

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA)

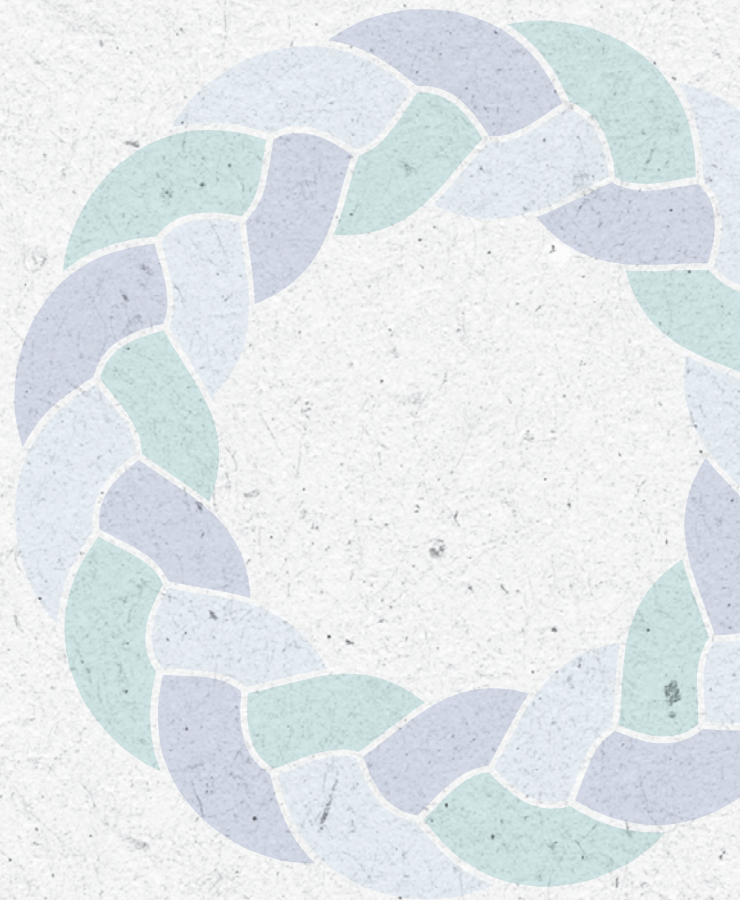


## IMPACT AND ANTECEDENTS\* OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IN WORKPLACES

a summary of scientific literature

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January 2020



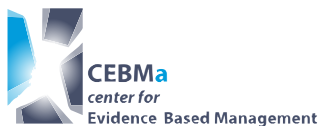
Culture Review **Implementation**  
our journey of positive change



**ACT**  
Government



**\*For the purposes of this REA 'antecedents' refers to the 'drivers' that may cause psychological safety.**



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# What is a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA)?

Rapid Evidence Assessments (REAs) use a specific research methodology to comprehensively identify the most relevant studies on a given topic, and select appropriate studies based on explicit criteria. In addition, two independent reviewers assess the methodological quality of the studies. In contrast to a conventional literature review, REAs are transparent, verifiable, and reproducible, and as a result, the likelihood of bias is considerably smaller.



## Background

Several months after the release of the Final Report: Independent Review into the Workplace Culture within ACT Public Health Services (Review) in late 2019 the ACT public health system partnered with the Australian National University Research School of Management (ANU-RSM) to develop an evidence-based Workplace Change Framework. The purpose

of the Framework is to provide identification and prioritisation of targeted areas to improve the culture of the ACT public health system. Supporting the Framework is a range of Rapid Evidence Assessments (REAs) on key themes that were identified by the Center for Evidence Based Management (CEBMA).

## What does this REA answer?

The ACT public health system approached the Center for Evidence Based Management (CEBMA) to conduct a REA of the most trustworthy scientific research on the impacts and antecedents of psychological safety in teams and organisations.

Other issues answered in this REA include the following questions:

1. **What is psychological safety?**
2. **What is the impact of psychological safety on organisational outcomes?**
3. **What are the antecedents of psychological safety?**

# Main findings

## 1. What is psychological safety?

The term 'psychological safety' was first introduced in 1965 by MIT professors Edgar Schein and Warren Bennis. They defined it as essential for making employees feel secure and able to change their behaviour in response to organisational change. Less than 30 years later, Schein argued that psychological safety helps people overcome their defensiveness and makes them focus on collective goals and problem prevention rather than on self-protection (Schein, 1993).

Since that time research on psychological safety has flourished, mainly due to the work of Harvard professor, Amy Edmondson. She affirmed that psychological safety 'helps to explain why employees share information and knowledge, speak up with suggestions for organisational improvements, and take initiative to develop new products and services' (Edmondson, 2014).

This REA provides evidence that confirms that psychological safety describes the extent to which an employee believes they can openly speak up, ask for help, ask questions, and make suggestions to their

colleagues or leaders without personal judgement or reputational repercussions. This is emphasised in many studies, including a recent study that found that physicians who experienced more psychological safety were more likely to accept corrective and positive performance feedback from peers, explanations of feedback, and suggestions for improvement (Scheepers, 2018).

A construct related but distinct from psychological safety is trust, often defined as the willingness to be vulnerable to the actions of others (Mayer, 1995). However, Edmondson differentiates the two terms by emphasising their different focus. She affirms that trust captures a person's willingness to be vulnerable to others – that in turn reflects the willingness to give the other person the benefit of the doubt. In contrast, she notes, psychological safety captures the extent to which a person believes that the other person will give the benefit of the doubt when taking risks (Edmondson, 2004).

## 2. What is the impact of psychological safety on organisational outcomes?

Many studies identified that psychological safety is related to both direct and indirect organisational outcomes. This therefore makes it a critical concept for managing teams and organisations. Psychological safety is strongly associated with employees' support, voice, information sharing, learning behaviour, team performance, level of pro-activity, psychological empowerment, retention and turnover, social network ties, team cohesion and work engagement.

Some studies also revealed that psychological safety can moderate or mediate several relationships between a wide range of constructs relevant to management and organisational outcomes. For example, even when a team has a learning orientation, team learning takes place only when psychological safety is high (Harvey, 2019). This also applies to the following leadership styles: empowering; authentic, transformational, inclusive and ethical, that in turn

positively effects the following employee outcomes: innovation; pro-active behaviour; constructive voice; organisational citizenship behaviour; and occupational safety – all only occurring when employees perceive their organisation and leaders as psychologically safe (Huyghebaert, 2018; Ifzal, 2019; Kim, 2019; Liu, 2018; Malik, 2018; Rao, 2018). Finally, a recent study indicates that psychological safety also mediates the relationship between functional dominance (when a team is dominated by a single function, i.e. medical specialists or engineers) and the performance of multi-disciplinary teams (Malhotra, 2017).

### 3. What are the antecedents of psychological safety?

This REA also identified the following factors as the strongest antecedents or predictors of psychological safety:

- » **Leadership style** – the studies show that leaders perceived by their employees as authentic, benevolent, ethical, humble, supportive, and trustworthy positively affect the psychological safety within a team or organisation (Anugerah, 2019). The same applies to leaders perceived as non-judgemental, empathic and respectful listeners (Castro, 2018). Not surprisingly, leaders perceived as abusive, untrustworthy or psychopathic negatively affect psychological safety.
- » **Empowerment** – Psychological safety increases when leaders share power with employees, give them autonomy to make decisions by putting trust in them and encouraging participative decision making. These types of leaders create an environment of openness that acts as a signal for employees to express themselves freely and speak up with suggestions for improvements (Rao, 2018).
- » **Leader-assigned mastery goals** – when learning new tasks or working on ill-structured problems, employees will inevitably make errors. This may be embarrassing or threatening to their self-esteem. In these situations, mastery or learning goals tend to be more effective. Mastery goals lead employees to view unsolved problems as challenges to be 'mastered' rather than focus on performance or how they will be judged (Ashauer, 2013). Therefore, leaders who set mastery goals for their team members create an environment in which they will feel safe in being able to take interpersonal risks and not feel that speaking up about problems will be held against them.
- » **Diversity climate** – this term refers to employee perceptions about their organisation's diversity-related policies and practices. In a positive diversity climate, employees will perceive that their organisation treats all staff with respect and dignity and provides equal access to opportunities for career advancement, which creates a psychologically safe environment (Guchait, 2017).
- » **Conflict management style** – managers and leaders who use an integrating conflict management style display high levels of concern, respect for others and open communication. This style for managing conflicts correlates with characteristics of supportive leadership, organisational justice and participative decision making, which are major antecedents of trust (Erkutlu, 2015). When employees trust their leaders, they are more likely to openly express their thoughts and opinions.
- » **Quality of the managerial relationship** – an employee's ability to share with their managers suggestions, concerns or knowledge is based on their past experiences with their manager. Therefore, those employees who feel they are fairly and positively treated by their manager will speak up more comfortably, whereas those who perceive the relationship with their manager as negative or problematic are more likely to feel uncomfortable in doing so (Unler, 2019).
- » **Team tenure** – the length of time teams have worked with each other can impact interpersonal dynamics and the level of

psychological safety. Newly formed teams tend to experience more positive interpersonal dynamics than teams who have been with each other for long periods. This is because the new team creates a 'new group' identity that engenders positive perceptions about teammates and high trust. This trust originates because the new members do not have adequate information to judge the trustworthiness of their teammates. Members of moderately tenured teams, however, had more social interactions and as a result may have discovered differences in personal values and opinions about how the team should approach task or interpersonal relationships.

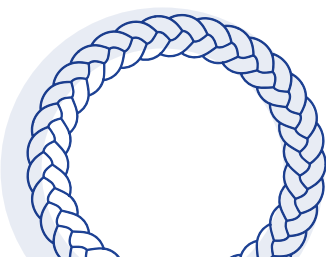
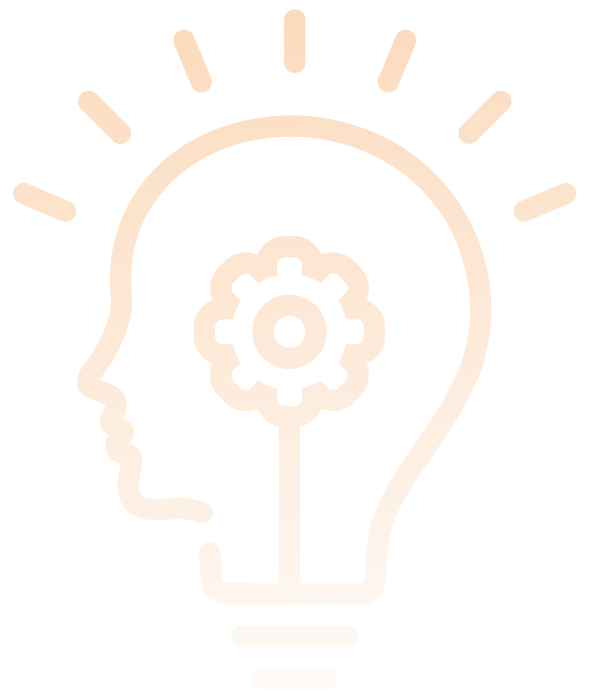
As a result, they are more likely to face conflicts and feelings of uncertainty, which are known to harm team psychological safety. In contrast to moderately tenured teams, members of longer tenured teams have had extensive time to obtain a deeper understanding of each other. When the team is managed effectively, it will have established team norms that enable its members to interact in a manner that focuses on effective goal completion, assisting other team members in their tasks, and avoiding unproductive conflict, which leads to higher team psychological safety (Koopman, 2019).

## Conclusion

The studies assessed in this REA clearly demonstrate that psychological safety has a large, positive relationship with a wide range of organisational outcomes. Therefore, this is likely to be an important condition for the effectiveness of teams, work groups, and the organisation as a whole. Review findings also indicate that the leadership style and skills of managers and team leaders directly enhance or undermine the establishment of psychological safety.

## More information

You can access more information in the *Rapid Evidence Assessment – The Impact and Antecedents of Psychological Safety – a summary of the scientific literature, January 2020*.





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