Managing People

What Psychological Safety Looks Like in a Hybrid Workplace

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Summary.   Sorting out hybrid work arrangements will require managers to rethink and expand one of strongest proven predictors of team effectiveness: psychological safety. When it comes to psychological safety, managers have traditionally focused on enabling candor and...more

"Our office policy is that people should come into the office once per week. Now they are organizing a team meeting with 15 people. I guess some people seem to feel comfortable with that, but I'm not; I have a young family at home and we have been very careful. I can't say that though."

— Executive at a global food brand, shared privately

[To a colleague working from home] "We miss having you here with us in the office. We are seeing more people in the office these days, and it's really nice to have more people around."

— Comments made in a virtual team coffee chat

Since the pandemic changed the landscape of work, much attention has been given to the more visible aspects of WFH, including the challenges of managing people from a distance (including reduced trust and new power dynamics). But a far less visible factor may dramatically influence the effectiveness of hybrid workplaces. As suggested by the above quotes, sorting out future work arrangements, and attending to employees' inevitable anxieties about those

arrangements, will require managers to rethink and expand <u>one of strongest proven predictors of team effectiveness</u>: Psychological safety.

How New Forms of Work Affect Psychological Safety

Psychological safety — the belief that one can speak up without risk of punishment or humiliation — <u>has been well established</u> as a critical driver of high-quality decision making, healthy group dynamics and interpersonal relationships, greater innovation, and more effective execution in organizations. Simple as it may be to understand, Amy's work has shown how hard it is to establish and maintain psychological safety even in the most straightforward, factual, and critical contexts — for example, ensuring that operating room staff speak up to avoid a wrong-side surgery, or that a CEO is corrected before sharing inaccurate data in a public meeting (both are real-life psychological safety failure examples reported in interviews). Unfortunately, WFH and hybrid working makes psychological safety anything but straightforward.

When it comes to psychological safety, managers have traditionally focused on enabling candor and dissent with respect to work content. The problem is, as the boundary between work and life becomes increasingly blurry, managers must make staffing, scheduling, and coordination decisions that take into account employees' personal circumstances — a categorically different domain.

For one employee, the decision of when to work from home may be driven by a need to spend time with a widowed parent or to help a child struggling at school. For another, it may be influenced by undisclosed health issues (something Covid brought into stark relief) or a non-work passion, as was the case with a young professional who trained as an Olympic-level athlete on the side. It's worth noting that we've both heard from employees who feel marginalized, penalized, or excluded from this dialogue around work-life balance because they're single or have no children, often being told they're lucky they don't have to deal with those challenges. Having psychologically safe discussions around work-life balance issues is challenging because these topics are more likely to touch on deep-seated aspects of employees' identity, values, and choices. This makes them both more personal and riskier from legal and ethical standpoints with respect to bias.

We Can't Just Keep Doing What We're Doing

In the past, we've approached "work" and "non-work" discussions as separable, allowing managers to keep the latter off the table. Over the past year, however, many managers have found that previously off-limits topics like child care, health-risk comfort levels, or challenges faced by spouses or other family members are increasingly required for joint (manager and employee) decisions about how to structure and schedule hybrid work.

While it may be tempting to think we can re-separate the two once we return to the office, the shift to a higher proportion of WFH means that's neither a realistic nor a sustainable long-term solution. Organizations that don't update their approach going forward will find themselves trying to optimize extremely complicated scheduling and coordination challenges with incomplete — if not incorrect — information. Keep in mind that hybrid working arrangements present a parallel increase in managerial complexity; managers face the same workflow coordination challenges

they've managed in the past, now with the added challenge of coordinating among people who can't be counted on to be present at predictable times.

Strategies for Managers

Let's start with the fact that the reasons why managers have avoided seeking personal details remain just as relevant and critical today as they've always been. Sharing personal information carries real and significant risks, given legal restrictions related to asking personal questions, the potential for bias, and a desire to respect employee privacy. The solution thus cannot be to demand greater disclosure of personal details. Instead, managers must create an environment that encourages employees to share aspects of their personal situations as relevant to their work scheduling or location and/or to trust employees to make the right choices for themselves and their families, balanced against the needs of their teams. Management's responsibility is to expand the domain of which work-life issues are safe to raise. Psychological safety is needed today to enable productive conversations in new, challenging (and potentially fraught) territory.

Obviously, simply saying "just trust me" won't work. Instead, we suggest a series of five steps to create a culture of psychological safety that extends beyond the work content to include broader aspects of employees' experiences.

Step 1: Set the scene. Trite as it sounds, the first step is having a discussion with your team to help them recognize not only their challenges, but yours as well. The objective of this discussion is to share ownership of the problem.

We suggest framing this as a need for the group to problem solve to develop new ways to work effectively. Clarify what's at stake. Employees must understand that getting the work done (for customers, for the mission, for their careers) matters just as much as it always has, but that it won't be done exactly as it was in the past — they'll need to play a (creative and responsible) role in that. As a group, you and your employees must come to recognize that everyone must be clear and transparent about the needs of the work and of the team and jointly own responsibility for succeeding, despite the many hurdles that lie ahead.

Step 2: Lead the way. Words are cheap, and when it comes to psychological safety, there are far too many stories of managers who demand candor of their employees — particularly around mistakes or other potentially embarrassing topics — without demonstrating it themselves or without protecting it when others do share.

The best way to show you're serious is to expose your own vulnerability by sharing your own WFH/hybrid work personal challenges and constraints. Remember, managers have to go first in taking these kinds of risks. Be vulnerable and humble about not having a clear plan and be open about how you're thinking about managing your own challenges. If you're not willing to be candid with your employees, why should you expect them to be candid with you?

Step 3: Take baby steps. Don't expect your employees to share their most personal and risky challenges right away. It takes time to build trust, and even if you have a healthy culture of

psychological safety established around work, remember that this is a new domain, and speaking up about buggy code is different than sharing struggles at home.

Start by making small disclosures yourself, and then make sure to welcome others' disclosures to help your employees build confidence that sharing is not penalized.

Step 4: Share positive examples. Don't assume that your employees will immediately have access to all the information you have supporting the benefits of sharing these challenges and needs.

Put your marketing hat on and market psychological safety by sharing your conviction that increased transparency is happening and is helping the team design new arrangements that serve both individual needs and organizational goals. The goal here isn't to share information that was disclosed to you privately but rather to explain that disclosure has allowed you to collaboratively come up with solutions that were better not just for the team but also for the employees. This needs to be done with tact and skill to avoid creating pressure to conform — the goal here is to provide employees with the evidence they need to buy in voluntarily.

Step 5: Be a watchdog. Most people recognize that psychological safety takes time to build, but moments to destroy. The default is for people to hold back, to fail to share even their most relevant thoughts at work if they're not sure they'll be well received. When they do take the risk of speaking up, but get shot down, they — and everyone else — will be less likely to do it the next time.

As a team leader, you need to be vigilant and push back when you notice employees make seemingly innocent comments like "We want to see more of you" or "We could really use you," which may leave employees feeling they're letting their teammates down. This is a really hard thing to do and requires skill. The idea isn't to become thought police or punish those who genuinely do miss their WFH colleagues or need their help, but rather to help employees frame these remarks in a more positive and understanding way — for example, "We miss your thoughtful perspective, and understand you face constraints. Let us know if there is any way we can help…" Be open about your intentions to be inclusive and helpful so that people don't see requests for their presence as a rebuke. At the same time, be ready to firmly censure those who inappropriately take advantage of shared personal information.

It's important that managers view (and discuss) these conversations as a work in progress. As with all group dynamics, they're emergent processes that develop and shift over time. This is a first step; the journey ahead comes without a road map and will have to be navigated iteratively. You may overstep and need to correct, but it's better to err on the side of trying and testing the waters than assuming topics are off limits. View this as a learning or problem-solving undertaking that may never reach a steady state. The more you maintain that perspective — rather than declaring victory and moving on — the more successful you and your team will be at developing and

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