Breaking the Chain of Command

Improving Physical Safety Through Psychological Safety

Contents

Introduction

Improving Physical Safety Through Psychological Safety

The United Nations estimates that 7,500 people die every day due to unsafe and unhealthy working conditions. That's 2.8 million deaths from occupational accidents and work-related diseases each year. That's more deaths than from road accidents, war, violence, and HIV/AIDS combined. Another 374 million workers sustained non-fatal injuries and accidents in the workplace.

In the United States, alone, a worker died every 101 minutes in 2021. According the the Bureau of Labor Statistics, that's an increase of 8.9% from 2020. That's not just a number, that's 5,190 lives lost in a single year. How many of them could have been prevented? And why were they lost in the first place?

Most people would point to disregard of safety procedures as the root cause of the catastrophe. Sure, sometimes injuries and crises occur because of equipment failure and mistakes, but oftentimes they're made because of oversight and a fear of speaking up when something goes wrong. In many cases, that negligent behavior is actually a symptom of cultural problems rooted in distrust, disengagement, and fear.

In this guide, we make the case that psychological safety is the key to creating a true culture of accident and injury prevention. Unless workers act as active and vigilant participants in monitoring and managing the environment, workplace safety follows the pattern of a breakdown system rather than a preventive or predictive system. You simply can't fix what you don't know is broken. With psychological safety as the central enabling condition, workers are much more likely to voice concerns and problems before they turn into accidents, injuries, and deaths. Especially in industries where lives are on the line, you can't afford to entertain psychologically unsafe conditions.

What is Safety?

The 4 Hazard Categories

Ergonomic

Biological — **?** — Chemical

Physical
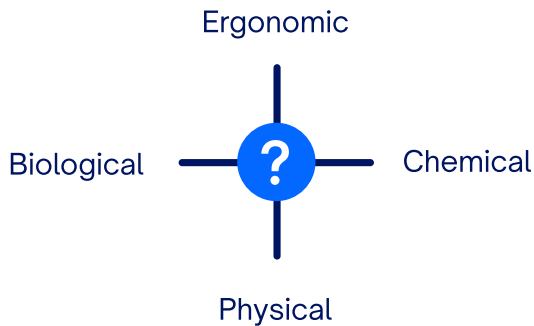
For more than two centuries, we have classified hazards into four tangible categories:

Ergonomic hazards are workplace situations that cause wear and tear on the body and can cause injury.

Chemical hazards relate to factors associated with storing, using, and disposing of hazardous chemical materials.

Physical hazards refer to anything that hurts employees' bodies, even indirectly, including extreme temperatures, radiation exposure, and excessive noise.

Biological hazards are usually associated with industries that work with people, animals, or infectious plant materials.

Physical Safety High-Hazard Industries

Wholesale & Retail Trade	Agriculture	Mining	Transportation & Warehousing
Water & Remediation Services	Manufacturing	Construction	Healthcare & Social Assistance

(High hazard industries are those classified by NAICS Code with 200% of private sector average injury rates)

Regulation & Workplace Safety

Organizations have a "duty of care" and moral obligation to provide preventative measures and procedures to protect their employees who face these hazards every day. Their job is to make sure their employees make it home safely.

Since British Parliament passed the Chimney Sweeper's Act of 1788, which regulated the working conditions of the young boys working long hours in dangerous conditions, the world has increased its efforts to improve workplace safety, and to good effect. Millions of lives have been saved. But as injury and fatality rates have risen in recent years, we seem to have reached a point of diminishing returns.

Why is it that despite our efforts to maintain a safe work environment, we still fall short of the promised levels of prevention and prediction? Turns out, there are some safety hazards that aren't so easily identified.

Safety is Both
Visible & Invisible

The 2 Domains of Safety

How we define safety has profound impact on the behaviors and practices we value and implement in our organizations. We know how to identify hazards in the four categories we mentioned, and we understand that they need to be reduced or removed entirely. These hazards are easier to see because they're tangible and have obvious consequences and sometimes life-threatening effects on employee populations. Are we paying attention to the less-visible, less-obvious hazards that affect our day-to-day work?

Safety, in reality, has two domains: one is physical, and the other is psychological. Let's talk about how these two worlds, the visible and the invisible, are connected.

Visible

Physical
Hazards

Psychological
Hazards

Invisible
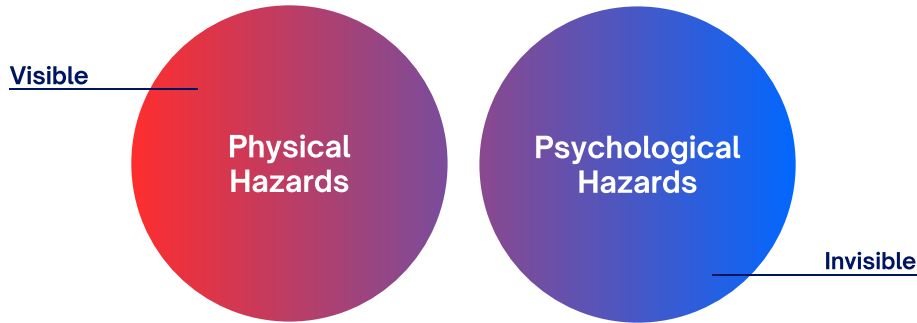
We experience psychosocial, or psychological, hazards in the workplace all the time. These are hazards that affect our thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and eventually behavior as we interact with others. If something has triggered mental or emotional or social fear, than our ability to mitigate risks in the physical world becomes compromised. If we can't provide a culture of psychological safety alongside physical safety, team members won't be equipped with the respect and permission they need to look at the physical environment and identify, speak up about, and remove inevitable, preventable hazards.

The 5th Hazard Category

As Oxford-trained social scientist Dr. Timothy R. Clark once said, "A leader's stewardship is to protect people not only physically but also psychologically."

This doesn't mean that current workplace safety regulations regarding personal protective equipment, communication standards, accident report guidelines, and fall protection aren't important. However, in order to experience a step-jump in safety, organizations must put equal weight, concern, and care into the levels of psychological safety on their shop floors, in their plants, and across their teams.

Ergonomic

Biological — Psychological Safety — Chemical

Physical

Hazard Detection

It's natural to want to avoid vulnerable situations, especially if moments of bravery are consistently mocked, penalized, or shamed. As a form of protection, we live our lives in a constant state of threat detection. Our heads are on a swivel. What are we looking for? Signs that speaking up may be dangerous or harmful. If someone else gets punished for raising a safety concern, no one else is going to bother. If leaders don't model a speak-up culture, and instead withhold that voice from their employees, who's going to point out a problem?

Without psychological safety, your team members will be unequipped to engage in early intervention.

The Performance Response

When our acts of vulnerability are met with rewarded vulnerability, instead of punished vulnerability, we experience what's called a blue zone.

In blue zones, we can show up as our authentic selves. We're finally allowed to thrive, so we give our discretionary effort, communicate candidly, and work towards innovation. We become active participants in our cultural environment.

The Fear Response

Those negative interactions, which we call acts of punished vulnerability, bring out a natural fear response called a red zone. Essentially, we're in survival mode.

When vulnerability is punished, it triggers the pain centers of the brain, activates the self-censoring instinct, and freezes discretionary effort. In that state, workers seldom point out potential hazards in the workplace and frequently hide mistakes and errors.
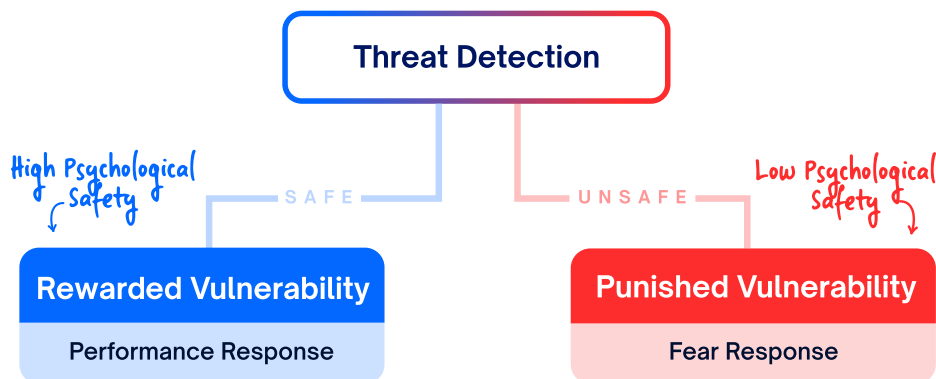
Psychological safety, in essence, hands your employees the microphone. Since they have boots on the ground and eyes on the situation, they're equipped to notice issues quickly and prevent hazards from happening. But they need to know that you, as the leader, are listening.

If you don't allow the circulation of local knowledge from the bottom to the top, and from side to side in the organization, you are doomed to treat symptoms and repeat the same unforced human errors that lead to accidents and injuries.

What is **Psychological Safety**?

In five words, psychological safety is "a culture of rewarded vulnerability" where people feel safe to speak up and challenge the status quo as full members of their team. Why rewarded vulnerability? Because it's the mechanism that teams use to create psychological safety: When employees model and reward each other's acts of vulnerability, it promotes inclusion, encourages divergent thinking, challenges norms, and normalizes active participation in the interdependent safety system

Vulnerability is an inherently human experience (meaning that every person experiences vulnerability, although they might experience it differently than you do). Every time you do something that exposes your insecurity, makes you feel uncertain, or otherwise pushes you out of your comfort zone, that's an act of vulnerability. Some common acts of vulnerability include:

- **Making a mistake**
- **Giving an incorrect answer**
- **Receiving feedback**
- **Contributing to a discussion**

- **Clarifying expectations**
- **Asking for more resources**
- **Raising a concern**
- **Expressing your emotions**

- **Sharing something personal**
- **Asking for help**
- **Admitting you don't know**
- **Trying something new**

Without a foundation of inclusion, a preventative attitude toward failure, a dedication to contribution, and an expectation of candor, physical safety measures will continue to fall short in protecting employees on the job. A culture of psychological safety (where acts of vulnerability are rewarded, not punished) gives employees the permission they need to (1) identify risk, (2) predict failure, and (3) speak up.

Fear Breaks the Feedback Loop.

The 4 Stages of
Psychological Safety™

Developed by cultural anthropologist Dr. Timothy R. Clark, The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety™ framework acknowledges that we're humans first and employees second. It follows a universal pattern that reflects the natural progression of human needs in social settings.

Organizations around the globe use this framework to turn the theory of psychological safety into actual practice. Teams progress through these stages as they intentionally create cultures of rewarded vulnerability.

Respect

Permission

Challenger Safety — Stage 4
Contributor Safety — Stage 3
Learner Safety — Stage 2
Inclusion Safety — Stage 1
Exclusion
PATERNALISM
EXPLOITATION
Innovation Threshold
Inclusion Threshold
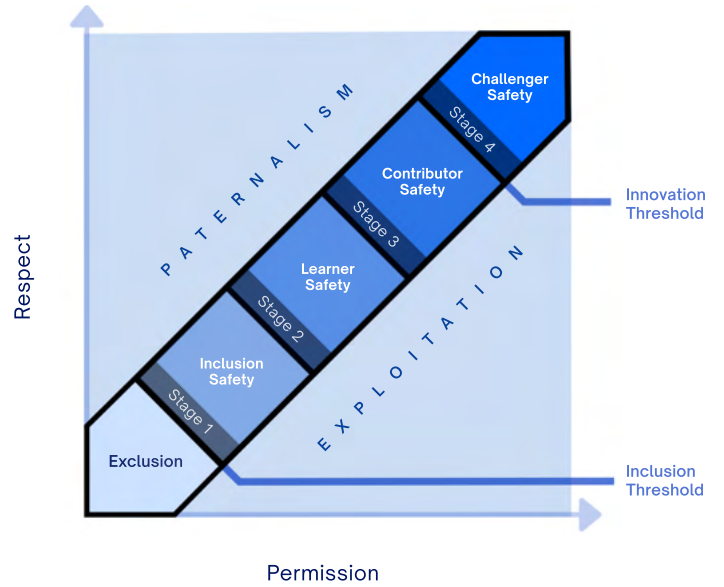
Stage 1 – Inclusion Safety:
Can I be my authentic self?

Stage 2 – Learner Safety:
Can I grow?

Stage 3 – Contributor Safety:
Can I create value?

Stage 4 – Challenger Safety:
Can I be candid about change?

The primary benefits of psychological safety have unique workplace dividends, especially in environments where physical safety is on the line. Psychological safety is the key to mending broken interactions and creating cultures of rewarded vulnerability in every social setting at work.

When you respect your teams' innate humanity and give them permission to engage across psychological safety's four stages, you create sanctuaries of inclusion and incubators of innovation. People will feel safe to be their authentic selves and create value exponentially.

Psychological Safety High-Hazard Industries

Transportation   Healthcare   Mining

Manufacturing   Construction
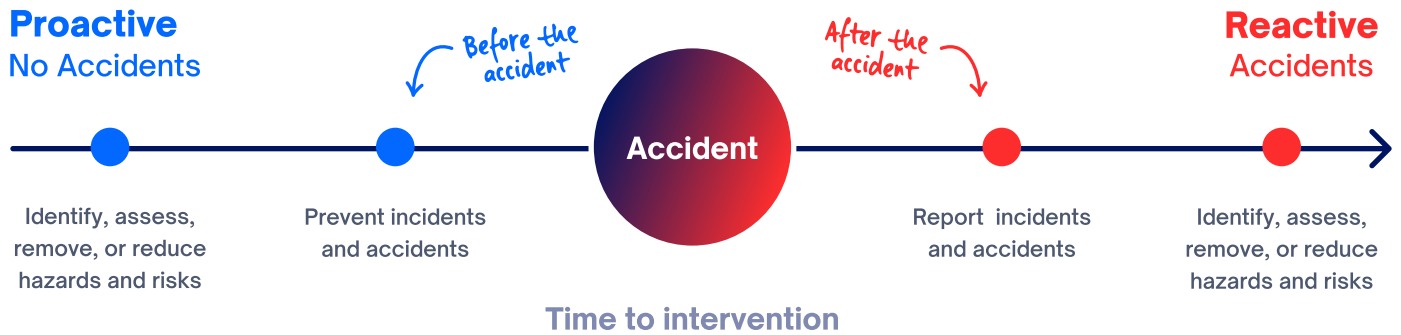
The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety™

Stage	Definition of Respect	Definition of Permission	Social Exchange
1. Inclusion Safety	Respect for the individual's innate need to be included, accepted, and gain a sense of belonging.	Permission for the individual to interact and be their true and authentic self.	Inclusion in exchange for human status & the absence of harm.
2. Learner Safety	Respect for the individual's innate need to learn, grow, and develop mastery.	Permission for the individual to engage in the learning process and make mistakes.	Encouragement in exchange for engagement.
3. Contributor Safety	Respect for the individual's innate need for autonomy, contribution, and recognition.	Permission for the individual to work with appropriate autonomy and independence.	Autonomy with guidance in exchange for performance and results.
4. Challenger Safety	Respect for the individual's innate need to innovate and improve the status quo.	Permission for the individual to make challenges to the status quo in good faith.	Air cover in exchange for candor.

Clark, Timothy R. The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety: Defining the Path to Inclusion and Innovation. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2020.

The 3 Safety Systems

Proactive & Reactive Safety

Proactive
No Accidents

Before the accident

Accident

After the accident

Reactive
Accidents

Identify, assess, remove, or reduce hazards and risks

Prevent incidents and accidents

Report incidents and accidents

Identify, assess, remove, or reduce hazards and risks

Time to intervention

The 3 Safety Systems

How do you assess workplace hazards in your organization? What kind of safety system have you implemented to mitigate risk and keep people protected? Some organizations wait until the incident occurs before they react to it, others have measures put in place to predict problems before they arise. Let's assume that safety systems can be categorized into three different types: breakdown systems, preventive systems, and predictive systems.

Signs of breakdown always precede breakdown. In a breakdown system, you keep working until something fails, at which point you fix the issue and continue on in the vicious cycle of crisis and cleanup. In a preventive system, you also assume static conditions, but you run production as long as you can, short of failure. In both cases, you lack the data you need to detect distant and early warning signs.

In a predictive system, you instead assume dynamic conditions, so you monitor the conditions and look for those early signs of breakdown. By checking and inspecting performance periodically and track time and usage data, you can make a data-driven decision to repair or replace before breakdown can occur.

Breakdown System

- Assume static conditions
- Run to failure
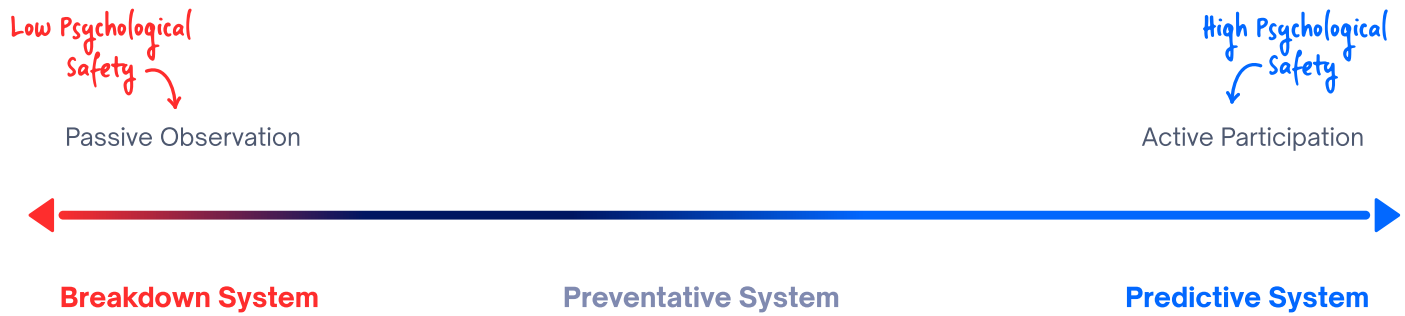- React
- Fix or correct
- Repeat

Preventive System

- Assume static conditions
- Run just short of failure
- Inspect periodically
- Replace based on usage
- Repeat

Predictive System

- Assume dynamic conditions
- Inspect with real-time data
- Detect early failure signs
- Adjust/correct immediately
- Repeat

Low Psychological Safety

High Psychological Safety

Behavioral Comparison

Low Psychological
Safety

High Psychological
Safety

Passive Observation

Active Participation

Breakdown System   **Preventative System**   **Predictive System**

Passive Observation vs. Active Participation

It's not just technology that does the continuous monitoring, it's every worker in the system. In fact, the system relies on a cultural norm of vigilance, alertness, and attentiveness–all aspects of active participation.

The moment an individual moves from active participation to passive observation, the entire safety system assumes more risk. Why? Because a safety system is interdependent. Passive observation can easily turn into complacency and negligence.

Early detection should lead to early intervention. But if you don't have psychological safety, your organization may be too afraid to engage in early intervention. If bad news is always punished at work, workers wait until the last possible second, when things have gotten really bad–even to the point of catastrophic failure–to raise the alarm.

With time and consistency, modeling and rewarding the vulnerable behavior that you want to see on your teams will help them trust that they have a valuable voice, one that will keep them and their coworkers, safe from harm.
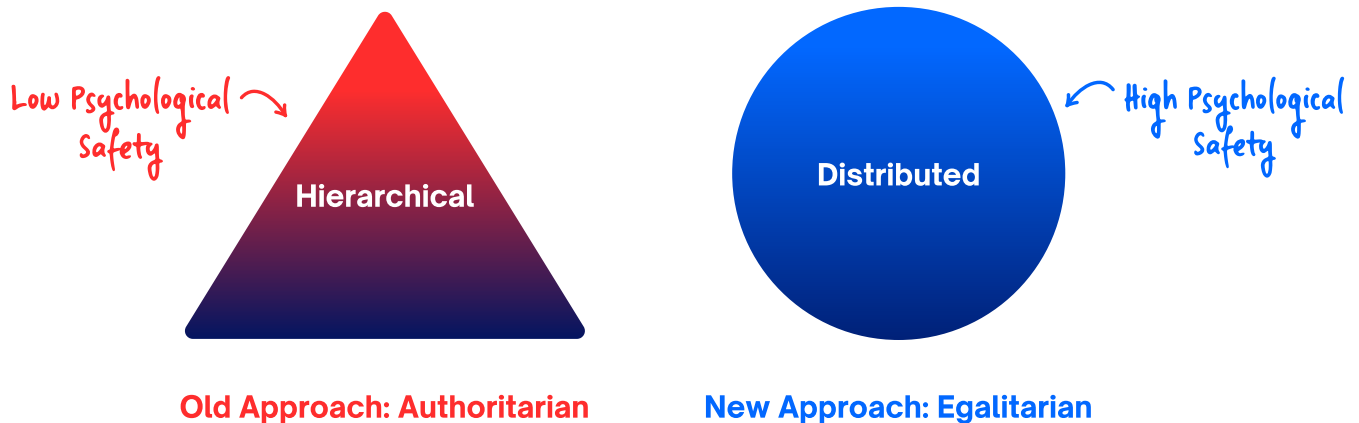
Self-Diagnose and Self-Correct

Psychological safety is the enabling condition that allows a team or organization to productively diagnose and correct an error, mistake, or failure. Without psychological safety, we often fail to conduct true root cause analysis and take true corrective action. Instead, we identify and treat symptoms of the incident.

While these symptoms might console a team through a specific issue, they will not provide the information or introspection necessary to prevent the issue from happening again.

Breaking the Chain
of Command

Hierarchical to Distributed Systems

Low Psychological Safety

Hierarchical

High Psychological Safety

Distributed

Old Approach: Authoritarian

New Approach: Egalitarian

The new approach removes fear associated with authority bias which blocks hazard identification and removal.

Breaking the Chain of Command

In a rigid hierarchical organization, chain-of-command authority exerts pressure on workers to comply with current policies, procedures, routines, or instructions. This traditional, authoritarian approach often induces fear and authority bias which influences workers to engage in hazard identification and removal.

But there's a better alternative. Even in the context of a hierarchical organization, it's possible to install a distributed authority system when it comes to safety. In a distributed authority system, authority is vested in each worker. As an individual, you can and should break the chain of command to stop a process, or refuse to comply with a requirement or procedure, if you believe a hazard exists.

You are vested with authority to do this. No one can or should force you to do something that you do not feel safe doing or encourage unsafe behavior in others. At any moment, you can break the chain of command. But only in a psychologically safe environment are workers truly willing to break the chain of command.

Why are fear-based systems dangerous?

1. Fear-based environments treat symptoms because people are afraid to disclose and report.

2. Fear-based environments make the same unforced human errors over and over because fear does not put people in the right state of focus, vigilance, and readiness. Rather, it compromises judgment and cognitive response.

3. You cannot move the individual to active participation if there is fear or authority bias. The nurse will not challenge the surgeon. The flight attendant will not challenge the pilot. The crane operator will not challenge the shop floor foreman unless there is psychological safety.

4. Psychological safety allows the continuous removal of hazards, whereas fear ensures the continuous preservation of hazards.

The Logic of Safety

Hierarchical System
(Authoritarian)

↓

Fear

↓

Silence (Passive observation)

↓

Breakdown System

↓

Decreased Safety

Distributed System
(Egalitarian)

↓

Psychological Safety

↓

Speak-up (Active Participation)

↓

Predictive System

↓

Increased Safety

Conclusion

As Dr. Timothy R. Clark says, "the absence of physical safety can bring injury or death, but the absence of psychological safety can inflict devastating emotional wounds, neutralize performance, paralyze potential, and crater an individual's self-worth." Each of these consequences have an upstream effect on the levels of physical safety on a team, division, and organization.

Learning how to build challenger safety, the fourth and final stage in The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety™, on your teams could make all the difference in ensuring that your colleagues and team members make it home safely. Challenger safety allows us to feel safe to challenge the status quo without retaliation or the risk of damaging our personal standing or reputation. As the highest level of psychological safety, it matches the increased vulnerability and personal risk associated with challenging the status quo. Teams with adequate challenger safety will feel empowered to speak up, stop the line, and ensure that the environment is safe.

Remember, psychological safety allows the continuous removal of hazards, whereas fear ensures the continuous preservation of hazards. Your goal, then, is to remove fear by creating a culture of rewarded vulnerability where team members feel (1) included and safe to (2) learn, (3) contribute, and (4) challenge the status quo.

Encourage your employees to move away from passive observation, and into active participation, in their areas of influence. Build predictive safety systems and don't entertain breakdown systems. Choose to be holistic in your approach to the safety of your organization. In industries where lives are on the line, it makes all the difference.
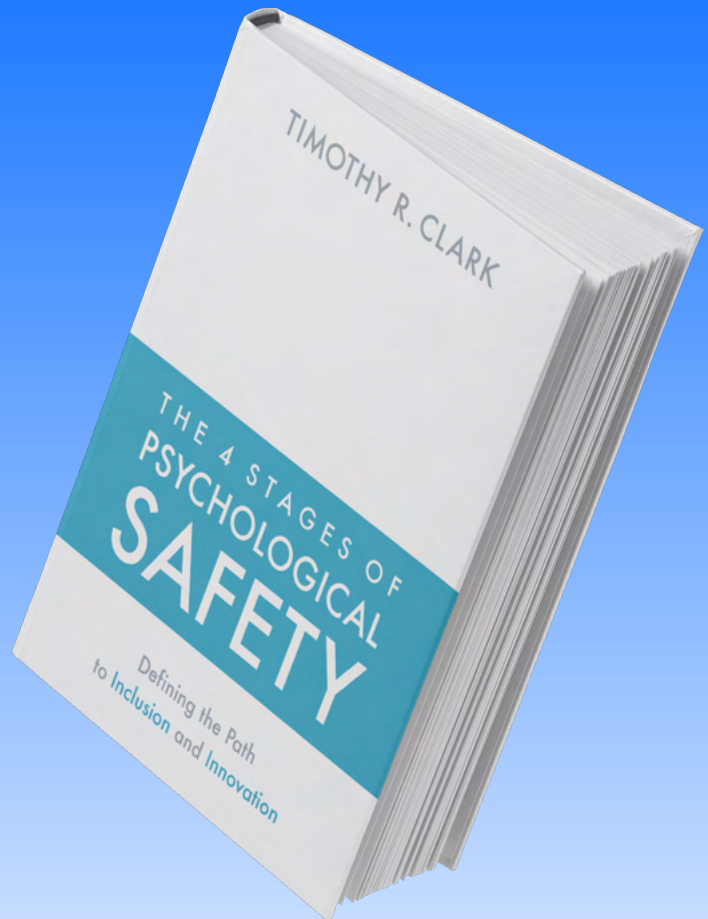
Additional Resources

The 4 Stages Book

The 4 Stages Behavioral Guide is a companion to The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety™ by Timothy R. Clark. Now available in Spanish, Portuguese, Traditional Chinese, Japanese, German and English.

Get Your Copy Today

"Safety, commitment and engagement are subjective topics, difficult to measure and can be the cause of lack of results and turnovers. This book challenges the status quo, revolutionizes leadership perspective and can transform companies and the way they engage with people so they can safely do their best."

Ana Artigas
Brazilian Neuropsychologist

"This is not just a book, it is an urgent invitation to the kind of rigorous self-examination that will lead to breakthroughs in every relationship of your life. Timothy Clark offers us both a case for a path to creating the kind of healthy social systems that all of us crave and that modern corporate flourishing demands."

Joseph Grenny
Co-author Crucial Conversations

"As a person responsible for the development of employees in 65 countries, I can tell you that this book outlines a must-have culture. A safe space is table stakes for any organization looking to attract and retain talent and innovate from every chair. A powerful call to action."

Simone Ciafardini
VP Clinique Global Education

120+ ways to reward the vulnerabilities of your team members.

Psychological safety is a culture of rewarded vulnerability. Use the practical and actionable behaviors in this guide to create psychological safety across its four stages.

Download The Behavioral Guide

THE 4 STAGES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Behavioral Guide

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