

Inclusivity and High Performance Begins with Psychological Safety

By Michael D. Thomas

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A workplace where employees believe they can speak up candidly with ideas, questions, and concerns, and even make mistakes without fear of reprisal or adverse repercussions, contributes to inclusivity and can improve performance. In such a work environment, employees feel comfortable asking questions, admitting what they do not know, or expressing their work-relevant thoughts and feelings. This construct is called psychological safety.

According to Lisa H. Nishii, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Human Resource Studies and Director, International Programs, in the School of Industrial Labor Relations of Cornell University, with regard to psychological safety:

The issue to think about here is if team members can't bring themselves to speak what's on their mind — that is they censor themselves, then they won't experience inclusion, nor will the group benefit from their perspectives. If team members don't trust each other, then they're going to waste time and energy thinking about what they should say, and what they shouldn't say, and wonder about the true intentions of their peers when they're interacting with them.

In comparison, when employees feel free from worrying about repercussions, how they will be perceived, or what people will think of them, they are able to be more engaged and connected in the workplace. They spend less time and energy being stressed or anxious, can create more mental space to think creatively, share their unique perspectives, and are more actively engaged in problem solving.

Psychological safety is important for all employees to feel included and is particularly important for employees who have been historically underrepresented in a particular field or workplace. I recall an early experience as an African American attorney working in a predominantly white law firm. On the first day, I filled out paperwork in a large conference room decorated with portraits of the founders of the firm — all white men. I was introduced to the office manager and head of the class action practice group — all white. I was then provided a firm manual on trends in class action litigation including photos of the authors — all white. One of the initial messages conveyed to me from seeing these images was that I did not belong. These initial messages, compounded with seeing few African Americans at the firm and even fewer in leadership positions, created an environment where I did not feel safe to ask questions, fully engage, or share my viewpoint or perspective — not because of a lack of skill or talent, but because my environment did not feel safe to authentically show up in.

Psychological safety assists in creating an inclusive environment. Inclusion enhances performance and retention, which furthers a company's ability to meet its goals and financial targets. However, in order for organizations to get the benefits of inclusion, employees from underrepresented groups need to feel comfortable presenting their authentic selves. If an employee does not feel welcome or included, the employee will engage, if at all, out of obligation and not with the uninhibited feeling of being a part of a psychologically safe organization.

Here are six tips to create psychological safety for employees in the workplace, particularly for employees who have been historically underrepresented:

1. Understand Stereotypes and Preconceptions, and Conduct a Diversity and Inclusion Assessment

We all have conscious and unconscious biases. Unconscious biases are more concerning because, by definition, we are not fully aware of them. Unconscious biases are beliefs about certain groups of people that individuals form outside their own conscious awareness. A critical step in creating psychological safety is to understand one's personal biases, along with those of the organization.

Therefore, an initial step in creating psychological safety is discussing bias, as well as conducting anti-

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bias training. Additionally, conducting a diversity and inclusion assessment can provide your organization a data-driven understanding of the current workplace demographics and culture around diversity and inclusion. Weldon Latham, founder of the unique Jackson Lewis Corporate Diversity Counseling Group, has been representing *Fortune 200* companies and conducting diversity and inclusion assessments for over 20 years. He advises:

Implementing diversity initiatives in a vacuum can actually be harmful to an organization. A better approach is to conduct a diversity, equity, and inclusion (“DEI”) assessment of key metrics and cultural indicators, and prepare a DEI Strategic Plan that will inform the development of effective initiatives.

2. Empathize and Be Curious

Put yourself in the shoes of a new employee and try imagining what they are going through. This is even more important when the incoming employee is of a different race, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, or status different from the majority of employees in the same or similar role. Organizations might be tempted to apply a one-size-fits-all approach to creating teams or assigning supervisors without understanding the potential for individuals who are underrepresented to feel excluded. You may need to empathize with the experience of an employee who finds themselves doubted or judged because of personal characteristics. This might alter how you create teams or assign supervisors.

As a result, curiosity becomes important. According to dictionary.com, curiosity is a “a strong desire to know or learn something.” As it relates to diversity, curiosity is having a strong desire to learn about the experiences of others to create an environment where employees feel seen and heard, and uninhibited to share their perspectives.

Empathy and curiosity in the workplace include taking the time to ask employees about their ideal supervision: the style of communication (email or call), type of feedback (direct or example), and frequency of checking in (daily or weekly). It does not mean accommodating all of these requests, but listening and trying. This not only builds trust but encourages employees to “buy in” or feel engaged if they feel they have had some say-so in their work experience.

3. Onboard with Intentionality

An important step in mitigating cultural barriers occurs at the start of employment. Michael D. Watkins stated in his Harvard Business Review article, “7 Ways to Set Up a New Hire for Success,” effective onboarding “brings new employees up to speed 50% faster, which means they’re more quickly and efficiently able to contribute to achieving desired goals. Effective onboarding also dramatically reduces failure rates and increases employee engagement and retention.”

Often employers believe in hiring talent and providing training over time. But making efforts to help employees feel welcome and valued upfront will build confidence and belief that they belong. It will also reduce stress and anxiety and create an initial feeling that it is safe to engage or add value. Moreover, if an organization lacks diversity, careless onboarding can heighten feelings among underrepresented employees of not belonging.

4. Be Consistent

Litigation often results when communication and behavior are not aligned. Make sure your actions in the workplace match your messaging. Over the past several months, employers have released statements about racism and made various commitments to diversity and inclusion. Similarly, more employers are requiring implicit bias training. Public statements and training, however, must result in changes in workplace behavior, otherwise you lose credibility with employees.

Similarly, some workplaces have “unwritten rules” on achieving success. This runs counter to an inclusive environment because there is inconsistency between written metrics for performance and promotion and the realities of the workplace. If an inclusive environment was in place and functioning, there would be no need for “unwritten rules.” Until that is the case, knowing the “unwritten rules” or what you are “up against” at a minimum empowers an individual to make more informed decisions about navigating their way in the workplace.

Psychological safety ultimately involves trust, which takes time to build and work to keep. If an employer’s actions around diversity and inclusion are inconsistent with its messaging to employees or to the public, the employer will lose credibility. Employees, particularly those who are underrepresented or who have been marginalized, will feel less safe in the workplace because of these inconsistencies.

5. Develop Opportunities for More Interpersonal Interactions

Employees need to have more opportunities to interact organically to form social bonds and trust over time. I can recall as a junior attorney speaking with a white senior attorney whom I was starting to work with more. She asked about my weekend. I responded that I went to a concert. She asked, who

did I see? I felt uncomfortable saying “Public Enemy” because I felt she might not know them or might judge me in a way that would negatively impact our working relationship. Instead, I answered “a band I used to listen to in college.” As we worked together, we were able to get to know one another more and I was able to share more about myself. Through this rapport, we both realized we had more in common than we may have initially perceived. As I built social ties, it was easier to ask for help, acknowledge when I did not know something, or challenge a strategic decision.

When management takes the time to build an understanding of other people, it becomes more comfortable to speak up. It is helpful for workplaces to think of ways to foster and support positive, healthy interactions among employees. This may include collaborations across teams, informal discussion at periodic team meetings, or setting boundaries and expectations for employee interpersonal engagements that are informed by inclusion.

Moreover, if employees feel more comfortable in the workplace, they are likely to discuss any disputes internally and seek to resolve them cooperatively.

6. The Value of a Diverse Pool of Employees

When you create a work environment where employees see a representation of themselves in varying positions within the workplace, they are more likely to feel comfortable being themselves. One way to help achieve this is to increase the diversity of the pool of candidates considered for positions. The Rooney Rule in the National Football League and the Mansfield Rule adopted by numerous law firms are two examples of ways to increase diversity within all levels of an organization.

Diversity and inclusion is a journey. Like most journeys, a well-crafted vision is key to its success, but be wary of legal traps. Failing to think strategically about diversity can result in employees feeling unsafe in the workplace. A well-crafted diversity and inclusion strategy fueled by data from a diversity assessment creates more employee engagement, less employee turnover, and, importantly, helps reduce stress, anxiety, and fear that may result in litigation.

For additional guidance, please contact a Jackson Lewis attorney.

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