

Build Psychologically Safe Accountability

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Research indicates that the highest functioning organizations and teams have a higher rate of errors and make more mistakes. Why? Because they aren't afraid to talk about, and learn from, mistakes. [Amy Edmondson](#), author of *The Right Kind of Wrong* and *The Fearless Organization*, describes team psychological safety as: 'a shared belief held by members of a team that it's OK to take risks, to express their ideas and concerns, to speak up with questions, and to admit mistakes — all without fear of negative consequences'. Similarly, [Timothy Clark](#), author of *The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety*, defines psychological safety as 'a culture of rewarded vulnerability'.

What does day-to-day psychological safety look like? Let's say that someone makes a minor mistake, such as forgetting to submit an abstract for an upcoming APS conference by the deadline. The person informs their peer, the co-presenter, without fear. The conversation may go something like this on a Thursday when they say, *"Oh no! I forgot to send the presentation abstract to the conference planning committee on Monday, which was the deadline. I'll do it now with apologies for the delay as entirely my fault and will cc you."* The peer might then respond with, *"Okay. Thank you for letting me know."* The rewarded vulnerability? The peer not overreacting, shaming or blaming the person for the mistake.

Psychological Safety does not mean that we don't hold ourselves or others accountable. While the scenario above indicates an isolated mistake, the peer might have had a different response if there had been a pattern of behavior of not completing tasks. For example, if there has been a pattern of not submitting abstracts or presentations in a timely fashion, the peer may respond with, *"Thank you for letting me know. Let's meet sometime in the next week to discuss how we might to keep better track of deadlines."* Rather than becoming upset or avoiding the issue, the peer can create a learning opportunity supported by psychologically safe accountability, being clear about expectations and not reacting with anger or retribution.

Creating a culture of rewarded vulnerability requires both *modeling* and *rewarding* acts of vulnerability. The best leaders talk about their mistakes, what they learned from them, and make it safe for others to learn and grow. All of us can create more psychological safety at work by valuing honesty over perfection, learning from errors, acknowledging individual and team efforts, and offering a proactive way forward after a mistake is made.

To learn more about psychological safety and specific ways to build healthy culture at APS, consider viewing the Webinar [Build Psychological Safety at APS](#). For Ombuds confidential, informal assistance regarding discrimination or harassment related issues at APS and non-APS events, contact Elisa Enriquez at ombudsenriquez@mccammongroup.com.

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