

Aitkin County

Psychological Safety Guide



Aitkin County

Dear Revitalization Team,

Psychological Safety is both a moral obligation and a strategic asset that enables county governments to engage openly, learn quickly, and contribute meaningfully, thereby elevating service delivery to the community. By fostering an environment where employees feel safe to express ideas and question the status quo, Aitkin County can unlock unprecedented levels of creativity and efficiency.

This guide invites you to delve into the transformative power of psychological safety. Consider this a call to action—this is your opportunity to try something new and catalyze meaningful change, both in service to the employees and citizens of Aitkin.

Enjoy!



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Take this Self-assessment First!

To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements? Select the number in the column that best represents your experience (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree).

Recently...	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I feel encouraged to voice my opinions during team meetings.	1	2	3	4	5
2. My colleagues actively participate in problem-solving.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Team members share constructive criticism openly.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Team members readily admit when they don't know something.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Employees comfortably speak up without fearing mistakes.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Colleagues freely share beneficial information for team performance.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Team members regularly ask questions to clarify uncertainties.	1	2	3	4	5
8. Employees willingly challenge existing practices for better outcomes.	1	2	3	4	5
9. My manager/supervisor provides constructive feedback respectfully.	1	2	3	4	5
10. My manager/supervisor listens attentively to my concerns.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Conflicts and interpersonal issues are proactively addressed by my manager/supervisor.	1	2	3	4	5

Recently...	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
12. My manager/supervisor regularly recognizes and appreciates team contributions.	1	2	3	4	5
13. My manager/supervisor consistently handles conflicts or challenging issues.	1	2	3	4	5
14. Performance standards and expectations are clearly communicated by my manager/supervisor.	1	2	3	4	5
15. My manager/supervisor actively supports my career growth and development.	1	2	3	4	5
16. My manager/supervisor encourages diversity of thought and perspective.	1	2	3	4	5
17. Our team collaborates effectively to achieve common goals.	1	2	3	4	5
18. All voices are valued in our team meetings.	1	2	3	4	5
19. There is a high level of trust among team members.	1	2	3	4	5
20. Our team successfully integrates individual strengths and skills.	1	2	3	4	5
21. There's a strong sense of camaraderie and mutual respect among team members.	1	2	3	4	5
22. Team meetings enable equal participation from all members.	1	2	3	4	5
23. Our team makes decisions promptly, avoiding project stalls.	1	2	3	4	5
24. Our team has a shared vision and sense of purpose that is clear to all.	1	2	3	4	5

Interpreting your Results

Add up your responses for each item within the three categories below:

Dimension	Add items	Total
Employee Behavior	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8:	_____
Manager/Supervisor Behavior	9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15,16:	_____
Group Behavior	17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24:	_____

For each category, interpret your summed scores using the following ranges:

- **Very High Psychological Safety** (Total = 33-40): A strong sense of trust, openness, and mutual respect exists.
- **High Psychological Safety** (Total = 25-32): Elements of trust and openness are present, but there's room for improvement.
- **Average Psychological Safety** (Total = 17-24): Some degree of psychological safety exists, but several areas require attention.
- **Low Psychological Safety** (Total = 9-16): A noticeable lack of openness and trust exists. Immediate action is required.
- **Very Low Psychological Safety** (Total = 8): The environment is not psychologically safe. Urgent and comprehensive measures are needed.

What is Psychological Safety?

Amy Edmondson, a professor at Harvard Business School, has extensively researched and written on the concept of psychological safety in organizational settings. She defines psychological safety as "a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking." In essence, it's the comfort and trust that allow team members to be themselves, voice their opinions, and share concerns without fear of retribution or humiliation.



To measure psychological safety, Edmondson suggests a multi-faceted approach that includes surveys, observations, and interviews. Specifically, she has developed questionnaires that probe the level of comfort team members feel in taking risks, asking questions, or admitting mistakes. Questions may include: "How confident are you that you won't face repercussions when you make a mistake?" or "Do you feel comfortable giving feedback to your teammates?"

In a more nuanced way, observations during team interactions can also be telling. Is there an even distribution of conversational turn-taking? Are people interrupting each other, or are they listening attentively? These dynamics can offer implicit clues about the state of psychological safety.

Finally, in-depth interviews with team members can provide a richer, more comprehensive understanding of how safe people feel. These conversations can offer insights into the contextual factors that might not be captured through surveys or observations, such as organizational norms, leadership behavior, or recent team experiences.

Why does Psychological Safety Matter at Aitkin?

Standing at the intersection of policy, public service, and community engagement, local government organizations are challenged to operate with heightened efficiency, transparency, and accountability. But to navigate this complex landscape effectively, and to truly thrive, these organizations require more than just procedural overhauls or technological upgrades. They require a fundamental cornerstone that often goes unnoticed yet holds unparalleled significance: Psychological Safety.

Psychological Safety isn't a lofty ideal or a mere catchphrase; it's a pragmatic, strategic asset crucial for retaining and developing talent in a volatile world. It creates an environment where employees can freely share ideas, question the status quo, and participate in constructive debate, thereby becoming active contributors to an organization's mission and vision. This guide aims to underscore the importance of psychological safety as a fulcrum around which talent management, service delivery, organizational resilience, and innovation revolve.

- ✓ **Talent Retention and Development:** The days when employees were seen as expendable resources are long behind us. Talent is the lifeblood of any organization, more so in sectors where expertise and community understanding play a significant role. Psychological safety allows employees to grow, develop, and most importantly, stay. It's not just about preventing turnover; it's about enabling your workforce to fulfill their potential.
- ✓ **Service to Employees and Citizens:** Local government organizations are unique in their dual role as both employers and service providers. When employees feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to be engaged, motivated, and committed to public service. This translates into better service delivery, higher citizen satisfaction, and a more robust social contract.
- ✓ **Resilience and Rapid Learning:** longer optional. A psychologically safe environment makes it easier for organizations to be resilient in the face of alterations, be it in policy, public sentiment, or even crises. Employees in such an environment will find it easier to adapt, learn, and evolve, thereby making the organization more agile and effective.
- ✓ **Innovation in County Government Solutions:** Local governments are increasingly expected to do more with less: less funding, less time, and often fewer resources. Psychological safety fosters an atmosphere where creative

problem-solving and innovation are not just encouraged but celebrated. It enables employees to transcend the boundaries of traditional governance models to develop cutting-edge solutions for complex county-level challenges.

Taking a “Systems” Approach

Systems thinking means looking at organizations like one big, connected puzzle. Every piece—people, teams, rules—fits together and impacts others. Why is this important for psychological safety? Because sometimes it's not just about a mean boss or shy team members causing problems. Sometimes, it's the bigger setup of the organization that makes people feel unsafe to speak up or be themselves.

For instance, let's say your job grades you on a curve, meaning only a few can get top scores while others must get low scores. This setup can make coworkers see each other as competition, not teammates. This hurts the overall feeling of safety, even if everyone on the team is nice and helpful. Another example could be if an organization does not empower employees to inform decisions around strategic planning. This setup might stop good ideas from regular employees from ever being heard.

In addition to examining rules and systems, it's important to view people as systems, including individuals, groups, and those with formal authority over others such as directors or supervisors. We'll unpack these one at a time, beginning with common misconceptions followed by a summary of healthy practices.

Active Listening

When taking the system's approach to psychological safety, we must begin by understanding the role we personally play. This begins with establishing a healthy practice of active listening, a communication technique that involves fully focusing, understanding, and responding to a speaker with the intention of comprehending the complete message being conveyed. Unlike passive listening, where the receiver may be distracted or disengaged, active listening requires full attention and the conscious effort to interpret, analyze, and evaluate what is being said. It often entails non-verbal cues like nodding, eye contact, and leaning forward, as well as verbal affirmations such as "I understand" or "Tell me more."

This method is particularly advantageous in complex conversations, conflict resolution, and relationship building, as it fosters a sense of respect and understanding between the parties involved. Here are some simple ways you can improve your active listening practice today.

1. **Prioritize Full Engagement:** In any meeting, whether it's a routine discussion or an emergency call, make a conscious effort to be fully engaged. Put away distractions, such as cell phones or other devices such as laptops to ensure that your attention is solely on the speaker.
2. **Put Down your Smartphone:** Using smart phones during meetings and workshops, whether visibly or out of the speaker's site is unprofessional and harmful to psychological safety, even if you believe everyone is doing it or finds it acceptable. If you have dedicated time to actively listen to someone but anticipate that you may receive an emergency call, set your phone to vibrate at a specific cadence (e.g., three buzzes) for specific phone numbers and email addresses.
3. **Maintain Eye Contact:** When someone is speaking, maintain eye contact to convey your undivided attention and interest. In emergency situations, this visual connection can provide reassurance to the person on the other end of the call that you are actively listening and ready to assist.
4. **Avoid Interrupting:** Interrupting not only disrupts the flow of the conversation but can also hinder effective communication. In healthcare and law enforcement, it's imperative to let the person on the other end of the line explain the situation fully before responding. Ensure that they feel heard by allowing them to speak without interruptions.

5. **Practice Empathetic Listening:** Empathy is a powerful tool in active listening. Try to understand the emotions and concerns of the speaker. In emergency calls, acknowledging the caller's feelings and concerns can help build trust and rapport, even in highly stressful situations. Phrases like "I understand this is a difficult situation for you" can go a long way.
6. **Ask Clarifying Questions:** To ensure you have a complete understanding of the situation, ask clarifying questions. In healthcare, this might involve gathering critical medical details, while in law enforcement, it could pertain to the nature of the incident. Clarifying questions demonstrate your commitment to comprehending the situation thoroughly.

Individual Behaviors

Common Misconceptions

Here are ten misconceptions about the way individuals can effectively contribute to psychological safety, that seem to come from good intentions but often come with unintended negative consequences:

1. **"I'm Friendly, So I'm Safe":** Being friendly isn't the same as creating a psychologically safe environment. Friendliness can mask deeper issues like bias or power dynamics, which can affect how safe others feel speaking up or taking risks. It's essential to move beyond mere friendliness to actively foster a culture of inclusivity and respect.
2. **"I Don't Discriminate, So I'm Inclusive":** While not actively discriminating is a good starting point, it doesn't automatically make you inclusive. Inclusivity requires proactive efforts to make everyone feel they belong, regardless of their background or beliefs. The absence of negative actions is not the same as the presence of positive actions.
3. **"I'm Not Offensive, So I'm Respectful":** Not causing overt offense doesn't necessarily mean you are being respectful to everyone's perspectives. Respect includes acknowledging and valuing different viewpoints, not just avoiding overtly harmful language or actions. A neutral stance can still perpetuate a culture where people don't feel valued.

4. **"I Listen When I Can"**: Listening sporadically or only when convenient doesn't foster a psychologically safe environment. Active listening should be consistent and deliberate, creating a space where everyone feels their input is valued. This approach goes beyond mere politeness; it's about validating the experiences and viewpoints of others.
5. **"I Speak My Mind, So Others Should Too"**: Your comfort in speaking freely doesn't necessarily translate to everyone else's experience. Different people have various comfort levels when it comes to expressing themselves, often shaped by past experiences and cultural factors. Psychological safety is about ensuring everyone feels they can speak openly, not just those who naturally find it easier.
6. **"I Don't See Color"**: While intended to express a lack of bias, this statement often negates the lived experiences of people from diverse backgrounds. It also overlooks the need to actively address systemic or unconscious biases that might exist within a group or organization. True inclusivity acknowledges and celebrates diversity, rather than ignoring it.
7. **"If They Had a Problem, They'd Say So"**: Not everyone feels comfortable speaking up, particularly in environments that haven't established psychological safety. The lack of feedback isn't necessarily an indicator that all is well. A silent team member might be silent because they don't feel their voice will be valued or heard.
8. **"I'm Good at My Job, So I Don't Affect Team Safety"**: Technical competence is not the same as contributing to a psychologically safe environment. You can be exceptional in your role but still contribute to an environment where people feel uneasy or unable to express themselves. Emotional intelligence is equally important as technical skills in fostering psychological safety.
9. **"I'm Not a Leader, So It's Not My Role"**: Psychological safety isn't just the responsibility of team leaders or managers; every team member plays a role. Your actions, words, and attitudes all contribute to the overall sense of safety within the team. Abdicating responsibility means missing an opportunity to positively impact the work environment.
10. **"They Seem Fine, So They Must Be"**: Appearances can be deceiving, and just because someone seems alright doesn't mean they feel psychologically safe. Emotional well-being isn't always readily visible, and assumptions based on

appearances can overlook underlying issues. Checking in and fostering open dialogue are key to understanding the true sentiment within a team.

Healthy Practices for Individuals

1. **Active Listening:** Consciously focus on really hearing what your colleagues are saying, rather than simply waiting for your turn to speak. Active listening fosters mutual respect and opens the door for meaningful dialogue.
2. **Openness to Feedback:** Be willing to both give and receive constructive criticism. Frame your feedback in a manner that aims for growth, and when you're on the receiving end, view it as an opportunity to improve rather than a personal attack.
3. **Speak Up Diplomatically:** Whether it's a new idea, a concern, or a question, share it with your team. However, the key lies in how you communicate. Be diplomatic and sensitive to the context and the receptiveness of your audience.
4. **Demonstrate Empathy:** Put yourself in the shoes of your colleagues to understand their perspectives better. This emotional intelligence skill is pivotal in team cohesion and in building an environment where people feel safe sharing their ideas and concerns.

Manager/Supervisor Behaviors

Common Misconceptions

Here are ten misconceptions about the way those with formal authority should contribute to psychological safety, that seem to come from good intentions but often come with unintended negative consequences:

1. **"I'm Approachable, So I'm Accessible":** While you may consider yourself approachable, you have to actively make time and space for team members to feel they can come to you. Approachability is both an attitude and an action. Team members should never feel like they're interrupting you when they have something important to share.

2. **"I Don't Micromanage, So I'm Empowering"**: While giving autonomy is empowering, too much hands-off leadership can create ambiguity and insecurity. People might feel they lack guidance and support, leading to low psychological safety. Empowerment requires a balance of freedom and framework.
3. **"I Give Positive Feedback, So Everything's Fine"**: Providing only positive feedback can result in a lack of constructive growth opportunities. Team members might become complacent or even anxious that they're not getting the whole picture. Feedback should be balanced to create an environment conducive to professional growth.
4. **"I'm Fair, So I Treat Everyone the Same"**: While fairness is essential, treating everyone the same can overlook individual needs and nuances. A one-size-fits-all approach often ignores the diversity of your team's experiences, personalities, and challenges, which can be detrimental to psychological safety.
5. **"I've Always Done It This Way"**: Tenure doesn't equate to effectiveness in fostering a safe environment. Long-standing practices might be outdated and contribute to a stagnant or even toxic culture. Being open to new ways of leading is crucial.
6. **"I'm the Boss, So I Know Best"**: Hierarchical thinking can undermine psychological safety. A good leader recognizes that great ideas and solutions can come from anywhere within the team. Inviting participation rather than dictating direction can significantly enhance psychological safety.
7. **"I Trust Them, They Know"**: Trust is excellent, but it needs to be communicated. Your team should hear explicitly that you trust and believe in them; otherwise, they may assume the worst. Psychological safety thrives on clear, positive affirmations.
8. **"I Don't Need to Check In Regularly"**: Occasional check-ins aren't enough to gauge the health of your team. Consistent and meaningful interaction is key for ensuring everyone feels heard and valued.
9. **"They're Adults, They'll Sort It Out"**: While adults should have conflict-resolution skills, a lack of managerial intervention in conflicts can exacerbate issues and harm psychological safety. Leadership is about guiding and facilitating, not just overseeing tasks.

10. **"Open Door Policy Is Enough"**: Having an open door is a start, but it's passive. Psychological safety is often better served by active leadership behaviors such as regular check-ins, team meetings, and one-on-one discussions aimed at fostering an inclusive environment.

But... I'm not hard on my employees!

It's a common misconception that a lenient manager or supervisor naturally cultivates a psychologically safe environment. Leniency, when taken to an extreme, can manifest as a lack of boundaries, structure, or expectations, which ironically can impair psychological safety. Here are ten ways manager/supervisor leniency can go wrong:

1. **Lack of Feedback**: Leniency often translates to less constructive feedback. Employees may question where they stand or how they can improve, leading to a cloud of uncertainty that diminishes psychological safety.
2. **Inconsistent Standards**: When a manager/supervisor is overly lenient, they may not enforce organizational norms or quality standards consistently. This can breed resentment among employees who strive for excellence and feel others are allowed to cut corners.
3. **Low Accountability**: A lenient manager/supervisor may neglect to hold employees accountable for their performance or behavior. In such a culture, responsibility is diffused, leading to decreased overall performance and disengagement.
4. **Perceived Favoritism**: Leniency may lead to arbitrary support or selective enforcement of rules, leading employees to perceive favoritism. Perceived injustice can seriously impair the sense of safety among team members.
5. **Lack of Role Clarity**: The absence of clear guidelines or boundaries can result in confusion over roles and responsibilities. This ambiguity can create tension among team members and harm psychological safety.
6. **Absence of Challenge**: Leniency often results in a lack of rigor and challenge in tasks assigned. When employees are not encouraged to stretch their abilities, they may perceive a lack of investment in their growth, which can be demotivating.

7. **Overlooked Conflicts:** A lenient manager/supervisor may avoid addressing interpersonal conflicts in the team to maintain a facade of peace. Such avoidance can actually exacerbate conflicts, making the environment feel unsafe for those embroiled in them.
8. **Promotion of Passivity:** When leniency results in low expectations, employees might adopt a passive attitude, resulting in decreased initiative. A workplace without proactive participation can quickly become stagnant and non-inclusive.
9. **Neglected Skill Development:** The lenient manager/supervisor might overlook the importance of training and skill-building, focusing instead on immediate tasks. This can stunt career growth, leading to dissatisfaction and decreased commitment.
10. **Culture of Mediocrity:** Ultimately, leniency can contribute to a culture of mediocrity where high performers may feel their contributions are undervalued. When excellence is not recognized or incentivized, employees may question the safety of investing emotionally or intellectually in their work.

Healthy Practices for Managers/Supervisors

1. **Regular Check-ins:** Balance autonomy with guidance by scheduling regular one-on-one or team check-ins. Use this time to discuss workloads, challenges, and opportunities for growth. By doing so, you replace ambiguity with clarity.
2. **Balanced Feedback:** Develop a balanced feedback mechanism that provides both positive affirmations and constructive criticism. This approach fosters a nuanced growth environment, eschewing the pitfalls of one-dimensional feedback.
3. **Active Trust Building:** Explicitly express trust in your team members. Consider exercises or practices that allow team members to demonstrate their competencies. Celebrate these moments as milestones in mutual trust development.
4. **Conflict Mediation:** Recognize that leadership involves facilitating not just tasks but also human interactions. Be prepared to step in and offer a structured approach to conflict resolution, emphasizing that conflict can be constructive if managed well.

Group Behaviors

Common Misconceptions

Here are ten misconceptions about the way groups should contribute to psychological safety, which often result in negative outcomes.

1. **"We're a Team, So We Must Be Cohesive"**: Team membership alone doesn't guarantee cohesion or psychological safety. It requires sustained effort to build relationships, trust, and open communication among team members.
2. **"We Don't Have Conflict, So We're Good"**: Absence of conflict often indicates avoidance or suppression rather than a genuinely safe and open environment. Healthy conflict is a sign of diverse perspectives and a culture where people feel safe to disagree.
3. **"Everyone Participates, So We're Inclusive"**: Participation can be forced or surface-level. True inclusivity means that everyone feels their input is genuinely valued, not just politely acknowledged.
4. **"We're All Friends Here"**: While friendship can enhance work, it's not a substitute for psychological safety. Being friends can sometimes even make it harder to give or receive candid feedback due to fear of damaging personal relationships.
5. **"We're Busy, So We're Engaged"**: High activity doesn't always mean high engagement. Team members can be busy with tasks yet disengaged from the group, not feeling safe enough to fully commit to collective objectives.
6. **"We Share Information, So We're Transparent"**: Information sharing isn't the same as transparency. Transparency involves not just sharing what is convenient but also what is critical for everyone to make informed decisions.
7. **"We Have Fun, So We Must Be Doing Well"**: Fun activities and casual conversations are good but aren't indicators of deep psychological safety. They can sometimes even serve as distractions from unresolved issues.
8. **"We Agree Quickly, So We're Aligned"**: Quick agreement might indicate groupthink, where individuals go along with the group to maintain harmony, often at the expense of diverse viewpoints and critical analysis.

9. **"We're Diverse, So We're Inclusive"**: Diversity in team composition doesn't automatically lead to inclusivity. Inclusion requires proactive efforts to ensure all voices are heard and valued.
10. **"We Met Our Goals, So We're Successful"**: Meeting performance indicators isn't the sole measure of a healthy group dynamic. Success should also be gauged by how people feel within the team setting.

Healthy Practices for Groups

1. **Facilitate Inclusion**: Don't just invite participation; facilitate it. Rotate meeting chairs or discussion leads to ensure various team members have the opportunity to guide conversations. This sends a powerful message of shared ownership and value.
2. **Healthy Conflict**: Create norms for healthy conflict by discussing as a group how to disagree respectfully and constructively. An upfront investment in establishing these norms can pay dividends in more meaningful discussions and better decision-making.
3. **Transparency Channels**: Establish formal and informal channels for sharing information that is crucial for team members to do their jobs effectively. This could include regular team briefings, a shared dashboard, or a dedicated communication channel.
4. **Psychological Safety Audits**: Periodically assess the level of psychological safety within the group through anonymous surveys or third-party facilitations. This not only gives you a pulse check but also demonstrates that the group's well-being is a priority.

Helpful Books

1. "[The Fearless Organization](#)" by Amy Edmondson: This seminal work lays the foundation for understanding psychological safety in the workplace. Edmondson explains why psychological safety is essential for learning and innovation, providing case studies from various industries to demonstrate its impact.
2. "[Dare to Lead](#)" by Brené Brown: While not solely about psychological safety, this book emphasizes the importance of vulnerability and courage in leadership. Brown argues that leaders who encourage openness and admit to mistakes create environments where psychological safety can thrive.
3. "[Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us](#)" by Daniel H. Pink: Pink's book explores the psychology of motivation, including the importance of autonomy and mastery, both of which contribute to a sense of psychological safety.
4. "[Radical Candor: Be a Kick-Ass Boss Without Losing Your Humanity](#)" by Kim Scott: Scott's book is focused on creating relationships at work that are both caring and direct. This fosters psychological safety by allowing people to know where they stand yet feel cared for.
5. "[Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High](#)" by Al Switzler, Joseph Grenny, and Ron McMillan: This book provides tools for facilitating open dialogue in high-stress situations, which is critical for maintaining psychological safety during conflicts or challenges.