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# Psychological Safety: Critical for Learning?

## Executive Summary

In March and again in June, The Learning Guild surveyed members about the effects of COVID-19 on learning and development (L&D). Many respondents offered text comments expressing their concerns and fears. Among these were remarks related to psychological safety. People were rapidly shifted to the work-at-home environment, thrust into participating in virtual teams, and enrolled in online classes, most of them virtual classroom-style and many of them hastily put together. Other organizations were asking employees to continue working in what was suddenly a risky physical environment.

Authors across the literature base agree on definitions: Psychological safety involves trust and open communication, which in turn supports development of relationships and collaborative work, and, ultimately, learning to enact that work. In a psychologically safe environment one feels comfortable expressing and being themselves, sharing concerns, asking questions, and making errors without fear of being ridiculed or shamed.

Edmondson & Lei 2014 and Kahn 1990 further describe psychological safety as knowing you will be given the benefit of the doubt when you have asked for help or made a mistake. It thus supports risk-taking and encourages learners to ask questions, surface problems, and admit mistakes, and increases collaborative behaviors such as knowledge sharing, willingness to suggest improvements, and innovation. (Edmondson 2002; Edmondson & Lei 2014; Johnson 2020; Kahn 1990; Torralba 2020; Tsuei et al. 2019; Turner & Harder 2018). Additionally, Kahn 1990, an influential early voice in conversations about “engagement”, proposed that psychological safety influences a worker’s vitality and enables—or discourages—personal engagement in the workplace.

Our understanding of psychological safety applies to a number of areas of interest to L&D practitioners, among them simulation, facilitator skill, effective feedback, team and other collaborative work, and employee engagement. While much of the attention has been turned to learning settings involving human-to-human interaction, considerations about psychological safety apply in asynchronous learning as well. This report discusses research findings and emerging thought in these areas.

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