

Safe at work

How can neuroscience help leaders and their teams perform at their best?

Writing **Sam Mather**



Understanding how the brain works can better help us lead and work with others. The core function of the human brain is to keep us safe and to ensure our survival as a species. As we rapidly approach a global population of eight billion, it's clearly done a grand job.

Mechanisms for keeping us safe have been hardwired into our brains. This hardwiring means that we are pre-programmed to look out for anything that might harm us, either physically or emotionally (the brain treats pain from each of these in the same way). And, crucially, as we reach adulthood, we have developed many strategies to respond to these threats.

Sadly, although these strategies may protect us individually, not all of them result in a productive workplace. When a threat is perceived, the brain prioritises our 'flight-or fight' response. It prepares our bodies by increasing the hormone adrenaline, releasing another hormone, cortisol, and narrowing our perception to focus on our own self-preservation. It sends us a message that we must be better prepared.

And, given that part of the brain we are being encouraged to use – the prefrontal cortex (or the smart bit) – is de-prioritised, however. After all, you don't need to work out quadratic equations if you are fighting or running away. The neurotransmitters that enable innovation, learning, problem-solving, smart thinking and big-picture thinking are suppressed by the surges of cortisol and adrenaline. This is normally a problem if it's a one-off event. For those who are perceiving threats constantly, however, it's not only bad for their physical health, but the lack of psychological safety also means that their ability to be productive employees is compromised.

Psychological safety

Harvard Business School's Professor Amy Edmondson defines psychological safety as the belief that you will not be humiliated, or find your career or status compromised, for speaking up with concerns, ideas, mistakes or questions. Although there is some debate in literature, it is generally considered that we have a finite number of cognitive resources. If employees don't feel psychologically safe, they are diverting limited cognitive resources and energy into protecting themselves: covering their tracks, playing politics and side-stepping accountability – ultimately engaging in non-productive activity.

Knowing what the brain is hardwired to interpret as a threat can enable organisations, leaders and team members to design, communicate and implement organisational initiatives in a way that

quietens the brain's defence mechanism. In particular, resistance to change is less about people not being able to change: the brain has a plasticity to adapt to change. The resistance to change is more likely to be a result of perceived threat.

There are five 'conditions of comfort' which, when absent, can trigger a threat response from our brains.

1 Control Leadership theories have long advocated for collaboration, delegation and empowerment. And they are right to do so. From the age of two, we hate being told what to do. Being controlled by someone else could be a threat to our survival. Only when we are in control of ourselves, and our destiny, will we feel safe. Thus, a command-and-control style of leadership will trigger a threat response in the human brain.

2 Consistency If something is contradictory or unexpected, the brain will err on the side of caution and assume it is a potential threat. The brain has a strong 'error detection' capability. Conflicting messages, incongruence between word and deed, and constant changes in direction all result in the brain recognising the inconsistency. And the brain assumes this inconsistency is a threat.

3 Competence We have all had times when we have received 'feedback' and our defences have risen. This is the brain telling us there is a potential threat: a threat to our competence. Something that was (and still is!) key to our survival. People will go to great lengths to disguise a perceived threat to their competence, especially in organisations that penalise failure.

4 Connectedness We are herd animals. There is safety in numbers. This plays out in organisations in the form of cliques, 'in groups' and 'out groups', and even in rivalry between functions or departments. We have a hardwired drive to be connected to a group or person. Changing teams, a new boss, merging departments: these are all threats to the safety we gain through connectedness.

5 Cause Finally, we need to know WHY we are doing something. We have finite physical, emotional and cognitive resources. If you want me to invest them in something, then there needs to be a good reason. Otherwise, I may be wasting resources needed to survive. Understand your people and what's important to them.

Knowing how the brain perceives external events has benefits at both an organisational and individual level. While my research has shown that an employee's work environment is the



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major contributor to their level of psychological safety, individuals also play a role. So, how can leaders use psychological safety to boost productivity? Here are some tips.

1 Start with you: lose the ego Leadership is not about you being the 'boss' or the 'decision-maker', or having all the answers. Leadership is about enabling others and setting them up for success. In doing so, employees will see you have their interests at heart, rather than self-promotion.

2 Learn to coach The 'ego-lite' leader does not feel the need to provide the answer or expect people to do things their way. Coaching allows leaders to empower and enable, thereby giving employees control and helping them to develop a mindset of learning rather than fear failure. Coaching allows employees to build their competence and, if done well, will improve the sense of connectedness between leader and employee.

3 Provide meaning and purpose For the employee, not the organisation! Connect the vision of the organisation to individuals' own aspirations and purpose. Create goals that enable both organisational and individual goals to co-exist. In doing so, you are providing a cause that they can relate to, as well as competence and connectedness.

4 Provide consistency This is consistency between communication, goals, leadership styles and actions versus deeds. The organisation's level of psychological safety is determined by the leader who leads in the 'least safe' way. So, decide how you want leaders and employees to behave through clearly articulated values, and then hold people to account for outlier behaviour.

5 Support growth and wellness, both within and outside the organisation Individuals need live a brain-healthy lifestyle: from getting enough sleep to finding time to relax. In maintaining a healthy brain, employees can deploy more advanced techniques to feel emotionally safe and mentally resilient. Give people what they need to succeed mentally, physically and professionally. Set them up for success – from ensuring they get the rest they need, to skilling them up for future roles.

When they work in this kind of environment, employees will have 'fitter' brains. As a result, they will be more resilient, more willing to collaborate and, of course, more productive. **E**

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