Our Workplace: Psychologically Safe or Harmful?

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I began writing a monthly article to be posted on my website 24 years ago. As any long-time readers can attest, there are several themes that I continue to address. I consider them to be "timeless," as significant now as they were decades ago. While they may be influenced by current events, their basic principles remain steadfast.

As one example, I have been writing about nurturing resilience in ourselves and others (children, students, patients, employees) for more than 35 years. During that time, noteworthy situations have emerged that impact significantly on our daily lives, including the growth of the internet, the occurrence of terrorist attacks such as 9/11, and the presence of the coronavirus with its many ramifications. Yet, the components of a "resilient mindset" and strategies for promoting a resilient lifestyle that my colleague Sam Goldstein and I described more than 20 years ago in our books *Raising Resilient Children* and *The Power of Resilience* (the latter examines resilience in our adult lives into our senior years) remain the same. If anything, while the specific guideposts and techniques we proposed to reinforce resilience have not changed, their application has assumed greater urgency. This is evident in the well-documented increase in anxiety, depression, and mental health issues in all age groups in recent years.

Another major topic I have examined on numerous occasions in my monthly articles and presentations focuses on the workplace environment. I have written about the emotional culture of an organization, effective leadership, the impact of bullying, factors that contribute to job satisfaction or dissatisfaction, and employee engagement or disengagement. In addition, I have emphasized that while workplaces differ—manufacturing, sales, entertainment, schools, colleges, hospitals, research labs, corporations, and law firms to list just a few—common staff issues and relationships are found in all.

The Significance of "Psychological Safety"

In December, 2019 I spotlighted the concept of "psychological safety," a concept first described by Dr. Amy Edmondson, a professor at Harvard Business School and author of *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth.* In the 2019 article, I cited an interview conducted by Martha Lagace with Edmondson that was posted on-line.

In this interview, Edmondson provided the following description of a psychologically safe workplace: "Individuals feel they can speak up, express their concerns, and be heard . . . , People are not full of fear, and not trying to cover their tracks to avoid being embarrassed or punished. We're willing to accept that we can be ignorant about some things and very smart about others. Psychologically safe employees are more interested in learning, excellence, and genuinely connecting with others than in looking good." Edmondson also stressed that psychological safety helps to create a climate in which diversity, inclusion, and a sense of belonging can thrive.

My posting of articles that pertain to the workplace has elicited candid comments from readers about their own experiences. While some have spoken glowingly of their experiences at work, many have not. In contrast to Edmondson's description of "not full of fear," some expressed being anxious at work, fearful of offering suggestions, and having supervisors/managers who spent most of their time being critical rather than supportive.

One woman wrote, "My supervisor's philosophy is that if someone does something right, it's expected so nothing has to be said, but if someone makes a mistake, they deserve to be criticized." She added that the criticism often transpires in front of others.

A man observed, "Dr. Brooks, you've written of different kinds of emotional cultures, including some filled with joy and collaboration in which empathy and kindness are expressed. Those qualities are sorely lacking where I work. If I could find another job, I would."

A woman described a very negative work environment dominated by jealousy and anger. She then said these negative emotions were ironic since she was a therapist at a mental health agency. "You would assume that clinicians who are trained to be empathic and supportive would not engage in power struggles and petty arguments. But that's not true at my agency. It's demoralizing and I can't help but believe that our emotions have a negative impact on our clients even if we attempt to be more positive with them."

A middle school teacher came up to speak with me privately following one of my workshops, a workshop during which I shared research of the importance of creating positive emotions as a foundation for strengthening learning, motivation, and caring in students. He said that he had previously worked at a middle school in which staff and administrators supported each other. "I can honestly say that even with the challenges we faced, I looked forward to

coming to school each day." He added that a family commitment necessitated a move to another state and he began working at his current school several months ago.

"It's like night and day when comparing my previous school with this one. Staff are so unhappy here. I don't even like to go into the staff room since all I hear are complaints about our responsibilities, our students, or their parents. I've attempted to bring up more positive things that we can focus on, but I'm met with skepticism. One of the other teachers accused me of being Pollyannish. Quite honestly, at this point I don't have the necessary energy to bring up new ideas. I don't even feel safe doing so. I realize that I've probably become part of the problem rather than part of the solution and that makes me feel even more depressed."

Similar to the therapist in the previous example who was aware that the negativity of the staff was impacting on clients, this teacher expressed, "And I know that our students must pick up on the staff's emotions, which probably reinforces negative feelings they have about school."

In stark contrast to these examples of negativity, it's always reassuring to hear people describe their workplaces in the following ways:

"I love working here and could not think of any other place I would rather be."

"While I was dealing with treatment for cancer, I exhausted all of my sick days. I get emotional when I think about what others at work did for me. My boss and colleagues arranged with human resources for each of them to transfer several of their own sick days to me. So many contributed that I had an extra six weeks, which was enough to bring me through my treatment."

A custodian at a high school who was near retirement reported, "I graduated from this school and after serving in the military, I came to work here more than 40 years ago. My kids also went here and my first grandchild is here now. I love this place. People always tell me how much they appreciate the things I do. It's easy to do these things for people who you care about because they care about you. It feels like we're all part of one family."

I was reminded of these examples of negative and positive work experiences as well as of psychological safety while reading a recently posted article by Amy Gallo in which she interviewed Edmondson. Gallo identified what prompted Edmondson to study and introduce the concept of psychological safety. She was conducting research exploring the relationship between errors made and teamwork in hospitals. She expected that teams judged to be effective would make fewer errors. Instead, she discovered that better teamwork was associated with more errors. But why?

Edmondson reasoned, as she studied the data more closely, that effective working teams might be more open to reporting their mistakes because they felt safe doing so. Follow-up studies confirmed this hypothesis. Gallo reported, “Psychological safety leads to team members feeling more engaged and motivated, because they feel that their contributions matter and that they’re able to speak up without fear of retribution. It can lead to better decision-making as people feel more comfortable voicing their opinions and concerns, which often leads to a more diverse range of perspectives being heard and considered. It can foster a culture of continuous learning and improvement, as team members feel more comfortable sharing their mistakes and learning from them.”

Gallo outlined the significant downside that occurs in the absence of psychological safety. Such an absence results in “negative impacts on employee well-being, including stress, burnout, and turnover, as well as on the overall performance of the organization.”

A Survey and Strategies to Promote Psychological Safety

To assist teams and groups in assessing their level of psychological safety, Edmondson developed a survey that includes seven questions to which a respondent is asked whether they agree or disagree.Two examples from the survey are:

“If you make a mistake on this team, it is often held against you.”

“It is difficult to ask other members of this team for help.”

Edmondson cautioned that individuals completing the survey are doing so “in a way that is relative to their expectations. For example, if I say ‘yes, I can ask for help’ I’m doing that relative to what I think it ‘ought’ to be.” She explained that the data are best used by those in leadership positions as a resource to begin to discuss with their teams what changes should be made to improve psychological safety in their organization.

Gallo wrote that the steps taken to create psychological safety represent good management practices such as: “establishing clear norms and expectations so there is a sense of predictability and fairness; encouraging open communication and actively listening to employees; making sure team members feel supported; and showing appreciation and humility when people do speak up.”

One leadership tactic to promote psychological safety that I have found impactful was described by Gallo’s as “admit your own fallibility.” While to some this may sound obvious, it is not an easy task for many leaders. Gallo stated, “If you, as a leader, can own up to and

demonstrate how you've learned from your mistakes, it paves the way for others. It's important to model the behavior you want to see in your team and normalize vulnerability. This includes things like being respectful, open to feedback, and willing to take risks." I might add that displaying this kind of leadership attribute is equally relevant in our roles as parents and teachers.

Questions to Consider

It is often my practice to pose questions related to the main concept I am discussing. My goal is to encourage us to reflect upon and initiate actions that support the application of this concept in our daily lives. In concluding this column, the following are a selection of such questions related to psychological safety (given my many workshops and consultations in schools, several of the questions are specifically about the school environment—you can change the wording of any of the questions to make them more relevant to your setting):

"What is something someone said or did in your workplace that promoted a sense of psychological safety?"

"What is something someone said or did in your workplace that lessened a sense of psychological safety?"

"What is something you said or did in your workplace to promote a sense of psychological safety?"

"What is one thing you plan to say or do in your workplace to promote a sense of psychological safety?"

"What is something someone said or did when you were a child or teen that promoted a sense of psychological safety in your home?"

"What is something someone said or did at school when you were a student that promoted a sense of psychological safety?"

"What is something someone said or did at school when you were a student that lessened a sense of psychological safety?"

"If a teacher, what do you intentionally say or do to promote a sense of psychological safety with your students?"

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