Psychological Safety: The Key Ingredient of Organizational Change

Network for Change and Continuous Innovation
July 2023

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Considerations

Remain Respectful

Be Open Minded

Voluntary Participation

How much experience do you have in managing change?

Advanced - significant experience in managing change and have played key role in multiple change initiatives

33%

Seasoned Practitioner - highly experienced in managing change and have successfully led multiple change initiatives

25%

Intermediate - moderate experience in managing change and have been involved in a few change initiatives

19%

Limited Experience - some exposure to managing change but with limited involvement or responsibility

17%

Novice - little to no experience in managing change

6%

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A psychologically safe culture is one where …

Individuals are encouraged and believe it's OK to speak up, challenge the status quo, and offer original ideas to improve problems
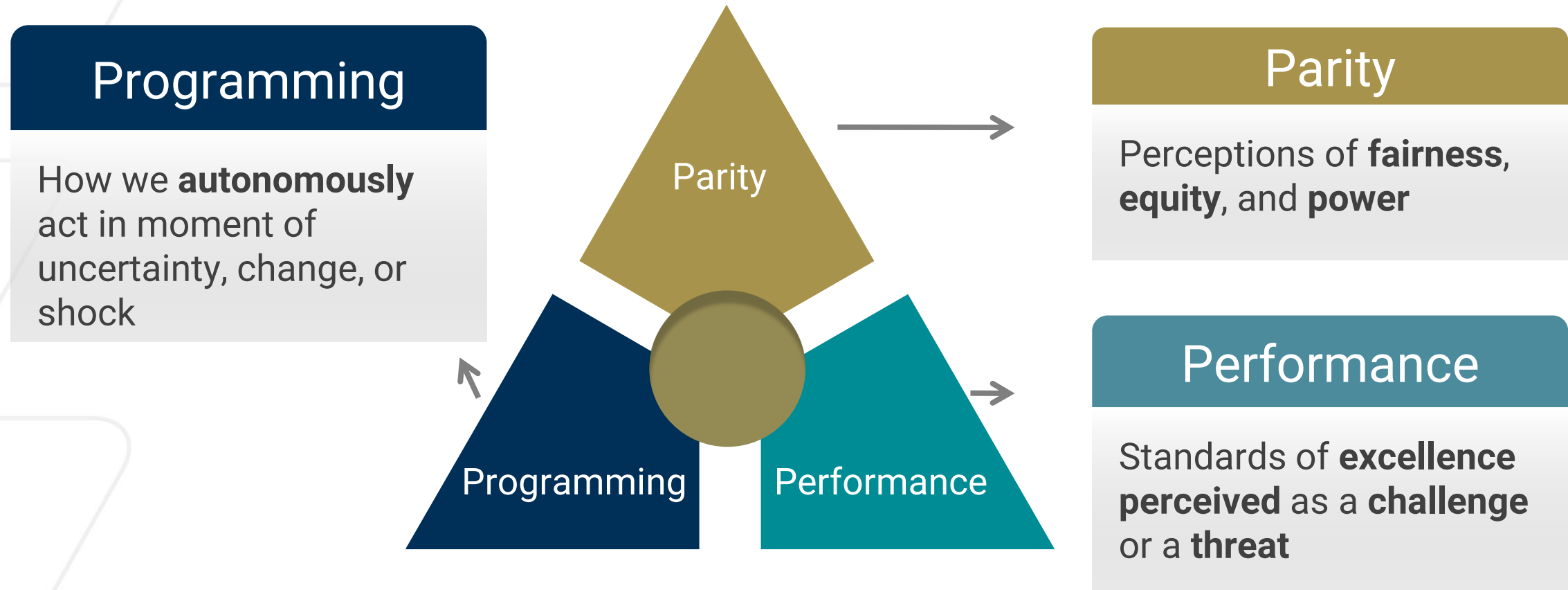
Learning, creativity, and innovation are the norm

Individuals perceive minimal risk for telling the truth

Employees feel comfortable speaking up and being themselves without fear of judgment or punishment

It is more rewarding than threatening to take interpersonal risks at work.

See Amy Edmondson's TedTalk: https://youtu.be/LhoLuui9gX8

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3Ps: Shaping a Person's Sense of Safety at Work

Programming

How we **autonomously** act in moment of uncertainty, change, or shock

Parity

Programming

Performance

Parity

Perceptions of **fairness**, **equity**, and **power**

Performance

Standards of **excellence perceived** as a **challenge** or a **threat**

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Programming

In uncertainty, shock, stress, or change, our programming can become autonomous:

Conditioning
What we have been told, taught or shown

Defenses
How we protect ourselves and how we feel when we perceive criticism or a threat

Experiences
The stories we carry with us through life

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Parity

The state of being equal, especially in relation to pay and position.

Source: Cambridge Dictionary

**Positional power and privilege** correlate with higher perceived psychological safety

"**Otherness**" correlates with lower perceived psychological safety

Bias, marginalization, exclusion, and systemic inequities influence perceptions of psychological safety

Parity can influence if people see **performance expectations as a threat or as a challenge**

Perceptions of **"organizational betrayal"** erode psychological safety

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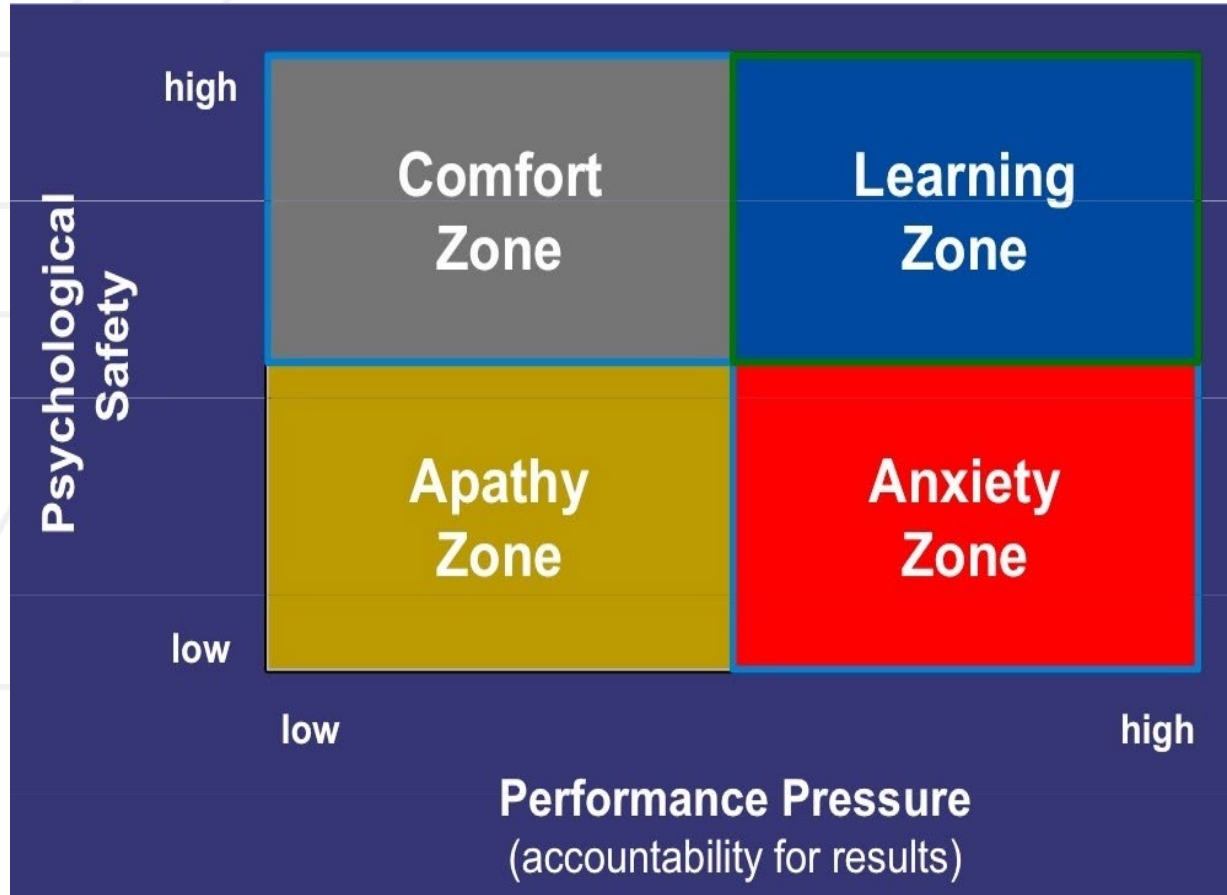
Performance

Comfort zone –
Sense of complacency. Little sense of urgency and doing the minimum is the norm.

Learning Zone-
High performance, continuous improvement, measurable results.

Apathy Zone-
Lack of care or concern for success, performance, cohesion. Disengaged and disconnected. Poor results.

Anxiety Zone –
High stress and anxiety. Wary to experiment, offer new ideas, or seek help. Burnout is a frequent outcome.

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Scenario

Your university is preparing for the launch of a shared services center to support campus users in completing routine administrative tasks. New roles will be created and while there are no plans to eliminate staff, a significant amount of upskilling and reskilling will be required.

Many members of your team are resistant to this change due to concerns about their roles, authority, or fear of becoming obsolete. In addition, many employees have expressed skepticism about leaders' claims that there are no plans to eliminate positions.

In what ways does psychological safety apply to this situation?
How would you approach or react to this situation?
Reflect Individually – Discuss Together – Share with the Group

Strategy 1: Vulnerability

- Show Up Without Armor
- Be Yourself
- Care For and Connect with Others
- Show You Care for Other's Ambitions and Dreams
- Model Empathy and Compassion (For Self and Others)
- Shamelessly Own Your Setbacks and Failures

Strategy 2: Crucial Conversations

When Stakes Are High, Opinions Vary, and Emotions Run Strong!

- Lean Into Discomfort

- Stay Calm and Open-Minded

- Be Aware that Psychological Safety May Be at Risk

- Actively Listen and Get Curious About Others' Perspectives

- Separate Facts from Stories

- Apologize When Appropriate

- Make It Safe

Strategy 3: Trauma Informed Leadership

Recognizing trauma and its negative effects on employees working to mitigate those effects!

- Notice Discomfort and Recognize Cues, Signs, and Symptoms
- Be Culturally Humble and Responsive
- Mitigate Power Differentials
- Encourage Peer Support and Mutual Self-Help
- Advocate for Empowerment, Voice, and Choice
- Identify and Share Resources for Resilience and Recovery
- Recognize and Resolve Shaming Behavior

Psychological Safety and Change Management

Putting the Pieces Together
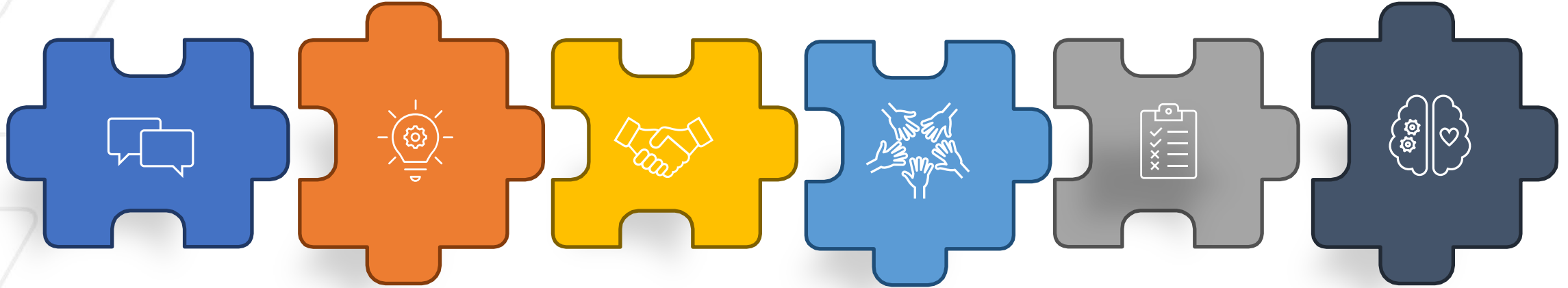
Encourage Open Communication

- Conduct stakeholder analysis; tailor communications
- Establish two-way communication
- Develop clear and consistent messaging
- Acknowledge and address emotions
- Foster open dialogue

Foster Innovation and Creativity

- Encourage idea generation
  - Create safe spaces for stakeholders to freely share ideas
- Identify and empower change champions
- Recognize and celebrate innovation

Build Trust and Collaboration

- Foster an inclusive culture; invest time and effort in building relationships with stakeholders at all levels
- Tailor messages
- Actively involve stakeholders in the change process
- Establish shared goals

Increase Employee Engagement

- Develop a compelling case for change
- Foster a sense of ownership by empowering stakeholders to contribute to decision-making and problem-solving
- Establish peer support networks

Reduce Resistance to Change

- Share the "why" behind the change
- Acknowledge and address emotions and concerns
- Solicit feedback
- Be transparent
- Build a strong change coalition
- Recognize and reward achievements and contributions

Promote Learning and Adaptability

- Conduct readiness assessments and identify skill gaps
- Provide targeted training
- Foster a growth mindset and learning culture
- Create spaces for stakeholders to reflect and learn (encourage self-assessment and peer feedback)

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