

Making It  
Easier To Deal  
*With Others*



**THEWELLBEINGLAB**

A MICHELLEMCQUAID PROGRAM



Education

# Can You Create Safe Spaces?

JUDGEMENT



## Rushing To Mind-Read

Assuming the worst, leaping to conclusions, and failing to check our understanding.



## Biting Your Tongue

Assuming learning is embarrassing, we avoid conversations and fix it ourselves.



## Groaning & Moaning

Assuming others are incapable, we resort to complaining and rob others of growth.



## Pointing The Finger

Assuming others are to blame, we overly focus on mistakes and shame people.

## Slowing Down & Asking

Assuming the best, taking a breath and asking questions to better understand.



## Offering Support

Assuming learning is helpful, we speak up and offer our support to assist.



## Daring & Sharing

Assuming everyone is capable, we spark a clear and kind conversation to enable growth.



## Sitting In Responsibility

Assuming we share responsibility, we create a safe space for each of us to be accountable.



CURIOSITY

## “Arguably your brain’s greatest skill is the ability to think about the minds of others in order to understand them better.”

*Professor Nick Epley*

One of your brain’s greatest skills is its ability to think about the minds of others in order to understand them better. Every day, you engage in a kind of mind-reading on an almost minute-to-minute basis when you’re interacting with others, with the capacity to make inferences about invisible things – about what others think, believe, feel, and want. This operates like a sixth sense.

For example, when somebody comes into your office to talk to you, you make an inference about their motive, intent, or desire, and what they’re trying to get out of the conversation. This capacity to think about the minds of others operates really quickly and automatically and allows you to connect deeply and honestly with others. It allows you to cooperate with those you trust, avoid those you don’t, and to track your reputation in the eyes of others.

However, as great as this capacity to connect with the minds of others can be, Professor Nick Epley (2019) has found that people’s overconfidence in their ability to infer invisible motives and emotions can result in interpersonal misunderstandings, which can create social friction, missed opportunities, and undermine psychological safety in our relationships.

For example, studies indicate you tend to have a good sense overall of whether others in your workplace generally find you to be likable. However, if you were asked to predict how much those you know like you, you would be little better than guesses. This means you may have no real idea about who likes you or doesn’t like you in your organization, making it difficult to tell when you’re conveying the desired impression or messages to others (Epley, 2014).

You may also have real difficulty knowing if someone is lying to you or telling you the truth. Studies have found (Bond & DePaulo, 2006) you are likely to be accurate about this about fifty percent of the time, which is barely better than chance (i.e., flipping a coin to guess). However, really knowing if someone is being honest with you or not, could improve your interactions. For example, it could help you encourage those who are nervous about telling you the truth to feel more comfortable about opening up, by letting them know that it’s okay and that you can handle the truth.

Professor Gervase Bushe (2019) explains that our overconfidence in mind-reading others often bogs down our relationships in “interpersonal mush” – the largely unfavorable conclusions we tend to leap to, about what others are thinking, feeling, and doing – which leads to distrust, spotty implementation, an inability to learn together, and results in higher levels of anxiety and burnout. For example, someone might say or do something that you’re not happy with. But rather than saying something to them, you’ll make up a story to make sense of their actions. This story then becomes your truth and a filter for how you interpret any future interactions with the other person.

How do we avoid this neurological trap? If you really want to increase your understanding of someone’s thoughts, feelings, and actions in a situation, approach them in a humble way and ask them direct questions about what’s on their mind at the time when they’re having thoughts that you care about and listen well. Also, stay hyper vigilant of your own biases. Remember the SCARF (Rock, 2008) model showing us what sends us into social threats.



## JUDGEMENT MINDSET

Goal = To Protect Myself

## CURIOSITY MINDSET

Goal = To Support Others



### BELIEFS

You think most people **aren't really trying to do the best they can** in the moment.

You think the **people you trust are trying to do the best they can** in the moment.

You think that **generally people are trying to do the best they can** in the moment.



### CHALLENGES

You tend to **leap to conclusions** about people's intentions and actions.

You **slow down, check in and get curious** but only with people who have earned your trust.

You **ask questions** to understand people's intentions and actions.



### EFFORT

You expect **connections with others to come easily** or not at all.

You expect **connections with others to require effort** but it is hard work.

You expect that **connection requires effort** and invest time getting to know others.



### HELP

You **prefer to fix things for people** than watch them struggle to learn and grow.

You **offer help when asked** but know it would be quicker to do it yourself.

You **offer people coaching and support** to help them learn and grow.



### SET BACKS

You **moan about the people involved** to others.

You **talk to the people involved, but also moan about them** to others.

You **talk to the people involved** and encourage them to move forward.



### FAILURE

You **blame and shame others** for their mistakes.

You fear mistakes, and **feel less confident** to trust others.

You **show others compassion** and help them take accountability for their learning.



### FEEDBACK

You **bite your tongue** in order to avoid difficult conversations.

You **address issues directly**, when you have the opportunity.

You **pro-actively create safe spaces to talk honestly** and enable learning.

## “Psychological safety describes a work environment where people are not tied up in interpersonal knots.”

*Professor Amy Edmondson*

An extensive two-year study at Google found that their highest performing teams all had one thing in common – high levels of psychological safety (Delizonna, 2017). Professor Amy Edmondson at Harvard Business School explains that psychological safety exists when team members feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable with each other by speaking up and offering new ideas, asking questions, valuing different opinions, and being willing and able to learn from their mistakes (Edmondson, 1999).

Psychological safety has been found to be both fragile and vital to success in uncertain, interdependent environments. This is because your brain processes a provocation by a boss, competitive co-worker, or a dismissive subordinate as a life-or-death threat. The amygdala, your brain's alarm bell, ignites the fight-or-flight response sending blood away from the thinking part of your brain and out into your arms and legs. And while this response may save you in a life-or-death situation, it makes it harder to think straight at work often when you most need it.

In contrast when your workplace feels challenging but not threatening, your brain's oxytocin levels rise, eliciting trust and trust-making behavior. And this has been found to be a huge factor in team success as it encourages speaking up because: concern is alleviated about others' reactions; energy isn't wasted on fear-based behaviors so clarity of thought is improved; productive conflict is supported; mistakes are readily discussed enabling failures to be mitigated; more novel ideas are shared promoting innovation; instead of focusing on self-protection people are focused on achieving motivating goals; and a climate is created that increases accountability (Edmondson, 2012).

Having high psychological safety in your team is not necessarily about being polite and nice. Rather it's recognizing that true respect is about saying what you think, and giving each other permission to make mistakes, get it wrong and being able to self-correct. Nor is psychological safety about eliminating all risk, but by taking away interpersonal risk you can better mitigate business risk. It also doesn't mean you need to lower your performance standards. You can still have high standards, high accountability and high psychological safety in your team.

Researchers suggest you can improve psychological safety by:

- **Replacing blame with curiosity** – If you believe you already know what the other person is thinking, then you're not ready to have a conversation. Instead, adopt a learning mindset, knowing you don't have all the facts and remember that generally people are doing the best they can with what they have in any given moment.
- **Approaching conflict as a collaborator, not an adversary** – True success is a win-win outcome, so when conflicts come up, avoid triggering a fight-or-flight reaction by asking, “How could we achieve a mutually desirable outcome?”
- **Accepting that failure can lead to growth** – We're all failing some of the time, the only question is whether we are learning from these experiences. Make it safe to take smart risks by normalizing failure and struggle as part of the learning process. Talk openly and with curiosity about what's not working, encourage and reward people's willingness to ask for help or mentoring, and share and celebrate the lessons being learned.

# Your Connection Toolbox

## Seek The Good



### Spot Strengths

Look for people's strengths and share with them what you see and how this helps others.

## Make The First Move



### Say Hello

Make eye contact and say hello to at least one stranger today.

## Create Safe Spaces



### Be Fully Present

When you're talking to someone, turn your phone over, your emails off, and really listen.

## Choose Kindness



### Be Compassionate

Remind yourself that most people are doing the best they can, with what they have, in this moment.



### Appreciatively Inquire

Ask someone an appreciative question. What's going well? What are you looking forward to?



### Invite Someone New

Invite someone who thinks differently to you to be part of a conversation or new project.



### Encourage Play

Take time for joyful, informal connection knowing that having fun together is part of belonging.



### Reach For Kindness

Do one kind act each day to help someone you work with.



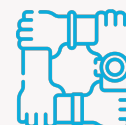
### Be Grateful

Thank one person each day for how they make your work a little better or easier.



### Check In

Check in on someone you haven't talked to for a while.



### Show Trust

Seeking the advice of others and show them how you're applying what they shared.



### Make Time

Make the time to return someone's call or respond to their email, show them they matter.

Please remember that feelings of struggle are just your body's way of saying something important to you needs your attention and support.

If you need immediate additional support to care for your wellbeing please reach out to:

- The Department's EAP Supporting You Service – 1800 060 650, 24/7
- Lifeline – 13 11 14
- Beyond Blue – 1800 512 348

For more helpful information go to:

- The Department's **EAP – Supporting You service** <https://education.nsw.gov.au/inside-the-department/health-and-safety/staff-wellbeing/employee-assistance-program>
- **Being Well** – COVID-19 Staff Wellbeing Resources <https://education.nsw.gov.au/inside-the-department/being-well/covid-19-staff-wellbeing-resources>
- EAP – Supporting You **Specialist Support Helplines** <https://education.nsw.gov.au/inside-the-department/health-and-safety/staff-wellbeing/employee-assistance-program/specialist-support-phonelines>