

The Power of Psychological Safety

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The path to a profitable, productive, high-performance, and happy practice

Psychological safety. This term largely refers to the perception of comfort that individuals have in freely being and expressing themselves without fear of repercussions and other negative responses to their self-expression.

In the workplace, psychologically-safe [teams within organizations](#) are not afraid of taking risks or challenging the status quo. There are additional considerations and characteristics associated with psychological safety in a healthcare setting; however, dental practices are best served when they do not ignore this essential element of a healthy workforce *and* a healthy, growing brand.

The secure psyche

In her [seminal research](#) on team-based psychological safety, Harvard Business School's Dr. Amy Edmondson initially theorized that so-called "more effective" teams within the hospital

she studied would make fewer mistakes. The research bore out something entirely different. What she found instead was that the effective teams seemingly made *more mistakes*. The data informed a new theory: Superior teams did not actually make more errors. They just *made more reports about those errors*. Dr. Edmondson surmised that these teams were more willing to admit their mistakes because “they felt safe doing so.” This psychological safety presents a considerable driver of group learning behaviours and, in turn, team and organizational performance.

In fact, psychological safety was defined as *the most important* contributor to a team’s effectiveness when [Google analyzed](#) 35-plus statistical models and hundreds of variables to pinpoint the “It” factor behind high performance. As researchers put it, *who* specifically made up the teams was less important than *how* the respective team members worked together as a group.

Psychological safety is so vital that our own Health Canada enacted its National Standard governing Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace. “[The Standard](#),” as it is known, is described as the first-ever set of voluntary guidelines and resources to aid organizations in promoting mental wellness and curbing psychological harm on the job.

The business case for promoting a psychologically-safe practice environment and teams is multi-faceted and takes direct aim at the following functions and challenges:

- Your team cannot best take care of their patients’ health if they themselves are unhealthy and not in a good “space” mentally. It is [estimated](#) that mental health-related conditions are accountable for almost three of every ten disability claims – with some sectors reporting that around *half* of all claims fall into this category.
- Staff who do not feel “safe” in the workplace may be overstressed and more prone to errors or oversights.
- Additionally, as noted in Dr. Edmondson’s groundbreaking research, these individuals are less likely to come forward with concerns about mistakes, either ones they have made themselves or those made by other associates or staff members. This sets a troubling, risky, and ultimately damaging precedent.
- Performance-related concerns, such as those mentioned above, considerably increase your risk exposure. Your practice may be vulnerable to legal action, and

there is also the undeniable associated risk to the professional reputation that you have worked so hard to build and further cultivate.

- Speaking of reputation, the effects of a psychologically unsafe workforce can make it very difficult to attract (or *keep*) top talent. This challenge is further **exacerbated** by labour shortages and keen competition for top performers.
- The healthy discourse that goes hand in glove with psychologically safe workplaces supports positive engagement, motivation, creativity, continual improvement, lifelong learning, improved decision-making, and so many other great attributes for your practice. These **gains** are often due to employees feeling safe enough to come forward with new ways of doing things without fear, judgment, or reprisals.

All of the items mentioned above feed into your “brand.” Sometimes, the hostility within offices is palpable. You can feel it the moment you walk in the door, akin to when you nonchalantly enter a room amid an argument or otherwise testy situation. You bristle. You do not want patients to sense this. They will feel immediately unwelcome.

Similarly, patients and other critical partners to your business can pick up on body language, even tone (over the phone), and other signs of stressors. All these elements lend themselves to that “patient experience” and “patient comfort” that we talk about and market so much on our websites, social media, and other collateral.

The best way to avoid these negative experiences or perceptions from cropping up is not to have such an environment in the first place! That way, there is no risk of patients stepping into the middle of a stressed-out shift or the remnants of a hostile exchange. And no amount of relaxing aromatherapy or calming tea offered lobby-side will assuage that!

Next steps to a healthier workplace and brand ID

With all that being said, organizations and businesses of all sizes and types can benefit from acknowledging and addressing the issue of psychological safety. In the health care setting, there is just more generally riding on the mindset and capabilities of the staff delivering care than those employees in other sectors tasked with making “widgets” instead of easing pain and restoring health; no offence to widget-makers, of course!

May we recommend the following:

- We know you have a team in place, likely a very good one. However, as individuals retire or otherwise move on, or as the need for additional hands on deck increases, we urge you to take great care when selecting new team members. Assembling the right people, and the process of onboarding them from the get-go, has far-reaching effects on the well-being of the team and practice into the future.
- As identified in Patrick Lencioni's *The Ideal Team Player*, look for and prioritize those soft skills and [characteristics](#) of humility (selflessness), ambition (that “fire in the belly”), and “smarts” (emotional IQ and interpersonal skills).
- Be on the lookout for trouble signs in your staff (and yourself, for that matter). The American Dental Association has isolated red flags, which should not be ignored and generally call for an intervention with appropriate health professionals.
- These [signs](#) include problems coping with typical practice stressors, consistently placing work ahead of all other needs, feelings of irritability and depression, and consumption of more than “moderate” amounts of alcohol each day. Here, moderate is characterized as up to four and up to three alcoholic drinks daily for men and women, respectively.
- Communicate, communicate, communicate. A good starting point is to create a shared vocabulary and understanding of what is acceptable and welcome within your psychologically safe practice environment. Put the likes of encouraged behaviours and norms in writing and ensure they are distributed to team members at all levels.
- Constantly seek feedback and have an open door. After all, input from the team is a basic tenet of a workplace that displays psychological safety. There should be plenty of ways for associates and staff to do this, be it during regular meetings or via an old-school confidential “suggestion box.” These efforts need not be time-consuming or clunky. They should, however, fit in seamlessly with your work culture and day-to-day operations.
- Plenty of options should suit each team member's specific work style and preferences, too. Such acknowledgement is all about fostering an inclusive practice dynamic, the type of dynamic that will also make your office *the* place to work and *the* destination for top-notch care in your city or neighbourhood.

- Do not take your team for granted. Be intentional in recognizing employee contributions, and do not be afraid to communicate those “high-fives” to your broader community on socials and elsewhere. In fact, as more consumers of all kinds [value](#) partnering with high-integrity organizations, it is more than appropriate to share these values and efforts with patients, vendors, and other partners in your community.
- Others want to see what you are doing as a team outside of day-to-day work, and it is only beneficial to you to share those elements of your practice that make you such a responsible neighbour and environmental steward.
- Inventory everything from good sustainability practices to volunteer efforts, which may or may not have anything to do with dentistry but still speak volumes to the “human element” of your practice. When integrating such efforts and initiatives into your communications, be yourself. Be sincere.

As much as we may speculate on the [rise of AI](#), we are not automatons here. Yes, “people-oriented practices” that support everything from how would-be talent to would-be patients view us can be “messy” or uncomfortable. But there is considerable power and opportunity in *being brave – taking a hard look* at how employees feel about approaching us as leaders and about sharing their candid thoughts on vital workplace matters.

We can use our psychologically safe space as a vehicle to accelerate productivity, boost performance, “upskill,” buoy patient loyalty, attract new “fans,” and foster a positive, overall happier place to work. We take considerable care in ensuring our “space” is safe in terms of adhering to optimal hygiene and cleanliness standards and reducing the risk of exposure to COVID-19 and other illnesses. Now, we must invest that same care and scrutiny when assessing and addressing the psychological safety and health of our dental home away from home.

About the Author:

Naren Arulrajah, President and CEO of [Ekwa Marketing](#), has been a leader in medical marketing for over a decade. Ekwa provides comprehensive marketing solutions for busy dentists, with a team of more than 180 full time professionals, providing web design, hosting, content creation, social media, reputation management, SEO, and more. If you’re



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