

Sample



THE

Psychological Safety Playbook

Lead More Powerfully
by Being More Human



Karolin Helbig
Minette Norman

Endorsements

"Powerful ideas, generously shared. Simple, actionable, and urgent. This book is a must-read for anyone who cares enough to lead."

—**Seth Godin**, bestselling author of *This is Marketing*

"*The Psychological Safety Playbook* offers timeless practices to help you thrive and lead in an uncertain and challenging world. The authors' engaging style makes their practical suggestions both compelling and actionable."

—**Amy C. Edmondson**, Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management, Harvard Business School, and author of *The Fearless Organization*

"We've all heard lots about the WHY of psychological safety; at last, we have a practical guide to the HOW of it. If you want your team to thrive, this book has tools you'll want to use."

—**Michael Bungay Stanier**, bestselling author of *The Coaching Habit*

"If you are leading change and transformation (and who isn't!), then *The Psychological Safety Playbook* should be on your reading list. Filled with pragmatic examples, this book provides a simple framework that will support you in building the team of your dreams."

—**Charlene Li**, Chief Research Officer, PA Consulting, and *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Disruption Mindset*

"The right book at the right time! While most leaders should have realized the superpower effects of psychological safety by now, many are still struggling to implement it. In this playbook, Helbig and Norman provide a wonderful collection of practical and easy-to-implement moves, which they present in a playful rather than a rigid, academic way. Very practical and insightful while easy to read—you 'only' need to practice!"

—**Oliver Herrmann**, SVP, New Ways of Working, Deutsche Telekom AG

"If organizational culture is important to you, and psychological safety is a vehicle to get you there, this book is the blueprint that will serve as your guide."

—**Dr. Ruth Gotian**, Thinkers50 #1 Emerging Management Thinker, author of *The Success Factor*, Chief Learning Officer and Assistant Professor of Education in Anesthesiology, Weill Cornell Medicine

"If we want to talk about and achieve only trivial things, we don't need to worry about psychological safety. If we want to talk about what's essential and do what really matters, we need to make it safer for people to really open up with each other. This book beautifully illustrates this distinction and goes beyond it to providing an operating manual for how to achieve it!"

—**Greg McKeown**, bestselling author of *Effortless and Essentialism*

"Every team could benefit from Helbig and Norman's inclusive rituals and practical tips for creating work environments where all voices are heard and respected."

—**Ludmila N. Praslova, PhD**, SHRM-SCP,
Professor, VUSC Graduate Organizational
Psychology

"It's time to throw out the antiquated model of tough-guy, fear-driven leadership. The most successful leaders I know are deliberate about building trust with their teams. This book will not only make you a better leader, but also a better person."

—**Katrina Alcorn**, design executive, and
award-winning author

"The Psychological Safety Playbook highlights the best practices of effective leadership: inclusiveness, deep listening, learning from mistakes, and team innovation. Karolin Helbig and Minette Norman demystify the concept of psychological safety with specific, concrete practices. This book is essential reading for any leader wishing to create a high-engagement and high-performance culture in contemporary organizations, which increasingly require a more human-centric approach to leadership."

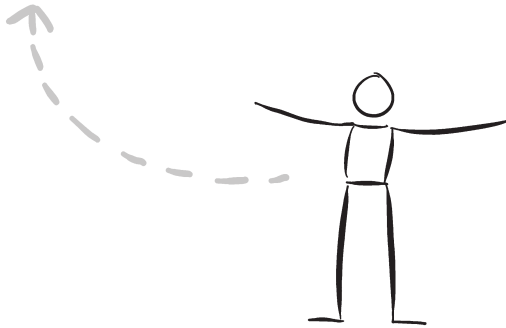
—**Rich Fernandez**, CEO, SIY Global

"The Psychological Safety Playbook is packed with practical and effective tips for leaders on building inclusive and empowered teams. Every play and move in the book is well researched, actionable, and can be applied today."

—**Amy Coleman**, CVP, Human Resources
and Corporate Functions, Microsoft

Karolin Helbig
Minette Norman

THE
**Psychological
Safety
Playbook**



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Introduction

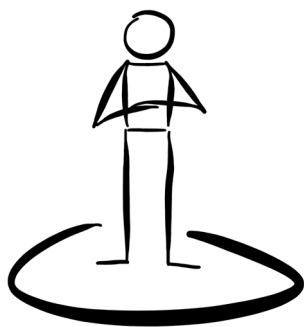
Welcome to *The Psychological Safety Playbook*. We are delighted to share this work with you. We believe that leaders who create conditions for psychological safety are the transformational leaders every organization around the globe needs today and in the future. And we believe that leadership is independent of formal hierarchical roles. You can be a leader in any position within your organization, whether you are a manager of a small team, a director, an executive, or someone who works to leverage the strengths of colleagues and team members.



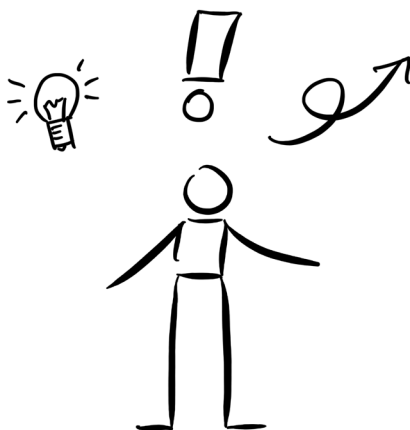
What Is Psychological Safety?

Psychological safety is “a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes.” This is the definition given by Amy C. Edmondson, Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School, who has been researching psychological safety for decades.

Think of psychological safety as the essential nutrients, vitamins, and minerals needed to develop healthy teams. Teams that have a high degree of psychological safety are the highest performing teams, the most inclusive teams, the teams that people want to be part of, and the teams that innovate. Google’s Project Aristotle studied hundreds of internal teams and found that the most important attribute of successful teams was psychological safety. If you’d like to learn more about Amy C. Edmondson’s extensive research and case studies, we encourage you to read her book *The Fearless Organization*.



When we don't feel safe, we hold back.



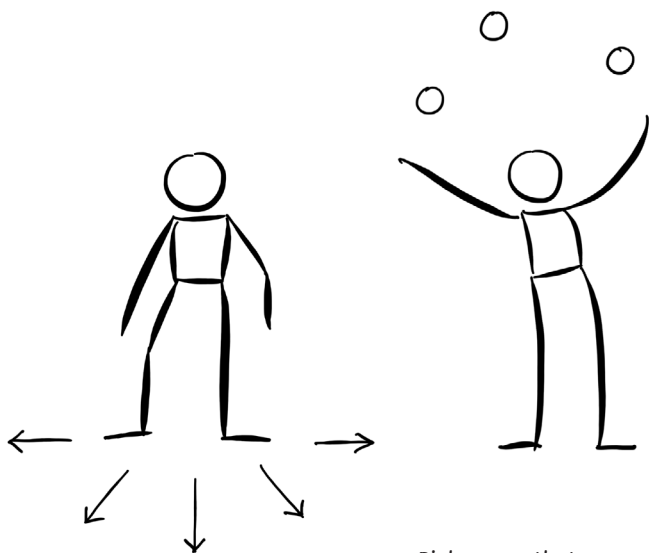
When we feel safe, we can ask naive questions,
propose wild ideas, and share our emotions.

How to Use This Playbook

This playbook is divided into five major plays. Each play contains a collection of moves, which are practical, real-world skills that every leader can learn and practice. You can start anywhere in the playbook and pick what you are particularly interested in learning more about. All the plays and moves are self-contained, so you do not have to read this playbook from beginning to end.

While some of the moves in this playbook may be familiar to you, some may be new. Remember that everything worth doing well takes practice. With ongoing, regular practice, we can hardwire these moves as our new default behavior.

We developed this playbook as a starting point for leaders. It is in no way an exhaustive collection of everything that can be done to increase psychological safety in organizations. This playbook contains our personal selection of the top twenty-five proven moves for leaders.



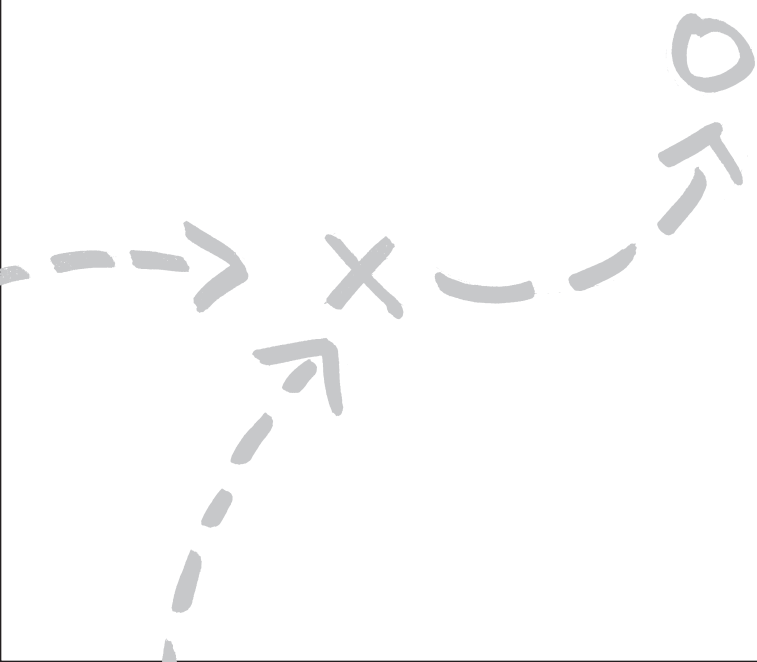
There are five plays in this book we invite you to explore.

Pick moves that resonate with you and experiment with them.

As you read the plays, you may notice that we repeat information, with slight variations. This redundancy is deliberate and reinforces common themes that are critical skills for leaders, including self-awareness, curiosity, and empathy. We also want each play to be complete and self-contained so that you can read and use what resonates most with you.

PLAY 1

Communicate Courageously



Courageous communication is one of the most fundamental skills needed to create a psychologically safe environment for everyone. Courage requires us to get out of our comfort zone, which means that you may not feel immediately comfortable with some of the moves in this play. That's OK! Embracing discomfort is part of the journey.

Keep in mind that communicating courageously is not only about what we say but also about inviting others to contribute to dialogue, being honest about our own feelings, letting go of our need to be right or perfect, and setting the tone for humor and levity to counteract the natural discomfort that often accompanies courageous communication.

Leaders tend to believe that they need to have all the answers and that they cannot show emotion. It's time to set aside those limiting beliefs. Courageous communication requires leaders to be vulnerable, to show up authentically, and to acknowledge that we are all works in progress.



A Story of Courageous Communication

Minette vividly recalls how a staff member demonstrated courageous communication:

I hired George as an engineering leader at a large global software company based in San Francisco. George was responsible for driving major technology changes across a decentralized engineering community. He had a PhD and decades of leadership experience, so he could have felt justified in fully taking charge and telling people what they needed to do. Instead, he communicated in a way that invited input and participation from others. He laughed easily, often about himself, and his laugh was infectious.

While George knew the direction we needed to go, he openly admitted that he did not have all the answers and that the experts in each team knew more than he did about their code and systems architecture. He asked people to offer their ideas and share their experiences so that together they could solve some very challenging technical problems. It wasn't an easy journey, as many of the experts often disagreed with one another, which could have resulted in unresolved conflict and long delays. George didn't shut down the conflict; he kept the dialogue going until a decision could be agreed upon by most participants. The result? Engineering experts from around the company contributed to solutions that the whole company could leverage.

George publicly acknowledged others' contributions, always using "we" rather than "I" when sharing successes. He also asked for help and recognized other people's contributions, which made him come across as more competent and credible, not less. It takes courage to not have all the answers, to ask for help, to invite dissent, and to laugh at yourself.

Moves in This Play

- 1 Welcome Other Viewpoints: “What Am I Missing?”
- 2 Solicit Diverse Perspectives: “That’s One Viewpoint; Let’s Hear Some Dissent”
- 3 Open Up: Express Your Own Emotions
- 4 Take Off the Mask of Perfection: “I Don’t Know Yet”
- 5 Nurture a Sense of Humor at Work: Laugh More (Especially at Yourself)

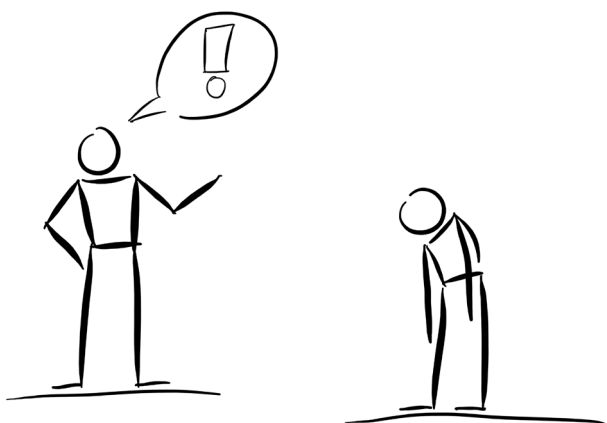
Welcome Other Viewpoints: "What Am I Missing?"

Why to Try It

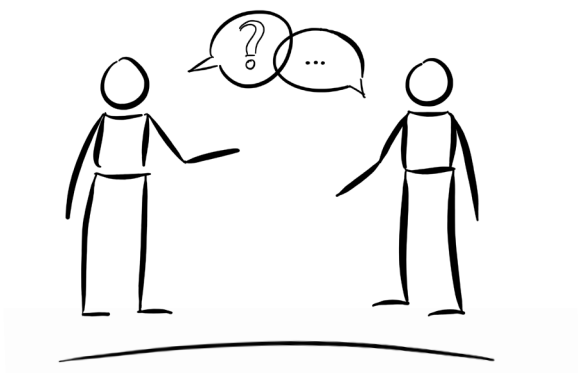
One of the most powerful things you can do as a leader is to ask, "What am I missing?" When you ask this simple question, you signal that you are open to looking at things from different angles and even to being challenged. With these four words, you are acknowledging that you're not omniscient—that you do not have all the answers.

One of the dangers of not soliciting or considering other viewpoints is conformity bias, which occurs when people feel pressured to agree with everyone else in the room. In the extreme case of people not feeling safe to voice a point of view, teams may experience groupthink, a psychological phenomenon in which the desire for harmony or conformity results in an irrational or dysfunctional decision. Leaders must be aware of the tendency of team members to agree with their leaders—it's generally easier to follow the leader than it is to challenge them.

A leader who regularly asks for other perspectives and responds to these perspectives without getting defensive sets an important tone by signaling that their team is one in which no one has all the answers



Knowing it all reinforces hierarchy.



Asking “What am I missing?” invites participation.

and everyone has valuable input to share. (See “Model Non-defensive Reactions: Hit the Pause Button” in Play 3: Manage Your Reactions.)

"A 'no' uttered from the deepest conviction is better than a 'yes' merely uttered to please or, worse, to avoid trouble."

MAHATMA GANDHI

How to Do It

- 1 **Declare you want feedback.** When you give a presentation, roll out a strategy, propose an action plan, or float an idea, explain your reasoning and make it clear that you truly want feedback from others.
- 2 **Set expectations.** Be explicit in saying that you do not expect everyone to agree with everything you've said, and that you want to avoid false harmony and groupthink.
- 3 **Open the conversation.** Ask, "What am I missing?" and then pause. Wait for others to respond.

- 4 **Keep the door open.** If no one responds, let them know that you are sure you haven't thought of every angle and that you would value their thoughts. You may want to delay making a decision until you hear other perspectives. You will need to balance gathering input with timely decision-making—you can do both.
- 5 **Express gratitude.** Thank others for speaking up. For example, "I truly appreciate your valuable feedback and honest opinion. I know it's not always easy to be the dissenting voice."

Welcome Other Viewpoints in a Nutshell

When you admit that you don't have all the answers and you're open to other perspectives, you create an environment where everyone's viewpoint is welcome and valued.

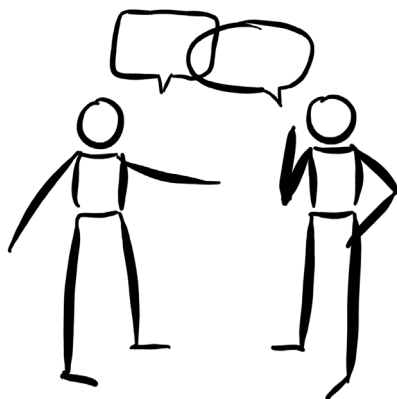
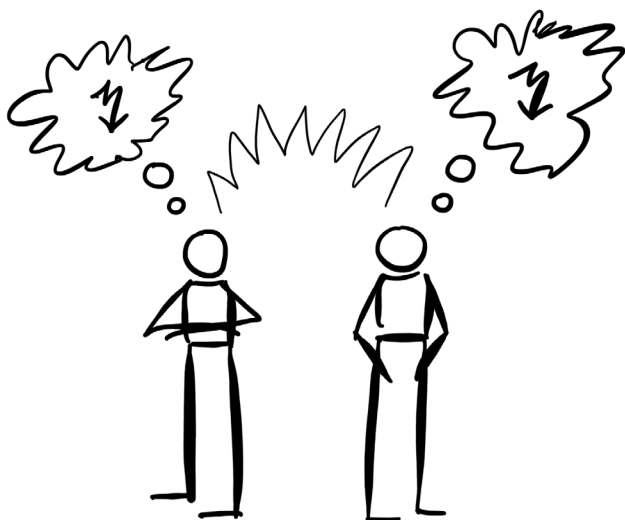
Solicit Diverse Perspectives: "That's One Viewpoint; Let's Hear Some Dissent"

Why to Try It

In any team, some people are more dominant and outspoken than others, even when there is no hierarchical relationship between them. This can be due to personality differences, but it is also common for people from underrepresented groups to feel less free to share their ideas than those in the dominant group.

As a leader, you need to ensure that no single voice is more heavily weighted than another and that everyone can contribute their point of view. It can be uncomfortable for the less dominant people in a team to find their voice, so you may have to explicitly ask for and normalize dissent in your team.

The more you can make it a practice to hear opposing viewpoints, the more people will feel that it's truly safe to speak up—even if their idea is wildly different from the others.



Inclusive leaders reduce social friction
and invite healthy dissent.

How to Do It

- **Set the tone.** Tell your team members that you expect them to challenge one another's ideas without demeaning or embarrassing anyone. This is healthy dissent, when ideas are challenged in a way that allows new ideas and innovative concepts to emerge. In contrast, social friction occurs when people are criticized or attacked, resulting in fear and conflict. Healthy dissent could sound like this: "That's an angle I hadn't thought of. The way I see the problem is..."
- **When someone shares their idea or proposal,** thank them for sharing. Then say, "That's one viewpoint. Let's hear some dissent."
- **If no one responds,** ask someone in the group to play devil's advocate and offer an opposing viewpoint.

- **Offer alternative ways of providing feedback** by using an online collaboration tool, survey, email, or chat. This helps people with different communication styles and comfort levels contribute.
- **Pay attention** to how people are responding to one another. Remind everyone that they're expected and encouraged to disagree with one another's ideas in a way that isn't insulting or hurtful.



Solicit Diverse Perspectives in a Nutshell

When you invite healthy dissent from your team, you ensure that diverse perspectives will be heard, resulting in better outcomes.



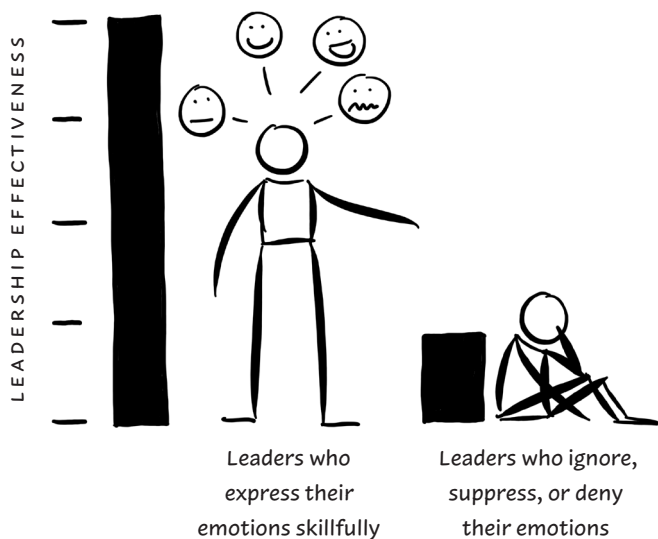
Open Up: Express Your Own Emotions

Why to Try It

All too often, leaders think that they cannot show emotion on the job. They believe that they must maintain a “professional” demeanor at all times, but the irony of this belief is that people respect and connect with leaders who show that they are human, share their emotions, and do not try to keep up a veneer of perfection.

Every human being has emotions. We can't turn them off. If we can recognize our emotions as data, we can harness their power in a positive way. When we attempt to ignore or suppress emotions, we lose our ability to control our responses to them, and they can take over our behavior.

It is important for leaders to be in control of their emotions and not have outbursts that can destroy psychological safety. At the same time, leaders can help build trust with their colleagues and employees by sharing that they, like all human beings, have emotional reactions. It may feel uncomfortable to share your emotions, but it can be a powerful way to connect with others. The vulnerability of admitting that you are having an emotional reaction to



something in your workday helps others better understand you and empathize with you as a fellow human being. Being aware of your own emotions will also help you better manage your reactions when you experience strong emotions.

How to Do It

- **Notice what you're feeling.** When you have a strong emotional reaction, you may feel your heart rate speeding up, your face getting hot, and your whole body tensing up. When you're experiencing a more positive emotion, you might be unable to stop smiling or moving around with excitement.
- **Share what you're feeling.** If you are having a difficult emotional response when you are with colleagues, it's OK to share that. For example, you could say, "That feedback hit me harder than I expected, and I'd like a minute to think about what I just heard before I respond."
- **Take a break if you need one.** If you aren't feeling calm enough to have a productive exchange with others, take a break. You can ask your colleagues to continue the conversation without you for a few minutes, or you can ask everyone to take a break.

- **Breathe.** Taking a few deep breaths can relieve stress and anxiety due to its physiological effect on the nervous system. Deep diaphragmatic breathing switches on our parasympathetic nervous system (which calms the body) and activates our vagus nerve (a key part of the brain's social engagement system). By breathing deeply, we are calmer and kinder and thus better able to engage with others.



Open Up in a Nutshell

When you authentically share your emotions with others, you engender a sense of trust and humanity in yourself as a leader.



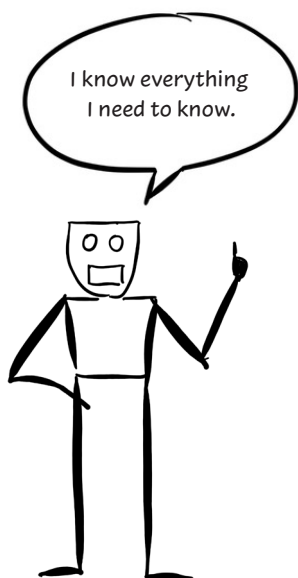
Take Off the Mask of Perfection: "I Don't Know Yet"

Why to Try It

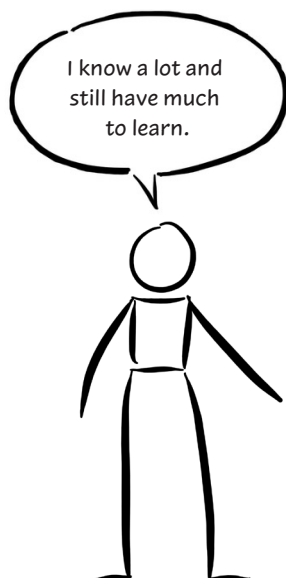
Traditional models of leadership often depict leaders as hard-driving, results-oriented individuals who know exactly what to do in any situation. With a command-and-control leadership style, these leaders set objectives and direct their teams. If this ever worked, it doesn't anymore. Today's complex problems require new ways of working and a new style of leadership that enables teams to learn from one another, embrace diverse minds and talent, and empower everyone to do their best work.

The most successful and innovative organizations are those that continuously learn. Leaders need to establish the conditions for team learning, first by admitting that they don't have all the answers and then by helping their team members get comfortable learning from one another. When leaders ask for help or share something they're curious about, they make it possible for others to do the same.

Admitting we don't know something is a highly vulnerable behavior. Leaders who model this level of vulnerability encourage their team members to seek



The "perfect" leader



The human leader

help, ask questions, and support one another. In time, these will be the most successful teams—the teams that others want to join because they're groups in which everyone can do great work together.

How to Do It

- **When you are asked a question** that you don't have an answer to, don't try to make one up or side-step the question. Instead, say "I don't have a great answer to that question right now."
- **Tell the person who asked the question** that you're interested in getting an answer and ask them if it's OK for you to get back to them. If you are in a larger group, you can ask if anyone has more information on the topic or even an incomplete or wild idea they're willing to share.
- **If you need help with something**, explicitly state to your team that you are asking for help. Tell them what you're struggling with and ask who would like to help. You can set up a collaborative, idea-generating session.

- **Give your team permission to ask for help.**
Celebrate the questions and requests for help and share the learnings from them.



Take Off the Mask of Perfection in a Nutshell

When you openly ask for help and admit what you don't know as a leader, you create conditions for continuous learning and improvement.



Nurture a Sense of Humor at Work: Laugh More (Especially at Yourself)

Why to Try It

When we, as authors, reflected on effective leaders we admire, one quality kept coming up: a sense of humor. Laughing together at work has a strong bonding effect and instills lightness into an environment that often feels heavy. Research confirms the positive effects of humor at work: it boosts well-being, increases team performance, and even has a measurable impact on a company's bottom line.

Laughing is deeply ingrained in our evolutionary biology and is an early reflex in human infant development. Laughter is healthy and fosters connection and trust. When we laugh, our brain releases “happy hormones” (endorphins, dopamine, and oxytocin), and the stress hormone cortisol is reduced. As a leader, you can take advantage of this natural wiring. Setting a humorous tone at the beginning of a meeting can unlock your team's creativity. The dopamine that is released in your team members' brains will turn on their learning centers and broaden their capacities to deal with the tasks at hand.

How work feels...



... without laughter



... with laughter

But humor is more than just a trick to help others feel good and be their most creative selves. Humor, like mindfulness and self-awareness, requires observation, which in turn helps us relate to our experiences. It's about not taking ourselves too seriously, being aware of how absurd things can be, and recognizing our shared humanity with tolerance and kindness.

Fortunately, we don't have to be naturally funny because we can train our sense of humor just as we can train our muscles to be stronger.

"Humor is one of the most powerful forces an organization has for building genuine connection, well-being, and intellectual safety among our colleagues."

NAOMI BAGDONAS

How to Do It

- **Find your own style.** You don't have to become a comedian. Don't feel pressured to make jokes you are uncomfortable with. Experiment and find your own approach. Introducing levity into the workplace doesn't need to be loud or raucous.
- **Turn on your humor radar.** Reflect regularly on funny things at work that you hear or see, describe them in detail, and give them a title. Ask yourself, "What would be funny about my situation if I weren't involved in it?"

- **Collect and share.** Compile a set of funny episodes you can share in different situations. Tell these stories and refine them as you go. Notice the bonding effect that's created when you share your very human experiences in an honest and humorous way.
- **Avoid anything that might be offensive, hurtful, or inappropriate.** Be aware of cultural differences, as some humor only works for a specific audience. Making fun of yourself is often a great starting point for introducing levity.



Nurture a Sense of Humor at Work in a Nutshell

When you lead with a sense of humor, you foster engagement and motivation, making it possible for people to contribute their best.



Communicate Courageously:

Play 1 Review and Resources

Nutshells

Welcome other viewpoints: When you admit that you don't have all the answers and you're open to other perspectives, you create an environment where everyone's viewpoint is welcome and valued.

Solicit diverse perspectives: When you invite healthy dissent from your team, you ensure that diverse perspectives will be heard, resulting in better outcomes.

Open up: When you authentically share your emotions with others, you engender a sense of trust and humanity in yourself as a leader.

Take off the mask of perfection: When you openly ask for help and admit what you don't know as a leader, you create conditions for continuous learning and improvement.

Nurture a sense of humor at work: When you lead with a sense of humor, you foster engagement and motivation, making it possible for people to contribute their best.

Recommended Reading

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Nilofer Merchant, “Don’t Demonize Employees Who Raise Problems,” *Harvard Business Review*, January 30, 2020, hbr.org/2020/01/dont-demonize-employees-who-raise-problems.

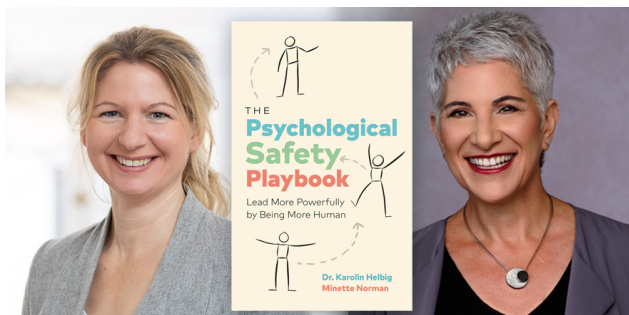
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About the Authors



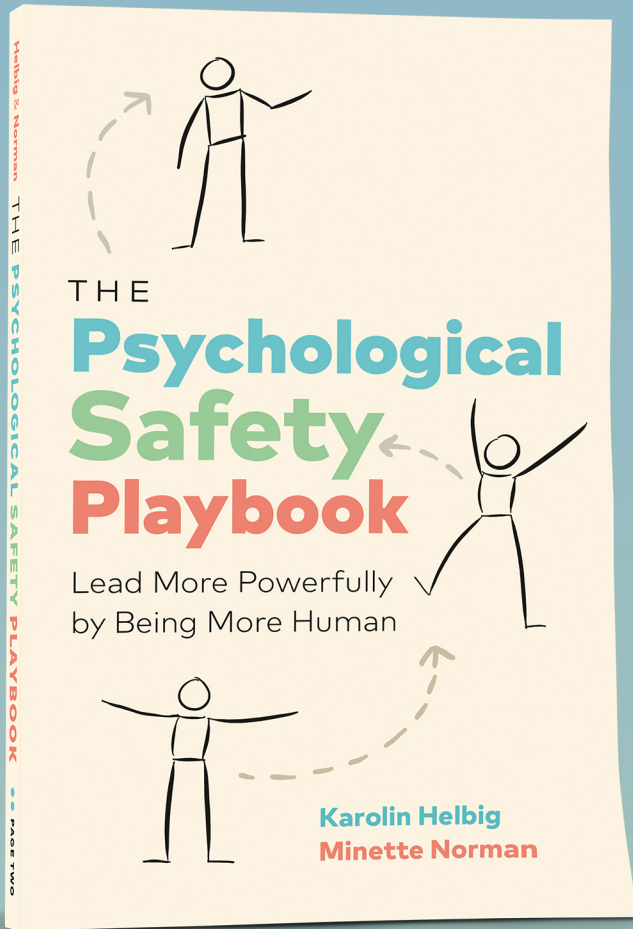
Karolin Helbig, who spent more than 15 years with McKinsey as a top management consultant and in leadership development, and has a deep expertise in science, helps leaders increase their effectiveness, optimize team performance, and transform their organizations through mindset, emotional intelligence, and psychological safety. She integrates neuroscience research that revolutionizes the way we understand human brains functioning and translates it into applicable and powerful leadership practices.

Building on her three decades leading global, technical teams in the software industry, Minette Norman focuses on developing transformational leaders who create inclusive working environments with a foundation of psychological safety. She has a deep commitment to fostering inclusion in the workplace and is a sought-after speaker in the areas of psychological safety, inclusive cultures, radical empathy, and collaborative teams.

Based on their own experiences and that of their clients, both Karolin and Minette's ambition is to start a movement to create psychologically safe workplaces around the globe. While there is an abundance of academic research on the psychological safety concept, they found there is limited practical information on how to implement psychologically safe environments where one can speak up without the risk of punishment or humiliation.

Together, Karolin and Minette developed *The Psychological Safety Playbook (Page Two)*, which will launch on February 22, 2023. This is the first concise and practical guide for implementing psychological safety in the workplace. *The Psychological Safety Playbook* provides 25 proven strategies to help leaders increase the psychological safety in their teams and to lead more powerfully by being more human. It is a must-read for any leader or manager looking to develop the highest-performing, highly inclusive, and most innovative teams.

Order your copy today!



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