more likely to be motivated to try new things.

Stage 3: Contributor safety

At this stage, employees feel like they can go beyond just asking questions and actually contribute their own ideas and share their opinions. Their engagement goes beyond just feeling motivated; they're actually driven to contribute to your mission in creative new ways.

Stage 4: Challenger safety

Employees at this stage of psychological safety feel comfortable enough to respectfully challenge their managers and leaders, helping the company go beyond the status quo. This is where true innovation happens, and employees feel like they can truly contribute to your broader mission.

How to create psychological safety in the workplace

Model vulnerability and openness from leadership

Whenever you're trying to build new values into your company culture, leaders need to walk the walk. They need to show what psychological safety looks like, as well as validating the risks employees take and questions they ask as that safety is built. That usually takes the form of taking these risks themselves and making their own mistakes in public.

Normalize mistakes as learning opportunities

Employees need to see that there's nothing wrong with making mistakes before they can start learning from them. That means managers, leaders, and peers need to walk a balance between holding each other accountable for mistakes and prioritizing the learning opportunities that come from them. That can mean focusing less on the impacts of a mistake and more on how it can be prevented in the future.

Encourage respectful dissent and dialogue

A workplace where everyone agrees on everything isn't a psychologically safe one. Employees need to feel comfortable enough to respectfully disagree with leaders and managers on everything from meeting times to strategy. That disagreement can't exist if it isn't encouraged and framed by leadership. Management principles like disagree and commit can give employees the space and comfort to voice their disagreement without affecting a team's overall commitment or unity.

Establish clear expectations for communication and feedback

Psychological safety doesn't come from a laissez-faire attitude. It comes from clear boundaries and alignment on how teams communicate, share feedback, and work together. By identifying

clear channels for feedback and clear guidelines for communication, you can give employees a foundation for finding psychological safety as they express their ideas.

Promote fairness, inclusion, and accountability

Psychological safety can't exist when some team members feel like they aren't being included. DEI initiatives are essential to building psychological safety, serving as the scaffolding from which you elevate all team members to contribute equally to conversations and initiatives. Pair this with organization-wide accountability so everyone can feel like they're on a level playing field.

The role of managers and psychological safety training

Managers are on the front line of your psychological safety efforts. A single manager can make or break your initiatives, either contributing to their team's feeling of safety or damaging it. That's why managers need support from HR in developing the right skills, getting the right training, and soliciting feedback from their teams.

Psychological safety is a multifaceted pursuit, requiring a number of skills from managers to build and maintain. Skills like active listening, coaching, communication, and empathy are essential. They need to be developed within the context of broader psychological safety training, delivered on an ongoing basis. It's not something that's built in a one-off training session; it needs to be a key part of the support managers get.

Pairing learning solutions with data-driven insights from platforms like 15Five allows you to build clear links between manager enablement, psychological safety, and employee engagement. This doesn't just help you get buy-in from leadership for your efforts, but also allows you to adjust your initiatives as needed.

Measuring psychological safety and engagement at work

Psychological safety can't exist in environments where it isn't measured. Leaders and managers may assume that they've built a workplace that is psychologically safe, but these assumptions can hide issues that go completely unnoticed—as employees feel like they can't share their concerns—creating a vicious cycle where safety declines and no one can tell. That's why a system for measuring psychological safety is so essential.

Pulse surveys, continuous feedback loops, and the employee engagement metrics you're already measuring can all help measure psychological safety. You can add questions targeting specific psychological safety issues (e.g., "Do you feel like you can give your manager candid feedback?") or adjust the metrics you measure to build a clearer link between engagement and psychological safety.

Or you could rely on a platform that already does it for you.

Psychological safety as a strategic engagement lever

Psychological safety doesn’t lead to better communication and better job satisfaction. It has a clear link to employee engagement, which itself leads to more innovation, stronger collaboration, lower turnover, and more. Building psychological safety isn’t optional; it’s essential to every broader objective your organization has.

Doing this requires intention, consistency, and regular measurement to confirm the success of your initiatives—or adjust those that fall short.