

9 Steps to Foster Psychological Safety and Build a Risk-Aware Culture

If employees don't feel safe sharing their opinions at work, any risk management effort is doomed to fail. It's not always easy to foster a climate of psychological safety, a shared belief that it's safe to take interpersonal risks as a team. But it can be done, and it will strengthen every aspect of your nonprofit, including problem-solving and risk management. Here's how to begin.

- 1. Earn trust.** Leaders must first demonstrate that they trust their employees and their peers. They also have to earn the trust of employees and peers. This will take time, patience, and consistency. Leaders should spell out that they allow and even welcome honest mistakes, and there won't be consequences. They have to demonstrate that, time and again.
- 2. Step out of your comfort zone.** Our environments and our natures can make us jump to protect ourselves from a perceived threat instead of taking an important risk with the team. Learn your own tendencies and work to disrupt them. If you're a leader who worries that your executive team wants to bury bad news, get more perspectives from around the organization (and demonstrate to your execs that you can handle bad news). If you're an employee who feels surrounded by negativity, talk to more upbeat people in the organization and ask them about their views.
- 3. Get less reactive.** Most of us have programmed responses to unexpected situations. Maybe we feel threatened and lash out or shut down. Those responses can derail psychological safety on a team. Work to disrupt your own programming. If you need to, say you'll take a minute to think before you react to a new idea.
- 4. Treat disagreement as a gift.** The more perspectives a team can gather, including reasons why an exciting idea might not work, the more valuable insight they will have. Welcome and invite disagreement on your team. Cognitive biases often lead us to tune out the very person who seeks to warn us of an important danger. Listen!





5. **Say “us” or “we” instead of “you.”** Sometimes a disruptive employee needs to be corrected. At all other times, frame conflict using its effect on the team and the words “we” and “us.” This demonstrates that you’re working through an interpersonal challenge, not enemy fire.
6. **Don’t harp on failure.** Sometimes we all fail, including teams. Set the expectations that some experiments will fail, that failure is part of growth, and that it won’t involve punishment. Too much focus on failure can make people feel ashamed, which can lead to poor decision-making.
7. **Be human first.** When you see a co-worker take a risk, support them if you can. This can make individual team members feel less alone and contribute to the overall sense of support on the team.
8. **Visualize it.** Ask your team for examples of a time when they spoke up frankly, or created an atmosphere that allowed others to do so. Then consider upcoming meetings or projects that require a frank discussion of risks and benefits. Ask your team to visualize how you can create the right atmosphere for the discussion. Write down the strategies. Writing down learnings helps people internalize and replicate them.
9. **Don’t give up.** It takes time, effort, and consistency to cultivate psychological safety. You and your team will likely slip into old patterns over and over. When you see that happen, name it, and give yourselves and your team members grace. Remind yourself and each other why you’re doing this work, what progress you’ve made, and how the journey will benefit your team and the people and communities your nonprofit serves.



Helpful Resources.

[Safe and Supported: The intersection of Psychological Safety and Fruitful Risk Practice](#) - Nonprofit Risk Management Center

[4 Steps to Build Psychological Safety at Your Workplace](#) - Harvard Business Review