Psychological safety: talk is good, practical application better!

25.5.2024, David Fiorucci

Psychological safety, a concept often associated with Amy Edmondson in the 1990s, has become a cornerstone of modern management practice in businesses and organizations. It has never been so relevant as in these times of rapid change in the work environment, where employees' mental well-being has become directly correlated with productivity and innovation.

Definition and importance of psychological safety

Psychological safety is defined as the belief shared by members of a team that the environment is safe for interpersonal relations, self-expression and the admission of errors without fear of punishment or rejection. In the present context, characterized by financial uncertainty, the challenges of digitalization and health crises, it is essential in enabling teams to remain resilient, adaptable and innovative.

Research shows that work environments with a high level of psychological safety deliver better results in terms of performance, employee engagement and customer satisfaction. A study conducted by Google, entitled "Project Aristotle", reveals that psychological safety is the most important factor in the constitution of top-performing teams.

The role of senior managers and leaders

The role of senior managers and leaders is crucial in establishing and maintaining psychological safety. It all depends on them and the framework they create. Leaders must show that they value learning and transparency and are prepared to acknowledge their own errors to encourage constructive feedback. They must also be accessible and receptive, creating a climate of trust in which employees feel comfortable in sharing their ideas and concerns.

Practical measures for establishing psychological safety

Training and development
Businesses can organize training courses on communication, conflict management and empathetic leadership to help leaders acquire the skills they need to create a safe and inclusive environment. Regular workshops will also help teams in acknowledging vulnerability and establishing mutual trust.

Evaluation and feedback
Establishing ongoing feedback systems, whereby employees can give and receive feedback openly and anonymously, helps to set up a constant dialogue and make adjustments to the practice of psychological safety. Performance assessments should include criteria on how an employee contributes to a psychologically safe work environment.

Celebrating setbacks and learning
Encouraging people to celebrate setbacks as learning opportunities is another effective strategy. Events such as "fail fests", during which employees share their mistakes and what they have learned from them, can de-stigmatize failure and promote a culture of growth.

Inclusive policies and practices
Senior managers must ensure that a business's policies and practices promote equality, include everyone and provide protection against abusive or discriminatory behaviour. An inclusive work environment boosts psychological safety by validating employees' different points of view and experiences.

Examples of successful businesses
Businesses such as Pixar and Bridgewater Associates have made psychological safety part of their management practice. At Pixar, for example, "brains-trust meetings" at which frank and constructive feedback is encouraged have been essential in the production of innovative, high-quality films. At Bridgewater, a policy of "radical transparency" is intended to encourage employees to express their thoughts and challenge sacrosanct ideas, even those held by senior managers.

For companies seeking to navigate the complex modern business landscape, investing in psychological safety is not only advantageous, but essential. Senior managers need to take the initiative, modelling behaviour and attitudes that foster an open, inclusive environment. At the end of the day, psychological safety is not only a matter of well-being at work; it is a powerful driver of performance, innovation and long-term competitiveness.

The intention behind senior managers' actions

The intentions that lurk behind senior managers' actions and decisions are a crucial but often underestimated factor in boosting psychological safety. When managers' intentions are pure, positive and clear, teams get the message that their managers are acting in the collective interest, not for personal advantage or in pursuit of a hidden agenda. Such transparency greatly helps to create a climate of trust in which employees feel safe to express their opinions and dare to take risks.

To establish this level of safety, leaders also need to demonstrate that they are human, vulnerable and open. By sharing their own doubts and failures, they show that it is acceptable not always to have the right answers, and that failure is a natural part of the learning and innovation process. This vulnerability sets up an emotional resonance that also encourages team members to open up, thus strengthening the connections and mutual understanding established within the team. A leader who practices openness and shows humanity can transform the work environment, making psychological safety not only a well-meaning policy but a daily practice experienced and shared by everyone concerned.