Psychological safety in schools

Taking care of teachers mental health and wellbeing

What is psychological safety?

Psychological safety at work means creating an environment where people:

- Are trusted and feel safe

- Can be honest with managers and colleagues

- Are able to speak up when they need to

- Have the freedom and security to try new things and make mistakes

- Feel safe enough to be creative and take risks.

It's about people being able to be themselves, in order to perform at their best without any risk to their mental wellbeing.

People want to work for employers who treat them like adults. They also recognise their shared responsibility to keep learning, striving and getting things done.

Environments which enable this are psychologically safe.

"

It's so much better to be in a workplace where you can be your real self, and contribute to the work in a meaningful way"

Amy Edmondson,
Author and Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School.

Psychological Safety (vertical axis, High to Low)

Motivation & Accountability (horizontal axis, Low to High)

- Comfort Zone (High safety, Low motivation)
- Learning Zone (High safety, High motivation)
- Apathy Zone (Low safety, Low motivation)
- Anxiety Zone (Low safety, High motivation)
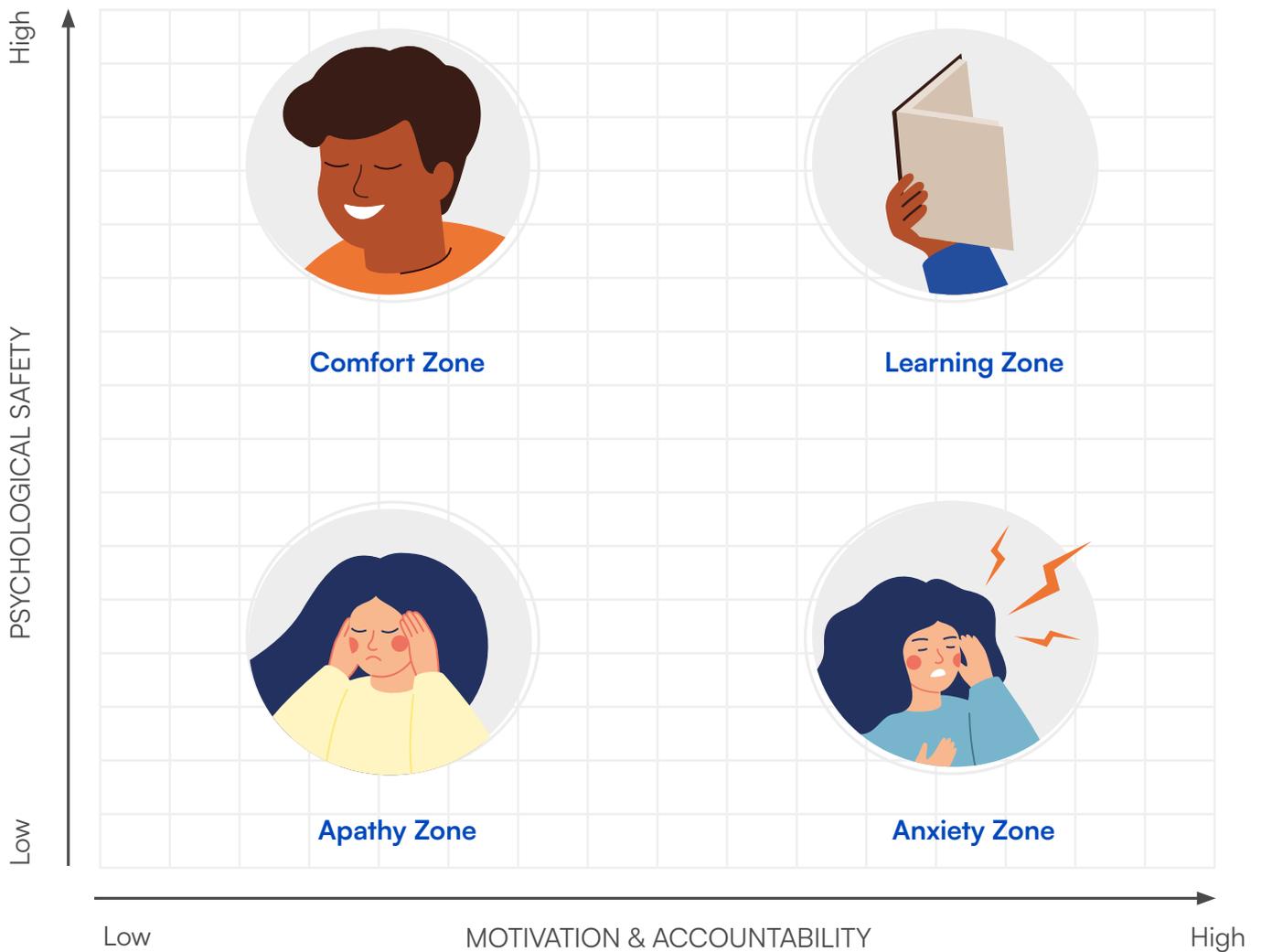
Developing and maintaining psychological safety is essential for workplaces, especially those where learning, knowledge sharing, error reporting and innovation are essential parts of everyday business, like schools, colleges and universities.

It's also really important in contexts which experience frequent change, where workloads are high, and where good team dynamics can make a huge difference to people's performance.

The model below, developed by Amy Edmondson, shows the value of creating an environment where both psychological safety, and motivation and accountability, is high. This is where you get the best performance from people - in the 'learning zone' - when they are at their least stressed and most engaged.

No one can do their best at work if they are mentally and emotionally depleted. Psychological Safety gives us an environment for people to reduce their stress, feel valued, have open and honest discussions, be able to say 'no' without fear of retribution and ultimately, do their jobs well.

Why do we (need) this in schools?

We know from extensive research, including our annual *Teacher Wellbeing Index* and our recent *report* into the impact of Covid-19 on education professionals' mental health and wellbeing, that teachers and other school staff frequently report numerous factors that take their toll on mental health and wellbeing. **These include:**

- Very high workload (often unrealistic)

- Poor work / life balance

- Frequent organisational change

- Lack of resources

- Bureaucracy, and lots of paperwork and data gathering without good systems to support this

- Unreasonable demands from managers

- Not feeling valued or appreciated

- A target driven culture

It is clear from these issues and the level of stress and poor mental wellbeing reported by education professionals, that **schools and the people who work in them need a workplace culture and environment that fosters:**

- Innovation

- Professional development

- Continued learning

- Shared responsibility

- Openness and honesty including when things are not going well

- Creative problem solving

- Agility

- Values-driven leadership at every level.

A school culture that fosters these things this is a psychologically safe one - and fundamentally, a safe and happy place to work.

What does this actually look like in schools?

Improving the mental health of education professionals is most effectively achieved by linking policy decisions, workplace culture and individual staff wellbeing. Strategies to improve the wellbeing of the workforce ought to look at all of these factors.

Workplace psychological safety stems from and enables a style of leadership which focuses on achieving results through effective processes, which is crucially underpinned by good relationships. This is often known as 'facilitative leadership'.

Creating and maintaining a culture of psychological safety involves approaches and activities that involve, reach and impact on, every education professional in any given school. Anyone can be a leader in bringing about psychologically safe work environments - it's about how you act, what sort of relationships you build, and being honest at work. This means ways of making schools psychologically safe can be acted on by individual staff, whole teams, and senior leaders[1].

The activities, behaviours, approaches and ideas below come from our research and conversations with teachers and other school staff.

What leaders and managers can do:

Managers and leaders are really influential in creating an environment of psychological safety (or not!). Building and maintaining a good culture is highly connected to the way we behave. To do this managers and leaders need to:

- Be more open - say when you feel excited but challenged, nervous but eager, anxious but still confident etc.

- Frame pieces of work and workplace challenges, honestly and encouragingly

- Ensure people and let them know you trust them

- Offer constructive responses when people raise issues

- Actively discourage habits which harm staff mental health - working excessive hours, working on weekends / holidays, presenteeism[2]

- Act as role models - set the tone for how you want staff to work

- Teachers report high levels of resilience and thrive in a collegiate environment - recognise this but make sure they know it's ok to say if they're not ok

- Talk about mental health and wellbeing regularly e.g. at meetings, CPD

- Give credit and acknowledgement regularly

- Show appreciation - this isn't just a case of saying thank you. Watch our webinar *here* on other ways this can be done.

For more detail on how to create an open, supportive and motivating culture through behaviour, see the *'how to guide'*.

---

1. We know that the Government also has a significant role to play in creating an education system which enables teachers and students to flourish, and continue to call on policy makers to ensure this happens, especially in the wake of Covid-19.
2. Presenteeism means showing up for work even when you're not well enough to be there - we know from our research this can be a big problem in schools.

To further grow a psychologically safe environment in schools, the following tools, approaches and provisions can be used:

Have a mental health and wellbeing policy - often seen as an essential first step which states what your school wants to achieve in terms of wellbeing. ✓

Offer flexibility wherever possible - introduce flexible working hours and arrangements (see flexible working resource). ✓

Provide access to employee assistance programmes and counselling services. ✓

Get people's opinions and views e.g. through staff surveys, invitations to shape policy and practice within schools. Once you've asked for a staff point of view, it is important to then take visible action based on the responses. ✓

Get governing bodies involved in promoting messages on mental health. ✓

Encourage staff to speak to their managers, HR or union members if they feel they need to. ✓

Set up an online space for blogs, tips, and planned wellbeing activities for staff to access, as well as info on stress reduction and when to seek help. ✓

Offer 'time to talk' sessions / days / slots with tea, cake and space for a conversation between colleagues. ✓

Work with staff to look for practical ways to reduce workload and working 'out of hours' e.g. ensuring as few meetings as possible, and increasing planning time within the school day. ✓

Communicate and signpost to the different support available in ways that staff will be able to pick up this information. ✓

Offer exercise, relaxation, stress management and mindfulness programmes, groups or classes, potentially as part of a wider wellbeing programme. ✓

Provide targeted, high quality professional development that supports staff to look up toward their purpose, rather than down into technical details. ✓

Ensure managers are well trained (including in managing for good mental health) and that the school's performance management approach includes wellbeing in the mix of considerations. ✓

Upskill the whole school on mental health awareness, resilience and personal wellbeing, and effective communications in a team including feedback sharing - use agile and efficient training methods. ✓

Establish mentor / co-worker support schemes. ✓

Prioritise activities, messages and initiatives which talk about staff mental health and wellbeing ✓

Invest in high quality streamlined administrative and data processes. ✓

Introduce supervision as a safe space to discuss issues. ✓

Make mental health awareness and wellbeing activities part of CPD sessions. ✓

Incentivise teams and departments to model good wellbeing practice. ✓

Have a well implemented student behaviour policy. ✓

For more information and ideas on how to raise awareness of mental health in the workplace and how to tackle the stigma that surrounds this, please see *other relevant resources*.

What individuals can do

Speak up.

Give input into mental health and wellbeing policies being written or reviewed, ask colleagues how they are, and talk to someone you trust if you don't feel ok.

Value self-care – it's not selfish!

To use a well-known travel analogy, fit your own mask first. You can't perform at your best for your students or your colleagues, or outside of school either, if you're not doing well yourself. Self-care isn't a luxury, it's an essential part of staying well. Be kind to yourself - there is plenty of evidence that higher levels of self-compassion are strongly related to lower levels of anxiety and stress. Find a moment in the day when you do something that is just for you.
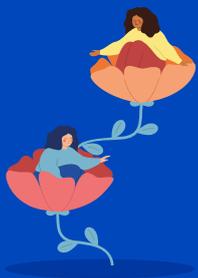
Take up the offers of support that do exist, if you need to.

This often looks like employee assistance programmes, access to free counselling, taking part in wellbeing activities.

Show leadership with a small 'l'.

Having a conversation with a colleague or being honest about a challenge you're facing goes a long way to creating the right kind of workplace culture for everyone.

What not to do:

When it comes to building a psychologically safe culture where staff are mentally well and performing well too, there's not much worse than school leaders or managers who talk the talk but don't walk the walk. Try not to do the following:

- Execute good ideas poorly — this will lower morale and increase staff dissatisfaction.

- Shut down ideas, requests or challenges.

- Add to time pressures, workloads and bureaucracy in the name of wellbeing and mental health.

For mental health and wellbeing to be prioritised, something else may have to give - but this isn't a 'nice to have' optional extra. Staff wellbeing and good mental health is essential for a well performing school. Building and maintaining the right culture will ensure the right performance too.

Adopt an honest and curious approach with your staff to find out what would help them, and follow through on what you commit to.

Sources:

1. https://www.eskil.co/workplace-psychological-safety/

2. https://reimaginaire.medium.com/a-conversation-with-amy-edmondson-about-psychological-safety-and-the-future-of-work-a0891e137218

3. https://www.predictiveindex.com/blog/psychological-safety-in-the-workplace/

4. https://www.hrmagazine.co.uk/content/features/the-importance-of-psychological-safety

5. https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/resources/for-organisations/research/covid-19-and-the-classroom/

6. https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/resources/for-organisations/research/teacher-wellbeing-index/

Education Support

The charity for everyone working in education