

Prioritize Psychological Safety

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While it's easy to think of mental health as just a personal concern, the reality is that a person's psychological well-being is also the responsibility of the organization that they work for. Psychological safety is a measure of the degree to which one feels comfortable sharing their thoughts, ideas and criticisms without fear of judgement or negative consequences.

But for many, the workplace can still be a major source of anxiety and unease. When people do not feel valued, respected or prioritized, there are both personal and professional costs. On the recent NextGen online training, "[Psychological Safety in the Workplace](#)," Mel Kepler and Rachel Niebeling, two experts from government consulting firm LMI, shared how to foster a healthy work environment, at both an individual and organizational level.

For anyone:

- **Understand the four stages of psychological safety:** This means that it will not solve all your problems with the wave of a wand, but data science is a comprehensible discipline that anyone is capable of reaching proficiency in.

Inclusion Safety: You feel included and accepted.

Learner Safety: You are able to learn and grow, ask questions, and receive feedback.

Contributor Safety: You can participate as a team member, contribute based on your talents, and make an impact.

Challenger Safety: You feel comfortable challenging the status quo and advocating for change.

For managers:

- **Ensure that hierarchy does not define interpersonal relationships.** This means that it should not just be junior employees learning from senior employees, but a collaborative environment where everyone feels comfortable sharing their ideas and opinions.
- **Control your behavior.** As a manager, you set the tone for your team. Lead by example and create a friendly, open, non-judgmental environment.
- **Listen.** As Kepler said, "if you meet with someone for 30 minutes, listen for 20." As a manager, you need to be able to hear the concerns of those working for you. Only then can you address them.

For individuals:

- **Make individual connections.** These heighten the overall psychological safety of the team, which is the sum of how comfortable each employee feels with every other employee. By forming a connection with any one person, you move the needle on overall team comfort.
- **Be understanding.** As Niebeling said, "people are fighting battles every day that you don't know about". Before offering criticism or judgement, think about what might be influencing a person's behavior and what an appropriate response would be.
- **Be a rock.** Even in a dysfunctional, psychologically unsafe team, you can be psychologically safe for other team members. By providing a safe space for them, you are taking a small step toward a better environment, and may be just the lifeline they need.