

## Psychological Safety – The Wrong Label?

In the many years I have been working with the concept of psychological safety, the only constant seems to be the confusion about what it actually means. Nearly half the posts on LinkedIn are about clarifying what psychological safety is not.

How is it possible that after all this time, we keep on reading about the misunderstandings and misconceptions?

When I am faced with questions or remarks that illustrate some sort of misunderstanding, I always faithfully reply with the definition – which is very clear and leaves no room for confusion:

“Team Psychological Safety is the shared belief by members of the team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking” [1]

But I recently realized where the confusion keeps on coming from: it’s simply from the label “psychological safety”. The definition Edmondson created is never actually used because it’s way too long; it is always reduced to simply “psychological safety”. I think that this is where the problem lies.

When someone encounters the term “psychological safety” they recognize two words they are familiar with:



### (1) Psychological

Oxford English Dictionary: “Of, pertaining to, or dealing with the mind; mental; of or relating to the science of the mind or mental phenomena.”

Etymology (Greek): pertaining to the study of the soul/mind

*psyche* → “soul, mind, spirit, breath of life”

*logia* → “study of, discourse about”

### (2) Safety

Oxford English Dictionary: “The condition of being protected from or unlikely to cause danger, risk, or injury.”

Etymology (Latin): the state of being uninjured or unharmed

*salvitas* (*salvus*) → “uninjured, unharmed, safe”

So it is not surprising that the label “psychological safety” creates images of comfort, stability, feeling protected and relaxed, not exposed to pain and with an inward focus on one’s thoughts and feelings.

Nothing in this label evokes the idea of courage, taking risks, disruption or uncertainty.

No surprise also that Google was blamed for hypocrisy when it announced massive lay-offs while promoting psychological safety at the same time.

And when we then try and explain that psychological safety means taking risks ... well ... we probably lose more than one audience member. The same Oxford English Dictionary defines “risk” as “(Exposure to) the possibility of loss, injury, or other adverse or unwelcome circumstance.”

In other words, “safety” is pretty much the exact opposite of “risk”.

Is it in any way surprising that there is confusion about what psychological safety – and in particular team psychological safety as coined by Professor Edmondson – really means?

Proposing a new label is not realistic but I do think that “safe interpersonal risk-taking” is a better, even if not so elegant, description.

It feels that we have no choice but to continue to face the misunderstandings and misconceptions of “psychological safety”.

Peter Cauwelier  
TEAM.AS.ONE

1. Edmondson, A.C., *Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams*. Administrative Science Quarterly, 1999. **44**(2): p. 350-383.