

GLI EVIDENCE CHECK(TM) / ISSUE 03

Does Psychological Safety Reduce Accountability?

What research suggests about candor, interpersonal risk, performance expectations, and responsible accountability.

FREQUENTLY OVERSTATED

THE CLAIM

Creating psychological safety makes people too comfortable and reduces accountability.

The Short Answer

Psychological safety does not require leaders to lower standards, avoid difficult feedback, excuse poor performance, or protect employees from every uncomfortable experience.

It refers to a shared belief that people can take reasonable interpersonal risks - such as asking questions, acknowledging mistakes, requesting help, challenging an idea, or raising a concern - without being humiliated or punished for speaking honestly.

Research generally connects psychological safety with learning behavior, employee voice, information sharing, creativity, engagement, and performance-related outcomes. It is not sufficient by itself. Teams also need clear goals, appropriate expertise, sound processes, role clarity, and meaningful performance expectations.

THE BETTER QUESTION

How can leaders create an environment where people can speak honestly and remain accountable for high-quality work?

What Psychological Safety Means

Amy Edmondson originally defined team psychological safety as a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. These risks include behaviors that may expose someone to embarrassment, rejection, or damage to their standing within the group.

Psychological safety can make it easier for people to:

- Ask for clarification or admit that they do not know something.
- Acknowledge errors and request assistance.
- Offer an unconventional idea or disagree with a more senior colleague.
- Raise an ethical, quality, or safety concern.
- Give and receive candid feedback.

These behaviors are especially important when work involves uncertainty, interdependence, experimentation, or the possibility of consequential errors.

Psychological Safety Is Not Constant Comfort

The word safety can make the construct sound more comfortable than it is. A psychologically safe conversation may still involve learning that your work did not meet expectations, receiving corrective feedback, acknowledging a mistake, hearing disagreement, revising a decision, or repairing harm.

Psychological safety means these conversations can occur without humiliation, interpersonal punishment, or retaliation for responsible candor. It does not mean the conversation will feel pleasant.

A USEFUL DISTINCTION

Psychological safety reduces unnecessary interpersonal fear. It does not remove appropriate challenge, responsibility, or consequences.

Why Psychological Safety Can Support Accountability

Accountability depends on accurate information. Leaders cannot respond to a problem they do not know exists. When employees fear embarrassment or retaliation, they may conceal mistakes, avoid asking for help, withhold disagreement, or remain silent about emerging risks.

Psychological safety may support accountability by making it more likely that people will:

- Identify problems and report mistakes before they compound.
- Ask for help before missing an important commitment.
- Clarify expectations and challenge flawed assumptions.
- Share information needed for sound decisions.
- Participate honestly in reviews and accept responsibility without first protecting themselves from humiliation.

Research consistently connects psychological safety with learning behavior and employee voice. These relationships do not prove that psychological safety automatically creates accountability, but they show why interpersonal candor can be an important condition for it.

Accountability Also Needs Clear Expectations

Psychological safety cannot compensate for unclear standards. Teams may speak openly and still perform poorly if members do not understand what outcomes matter, who is responsible, what quality looks like, which deadlines are firm, how decisions will be made, or how progress will be reviewed.

Healthy accountability requires employees to know what they own, how their work will be evaluated, and how leaders will respond to both mistakes and recurring performance problems.

A Mistake Is Not Always the Same Kind of Failure

Situation	Appropriate leadership response
Reasonable mistake in uncertain work	Examine what happened, capture learning, and improve the process.
Capability or knowledge gap	Provide instruction, feedback, practice, or additional support.
Unclear role or conflicting expectations	Clarify ownership, priorities, authority, and decision rights.
System or process failure	Correct the conditions that made the problem more likely.
Preventable lapse in attention	Address the lapse, its consequences, and the required correction.
Repeated failure to meet a clear expectation	Use direct performance management and appropriate consequences.
Reckless, unethical, or harmful behavior	Intervene promptly and apply proportionate consequences.

Psychological safety does not require leaders to treat negligence, misconduct, experimentation, and system failure as though they were equivalent. It creates conditions in which the facts can be discussed accurately before responsibility and corrective action are determined.

Psychological Safety and Performance Standards

	Lower standards	Higher standards
Lower psychological safety	Apathy Disengagement or minimum effort.	Anxiety Concern for performance, but reluctance to speak or take interpersonal risks.
Higher psychological safety	Comfort Open interaction without sufficient performance discipline.	Learning and performance Candor, improvement, responsibility, and meaningful expectations.

This framework is useful for leadership reflection, but it should not be treated as a validated diagnostic measure or proof that every team falls neatly into one of four categories.

When Psychological Safety Is Poorly Implemented

- Leaders avoid corrective feedback because they do not want employees to feel unsafe.
- Agreement and positivity are valued more than responsible dissent.
- Every critical response is labeled harmful.
- Employees are protected from appropriate consequences.
- Speaking up is encouraged, but following through on commitments is optional.
- Leaders welcome ideas but become defensive when someone identifies a problem.
- Psychological safety is treated as an employee personality trait instead of a feature of the working environment.

Productive Accountability Is Not Public Punishment

Accountability is sometimes equated with surveillance, blame, public criticism, or punishment. These practices can create short-term compliance while making it less likely that people will disclose problems early.

Responsible accountability asks:

- What was expected, and was the expectation clear and achievable?
- What happened, and what information was available at the time?
- What did the person or team control, and what system conditions contributed?
- What responsibility should the individual accept, and what needs to be repaired?
- What support, learning, or consequence is appropriate?
- How will the organization reduce the likelihood of recurrence?

THE ACCOUNTABILITY TEST

Accountability should make responsibility clearer. It should not make honesty more dangerous.

What the Evidence Does Not Show

- Psychological safety automatically produces high performance.
- Psychological safety eliminates conflict or discomfort.
- Every interpersonal risk should be free from consequences.
- All mistakes should be celebrated.
- High psychological safety compensates for weak strategy, poor staffing, insufficient expertise, or unclear goals.
- Every team benefits from psychological safety in exactly the same way.
- Leaders can create psychological safety through reassurance alone.
- Psychological safety and accountability are interchangeable constructs.

Some research suggests that relationships between psychological safety and particular performance outcomes may be nonlinear or depend on the work being performed. Psychological safety should not be presented as a universal, stand-alone solution.

Questions Leaders Should Consider

1. Can employees admit a mistake before they know how the leader will respond?	2. Can someone ask for help without being treated as incompetent?
3. Can employees disagree with a more senior person respectfully?	4. Are quality and performance expectations specific and understood?
5. Do people know what they are personally responsible for delivering?	6. Are employees expected to raise risks before those risks become failures?
7. Do leaders distinguish experimentation, capability gaps, negligence, and misconduct?	8. Can employees give leaders unwelcome information without retaliation?
9. Are difficult performance conversations direct, private, and respectful?	10. Do leaders address recurring performance problems rather than avoiding them in the name of safety?
11. When an error occurs, does the review examine individual actions and system conditions?	12. Do employees experience accountability as clear ownership or primarily as fear of punishment?

THE BOTTOM LINE

**Psychological safety and accountability are not opposites.
Healthy teams need both.**

Key Evidence

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