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Looking at Psychological Safety Through an Equity Lens

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As organizations strive to create psychological safety for everyone, team members experience different levels of psychological safety for different reasons. Companies that want to create equal access to psychological safety must address different needs for different people.

BY TIRZAH ENUMAH + MIKE ARAUZ

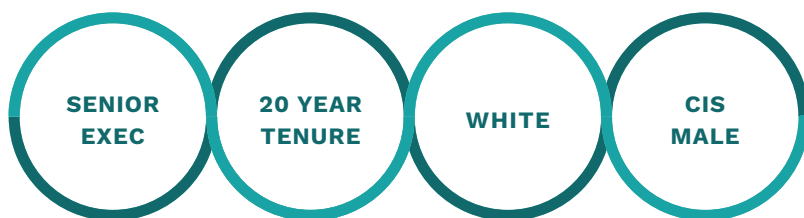
COVER:
THE AUGUST TEAM
BROOKLYN, NY

Psychological safety, as defined by [Amy C. Edmondson](#), is the belief that one will not be harshly judged or punished for speaking up with challenging or risky ideas. This is a critical factor in any team's ability to do their best work together. Studies from [Microsoft](#), [Google](#) and others have shown that a team's collective psychological safety is the #1 indicator of future team performance.

But the amount of psychological safety experienced by different members of a team is not distributed equally by default.

Societal, situational and cultural factors can deplete individuals' psychological safety in ways that are often invisible to members with more. This can result in vastly different and inequitable individual experiences within the same team.

COMMON IDENTITIES THAT
CONTRIBUTE TO INCREASED
PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY





While diversity of backgrounds is generally a requirement for breakthrough performance, particularly when seeking innovation, it is rarely sufficient. Diverse teams need the lubricant of psychological safety to ensure that their members ask questions and share ideas. Leaders, and other team members, play a crucial role in nurturing psychological safety through framing, inquiry skills, and a capacity to step in to bridge different perspectives. When this happens, teams stand to gain more than just performance benefits.

—**AMY C. EDMONDSON,**

AUTHOR AND PROFESSOR OF
LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT
AT THE HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL

Psychological safety is a team phenomenon, with team-based benefits and outcomes. But the psychological safety of a team is only as strong as the psychological safety experienced by the person who needs it the most. And the real catch-22 is the fact that that person is the least likely to speak up about it.

Rather than asking those who feel less psychological safety to bear the burden of addressing it, it's up to those who feel more psychological safety – leaders and those with socially privileged identities – to take responsibility for building it up for everyone.

Collaborative tactics such as asking everyone for their input or inviting participants from different teams and levels of seniority can be a good starting point, but they aren't enough. To build true psychological safety for everyone, we must approach it through a framework of equity and inclusion.

In this paper, we analyze various situational, cultural, and societal barriers that hinder individual experiences of psychological safety, and share a tool to help leaders and teams better understand how invisible power dynamics impact the team's potential. Our goal is to help you create conscious practices for building equitable psychological safety across the spectrum of lived experience within your teams.

Why is equitable psychological safety so important?

Diverse teams have proven business advantages over homogeneous ones. Diversity is linked to greater [innovation](#), better [market performance](#), higher [recruitment and retention](#), and increased [engagement](#) for both employees and customers.

But new [research](#) suggests that a lack of psychological safety can drag a diverse team's performance down significantly, sometimes erasing its advantage altogether. Conversely, high psychological safety can be the key to unlocking a diverse team's full potential.



TIRZAH ENUMAH,
E&I PRACTICE LEAD

Diverse teams have members who experience different levels of social privilege afforded by their race, gender, sexuality, and other identities, as well as different levels of structural privilege afforded by seniority, tenure, functional expertise, and other factors. These experiences shape each individual's sense of psychological safety.

For example, [a study by Melissa Thomas-Hunt and Katherine W. Phillips](#) found that women are unfairly judged as less expert than men, which damages their confidence and causes them to self-censor. Meanwhile, [the 2022 Women In the Workplace study](#) found that women are less likely than men to feel comfortable disagreeing with coworkers. And among racially diverse women, Latinas and Black women are also more likely than others to worry that they'll be penalized for mistakes.

If someone with less social privilege has spent their life feeling unsafe speaking out, they can't be expected to suddenly feel differently on a work team simply because its leaders profess it to be a "safe space."

Equity means fair opportunity and equal outcomes – not equal inputs. Equitable companies provide different things to different people based on their individual needs.

So, if we want the benefits of team psychological safety, we have to create individual psychological safety. And it's impossible to do that without an equity framework that addresses individual barriers.

Start by considering the cultural barriers within your company

The dominant behaviors, beliefs, and values of your organization create a culture that either inhibits or enables every team's ability to cultivate psychological safety. Your culture is the foundation – either strong or weak – for psychological safety at your company.

In her book *The Fearless Organization*, Amy C. Edmondson identifies three key leadership behaviors that build a culture of psychological safety:

1

LEARNING FRAME:

FRAME THE WORK AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN; ACKNOWLEDGE UNCERTAINTY AND THE POTENTIAL FOR FAILURE; CONNECT THE WORK TO A LARGER PURPOSE.

2

INVITING PARTICIPATION:

EXPRESS HUMILITY; ASK GOOD QUESTIONS; USE STRUCTURED PROCESSES THAT CREATE ROOM FOR EVERYONE TO CONTRIBUTE.

3

RESPONDING PRODUCTIVELY:

EXPRESS APPRECIATION – ESPECIALLY WHEN SOMEONE SHARES SOMETHING CHALLENGING OR RISKY; HELP PEOPLE LEARN FROM FAILURE; HOLD EVERYONE ACCOUNTABLE FOR SUPPORTING EACH OTHER'S PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY.

As teams take on new work and projects, leaders can build psychological safety by focusing on learning rather than on executing according to a plan. This encourages team members to speak up as they notice unforeseen obstacles. Leaders will create more engaged teams when they demonstrate humility, make space for all team members to share their point of view, and celebrate divergent and challenging perspectives rather than dismissing them.

If leaders want every team member to have a fair chance at psychological safety, they must start by assessing how the company culture is limiting or cultivating it.

Every day, in every work interaction, these cultural markers send signals to your employees that inhibit or enable their psychological safety.

INHIBITING**ENABLING**

RISK-TAKING IS A CHANCE TO FAIL

RISK-TAKING IS A CHANCE TO LEARN

FEEDBACK MEANS I DID SOMETHING WRONG

FEEDBACK IS AN OPPORTUNITY TO GROW

LEADERS HAVE THE BEST ANSWERS

LEADERS ASK THE BEST QUESTIONS

THE BEST IDEA IS THE ONE MY BOSS AGREES WITH

THE BEST IDEAS COME FROM EVERY LEVEL

WE LISTEN TO THE FASTEST ANSWER

WE MAKE SPACE FOR THOUGHTFUL ANSWERS



MIKE ARAUZ,
FOUNDING PARTNER

How do structural factors shape individual experience?

Think about all of the different teams you've been on, past and present. Recall the moments when it didn't feel safe to ask a question, propose an idea, admit you didn't understand something, or share your honest feedback.

What were the circumstances of your position in each of those situations? Consider how those circumstances may have contributed to your lack of psychological safety.

POSITIONAL AUTHORITY

WHAT WAS YOUR SENIORITY COMPARED TO OTHERS ON THE TEAM?

TENURE

HOW LONG HAD YOU BEEN ON THE TEAM OR IN THE ORGANIZATION COMPARED TO OTHERS?

HYBRID/REMOTE

TO WHAT EXTENT WAS YOUR HYBRID/REMOTE EXPERIENCE THE SAME OR DIFFERENT FROM OTHERS?

FUNCTION

HOW WAS YOUR UNIQUE EXPERTISE VALUED WITHIN THE TEAM? WERE YOU LEADING OR SUPPORTING?

These are structural barriers to psychological safety. They fluctuate with the conditions of each team and project, and can even change as you move from meeting to meeting in a single day.

Nearly everyone has experienced diminished psychological safety because of structural barriers. Since the discomfort is usually temporary, it can be easy to forget what it's like once it is over. This is why it's common for senior executives to claim that they have healthy psychological safety on their team and enjoy hearing divergent and challenging perspectives, while more junior members of their team feel the opposite.

These structural barriers, however, are only part of the answer to why different people may feel different amounts of psychological safety within different teams.



Inclusion is something we all want, but it can be difficult to put into practice. Psychological safety is an important concept with practical strategies to enact culture where people are invited in and valued. Using a DEI lens offers the additional perspective needed to deliver psychological safety that not only produces better outcomes, but unleashes the power of a diverse workforce or team.

—**LORI NISHIURA MACKENZIE**,

LEAD STRATEGIST, DIVERSITY,
EQUITY AND INCLUSION, AT STANFORD
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

How do social biases beyond the bounds of the organization impact individual experience?

Even on a diverse team, in an organization with a healthy culture of inclusion and belonging, bolstered by policies that promote equity and justice – even then, individual team members face barriers to psychological safety caused by systemic factors beyond the boundaries of the organization. Consider how identity-based biases create valid reasons for people to be fearful of speaking up.

IF YOU ARE A BLACK WOMAN, YOU MAY HAVE LEARNED FROM A YOUNG AGE TO WITHHOLD IDEAS THAT MIGHT BE SEEN AS CHALLENGING TO AVOID BEING UNFAIRLY PERCEIVED AS ANGRY OR THREATENING.

IF YOU ARE AN ASIAN WOMAN, YOU MAY HAVE EXPERIENCED A PATTERN OF BEING UNFAIRLY OVERLOOKED OR DISMISSED.

IF YOU ARE LATINA, YOU MAY HAVE EXPERIENCED BEING CALLED EMOTIONAL, WHEREAS OTHERS ARE SEEN AS SIMPLY PASSIONATE.

IF YOU IDENTIFY AS A WOMAN, YOU MAY HAVE SPENT YOUR PROFESSIONAL LIFE WATCHING WOMEN COLLEAGUES BE INTERRUPTED IN MEETINGS, AND BEING INTERRUPTED YOURSELF.

IF YOU IDENTIFY AS NON-BINARY, YOU MAY HAVE FACED BIASED COMMENTS ABOUT YOUR APPEARANCE THAT MADE YOU WANT TO AVOID CERTAIN TEAM MEMBERS.

IF ENGLISH IS NOT YOUR NATIVE LANGUAGE, YOU MAY HAVE DEVELOPED A HABIT OF SAYING LESS SO THAT OTHERS ARE LESS LIKELY TO MAKE UNFAIR ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT YOUR FLUENCY AND COMPETENCY.

IF YOU HAVE A HEARING DISABILITY, YOU MAY HAVE LEARNED TO MASK YOUR ACCESSIBILITY NEEDS TO MAKE OTHERS FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE.

IF YOU ARE SOMEONE WHO NEEDS TIME AND QUIET TO COLLECT YOUR THOUGHTS, YOU MAY HAVE GIVEN UP TRYING TO CONTRIBUTE IN FAST-PACED MEETINGS WITH MORE EXTROVERTED COMMUNICATORS.



A person's own negative experiences, as well as a pattern of negative experiences of people with similar identities, can be powerful blockers.

Some of the most common social and relational influences on psychological safety are race, gender, sexuality, native language, ability, and personality. These aspects of identity overlap and combine to create unique experiences for every person.

Understand how these barriers intersect

If we want to create equitable psychological safety at the individual level, we need to attune to the ways in which barriers resulting from organizational culture, structure, and social biases combine to create a vast and dynamic range of individual experiences.

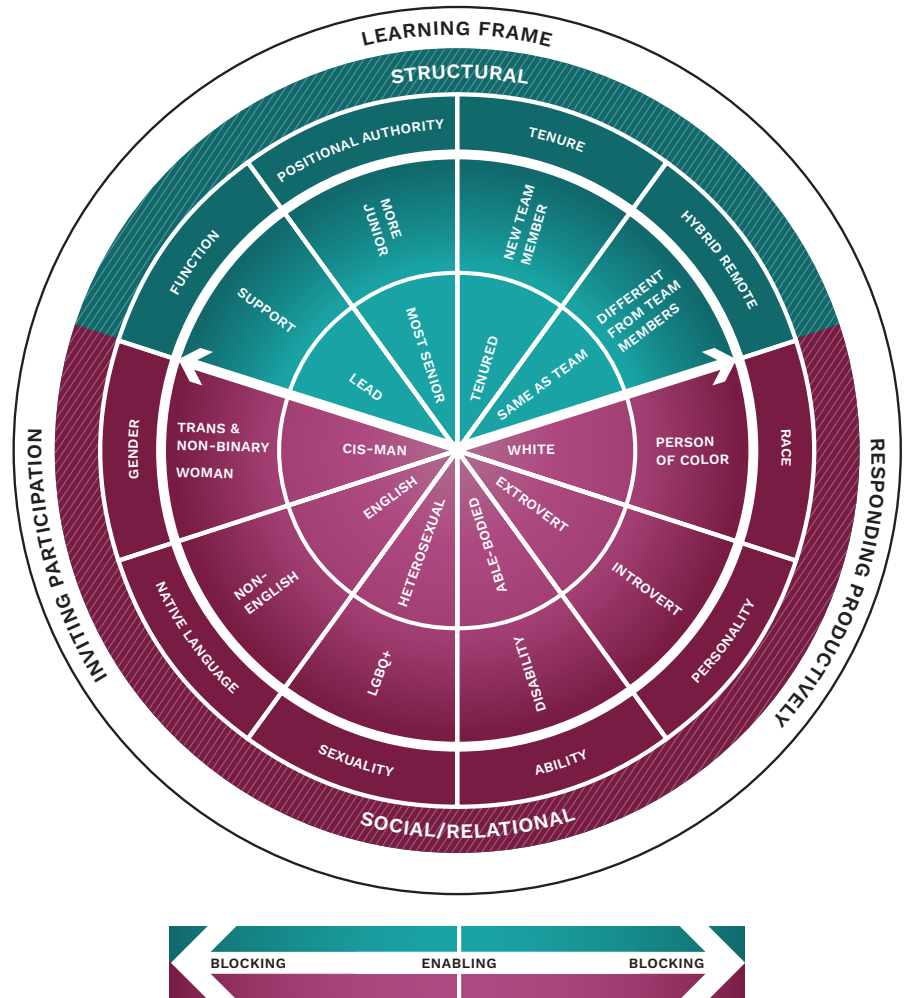
While an organization may have a healthy learning culture, a brand new team member may still be unsure how their perspective will be received. A woman of color may be overly cautious about voicing a dissenting opinion, even if she is more senior. A remote team member who is also not a native English speaker may struggle to speak up when they are the only person on video.

On the next page is the **Equity Lens for Psychological Safety**. This tool is best used to diagnose your own experience of psychological safety, and to begin to understand how other team members' identities may create a different experience from your own.

Equity Lens for Psychological Safety

Team & Org Culture

This chart maps out how different factors influence a person's individual experience of psychological safety. Around the outside, the organizational culture sets a foundation. The more someone identifies closer to the center of the circle, the more psychological safety they experience. The more they identify closer to the edges of the circle, the more difficult it will be for them to experience psychological safety.



USING THE EQUITY LENS FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY:

1 LOOK AT THE DIFFERENT INFLUENCES, AND CONSIDER HOW YOUR DIFFERENT IDENTITIES EITHER ENABLE OR BLOCK PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY FOR YOU.

2 WITHIN YOUR TEAM, HOW EASY OR HARD IS IT FOR DIFFERENT PEOPLE TO FEEL SAFE SPEAKING UP AND SHARING CONCERNS, QUESTIONS AND IDEAS?

3 WHEN YOU CONSIDER DIFFERENT IDENTITIES OF OTHER MEMBERS OF YOUR TEAM, HOW MIGHT THEIR NEEDS FOR ENABLING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY BE DIFFERENT FROM YOUR OWN?



JESSIE PUNIA,
PRESIDENT AND PARTNER

Diversity is essential to building successful organizations today and into the future. Psychological safety is a critical driver of team performance. As teams become more diverse, organizational success depends on creating a culture where every team member can experience psychological safety. This work begins with understanding our own experiences and empathizing with the experiences of others.

Takeaways

Every team member's ability to contribute is shaped by how organizational culture, structural identities, and social/relational identities either enable or block their psychological safety.

THESE IDENTITIES INTERSECT IN WAYS THAT CREATE A UNIQUE EXPERIENCE FOR EACH PERSON.

TO ENSURE THAT ALL TEAM MEMBERS HAVE EQUITABLE ACCESS TO PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY, TEAMS AND ORGANIZATIONS NEED TO UNDERSTAND HOW TO MEET THE DIFFERENT NEEDS OF DIFFERENT PEOPLE.

LEADERS, AND PEOPLE WHOSE IDENTITIES ENABLE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY, HAVE A SPECIAL RESPONSIBILITY TO ATTUNE THEIR BEHAVIOR TO OVERCOME THE RELATIVE BARRIERS THAT OTHER TEAM MEMBERS MAY FACE.

UNDERSTANDING HOW OUR OWN IDENTITIES ENABLE OR BLOCK PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY, AND HOW OUR EXPERIENCE MAY BE DIFFERENT FROM OTHERS, WILL BECOME A FOUNDATION FOR BUILDING A THRIVING CULTURE OF EQUITY AND INCLUSION.

About August

August Public Inc. is an organization transformation consultancy and Certified B-Corp and that helps companies transition to more agile, open, and human-centered ways of working. Our business was founded on the belief that today's most valuable work depends on leaders and teams who are capable of learning and adapting fast enough to realize their purpose. We help our partners meet this challenge, in the midst of a constantly shifting world, with our unique focus on simple, practical change and radical inclusion.

Our values at August are team, equity, learning, public benefit, and joy. We strive to embody these values in every project and in every partnership.

Authors



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Tirzah is a mission-driven leader, thoughtful advisor, and experienced facilitator who is passionate about empowering others, especially the most marginalized among us, to become economically secure, fulfilled, healthy, and happy. For over a decade, Tirzah has led work on topics including diversity, equity, and inclusion, organizational culture change, talent development, and staff learning in the public and nonprofit education sectors. At August, Tirzah helps organizations and teams center equity, foster belonging, and amplify their impact to make our world better.



Mike Arauz, Founding Partner, mike@aug.co

Mike is a trusted advisor to leaders of global organizations looking to transform the way they work. Passionate about undoing obsolete ways of working and organizing, Mike has had the privilege of partnering with Fortune 500 companies to build a model that is better suited for the 21st century. A sought out speaker and thought leader, Mike is a co-author of the Responsive.org manifesto and a leading contributor to the global self-management and future of work movement.

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