

Gartner Research

# Fostering Psychological Safety During a Crisis

By Asia HR Research Team

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## Fostering Psychological Safety During a Crisis

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Executive leaders must guide managers to ensure psychological safety for their teams during a crisis. Psychological safety enables employees to freely express information relevant to their ability to work. This guide provides practical steps executive leaders can take and guide managers to follow.

### Overview

#### Key Findings

- Organizations that foster psychological safety among employees promote teamwork, encourage employee authenticity, foster learning and innovation, and drive business outcomes such as on-the-job effort and intent to stay.
- Employees and managers may feel higher levels of psychological safety when discussing routine and familiar topics that maintain the status quo. However, during a crisis, employees especially need to feel confident they can share information that is relevant to their ability to work effectively.
- Executive leaders should guide managers to foster psychological safety in their daily interactions with employees.

#### Recommendations

Executive leaders must strengthen managers' ability to foster psychological safety among employees in a crisis. Specifically, they should:

- Equip managers to respond to disruptions and crises by setting policies and procedures on handling employees' emotions related to a crisis situation.

- Create consistent messaging on culture and expectations during disruptions and crises by celebrating employees' willingness to participate in courageous conversations.
- Invite input on what is inhibiting open communication by guiding managers to have timely, open, two-way communication with their direct reports.

## Analysis

*This research is adapted from "Leader Guide to Fostering Psychological Safety During a Crisis" in which HR and D&I leaders are advised with practical steps to foster psychological safety during times of crisis.*

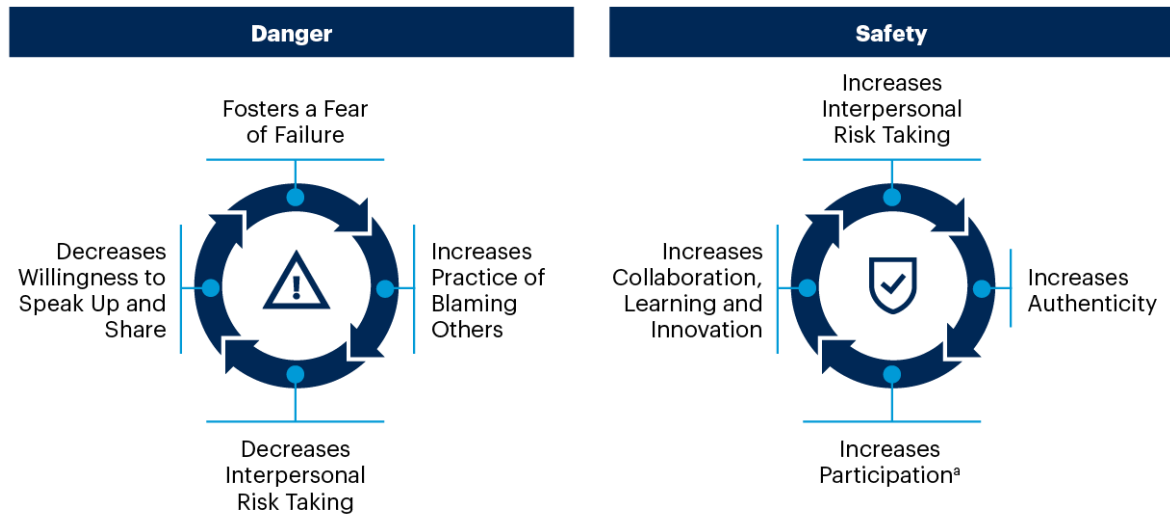
A crisis is uncomfortable and disruptive, be it a shared adversity (e.g., global pandemic, economic recession, natural disaster) or an individual struggle (e.g., medical emergency, financial hardship, domestic abuse). During crises, employees' anxieties run high and their patience can be short, which, in turn, can negatively affect employees' performance at work. If left unchecked, small work disruptions could have broader implications for teams, colleagues and the business overall. In such situations, talking openly about challenges can be uncomfortable and daunting for employees, as they may hold back due to the risk of negative judgment, ridicule, rejection or potentially retributive behavior. If employees feel stifled and unable to communicate freely and hold back on certain topics, these actions may cause further stress, anxiety or related physical health symptoms. Fostering a sense of psychological safety can potentially enable employees to feel comfortable engaging in two-way communication and sharing information.

## What Is Psychological Safety?

Psychological safety is the shared belief that members of a team feel comfortable taking interpersonal risks. When it exists, employees feel safe to share their perspectives without retaliation. Organizations that foster psychological safety benefit because it promotes teamwork, encourages employee authenticity, fosters learning and innovation, and drives business outcomes such as on-the-job effort and intent to stay. <sup>1</sup>

Figure 1: Psychological Danger Versus Psychological Safety

**Psychological Danger Versus Psychological Safety**



Source: Gartner

<sup>a</sup> Increases desire to ask questions, seek feedback, discuss mistakes, experiment, fail in experiments, offer opposing perspectives, raise concerns and propose novel and unorthodox ideas

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**Psychological Safety Ensures Timely Identification and Resolution of Issues**

As shown in Figure 1, feelings of psychological danger can lead to counterproductive cycles of fear and blame. No one wants to give or receive what could be perceived as “bad news,” such as the possibility that a sick co-worker could contaminate and shut down an entire workplace. By fostering psychological safety, organizations can enable employees to share problems before or when they occur instead of letting challenges grow in silence. Timely identification of issues gives organizations the opportunity for timely resolution of those issues.

## What Employees Need to Express

Employees and managers may feel higher levels of psychological safety when discussing routine and familiar topics that maintain the status quo, but moments of shared or personal disruption might push the boundaries of what they feel safe discussing. Especially during a crisis, employees need to feel confident they can share information that is relevant to their ability to work effectively. Employees must perceive safety so they can share with their managers and organizations what they need to know, not just what employees think their managers want to hear. Employees should be able to express to managers and other stakeholders their personal concerns or observations about the situation. Examples may include statements such as, “I feel uncomfortable expressing my views, as I am the only minority in the room,” or “I don’t call out my colleagues for violating company procedures on maintaining an inclusive work environment.”

## How Organizations Can Promote Psychological Safety

Executive leaders can build and maintain psychological safety across the organization through concerted and consistent efforts. These efforts include:

- Setting policy and procedures to respond to disruptions and crises
- Creating consistent messaging on culture and expectations during disruptions and crises
- Inviting input on what is inhibiting open communication

Executive leaders also need to guide their managers to have timely, open, two-way communication with their direct reports, especially if these employees are dealing with their own feelings and concerns from a disruption or crisis. Managers are the everyday face of leadership for employees and a critical channel to cultivate psychological safety across the organization. In today’s context when many managers and teams are working remotely, having open dialogues and making employees comfortable can be challenging, as managers may not be able to easily perceive usual cues about an employee’s feelings. Creating psychological safety in a remote work environment requires extra care, attention and empathy. For instance, an employee who may normally say, “Everything is great,” could be indicating a problem just by saying, “Well, it’s been a long, hard week.” Executive leaders can guide their managers to follow the practical steps below to ensure psychological safety for their teams.

## What Managers Should Do

**1. Know what can hinder psychological safety.** Three risk factors can inhibit a “psychologically safe” environment in the workplace: a lack of work well-being, lack of open communication and lack of cultural clarity. Managers should be aware of these risk factors to effectively foster psychological safety in the workplace.

**2. Celebrate courageous conversations.** Managers should celebrate and encourage employees to participate in courageous conversations. They can express appreciation for employees’ willingness to vocalize questions, doubts and confusion, and help these employees determine the best next steps.

**3. Practice empathy and curiosity.** Managers must refrain from making assumptions, jumping to conclusions or changing the subject. Everyone’s experience is unique, so managers should seek to understand the situation from direct reports’ perspectives. Managers need to pay attention to employees’ tone of voice, body language and context to gauge how employees are feeling as they speak with their managers and teammates.

**4. Don’t rush to give advice or offer solutions.** Managers should seek to understand before they are understood; if employees share a fear or challenging circumstance, managers should resist the urge to fix it prematurely. Employees may be sharing their concerns just to seek validation. For instance, if an employee is concerned about a sick family member, a response of “I’m sure it will be OK” may be counterproductive and come across as disingenuous. Managers should instead respond with, “I’m glad you shared this with me. Is there anything that would help at this time?”

**5. Clarify roles and expectations.** Especially during times of change and uncertainty, managers should take the time to set clear goals and verbalize expectations for employees to help them feel confident in their roles and throughout their projects. Managers should be honest about what they do know and not know.

**6. Seek out other resources.** Even on a team where employees trust the manager, managers are likely not fully equipped to handle the breadth of employee emotions related to a crisis situation. Managers should therefore know where to direct employees for more support, such as connecting with peers or other leaders or leveraging ERG networks or EAP and counseling services.

7. Escalate questions and concerns. Ensure that managers use and follow the organization's established set of criteria for handling questions, concerns or allegations made by employees. If necessary, managers should be prepared to channel information to the appropriate function (e.g., compliance, HR, legal, security). When in doubt, or if such criteria don't exist, managers should alert the next level of leadership and ask for guidance.

## Evidence

<sup>1</sup> "Understanding Psychological Safety: When and Why it Works"

## Recommended by the Authors

"Leader Guide to Creating an Inclusive Team"

"Encourage Employees to Speak Up"

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