

# Safety First! That Applies to Psychological Safety, Too

Psychological safety is important for continuous improvement.



Do you know that WD-40 stands for Water Displacement, 40th formula? It took them 40 attempts to get it right. Thomas Edison is quoted as saying, “I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.” We work in a no-fail industry, so you may be wondering why I’m telling you this. It’s because we work in a no-fail industry. Our parts go into airplanes, cars and human beings. These parts cannot fail, but the people designing and making them may have to fail on the way to finding the best design and process to produce a no-fail part.

## What Is Psychological Safety?

According to a *Harvard Business Review* interview with Amy Edmondson, the Harvard Business School professor who coined the phrase “psychological safety,” it’s a culture where employees are encouraged to share ideas and concerns, ask questions, take risks and admit mistakes. Notice I said admit mistakes. Everyone makes mistakes, but some work environments punish mistakes, which forces employees to cover them up.

Mistakes are a powerful form of learning. Edmondson’s study of Google showed that the most productive teams were the teams who made the most mistakes. It turns out those teams were willing to admit they made mistakes and, since they worked in an environment where it was OK to admit mistakes, they were able to learn and become productive teams.

## Continuous Improvement

According to a study done by Workplace Options, “... psychological safety centers on trust, innovation and collaboration ... driving higher employee engagement, retention, and ultimately, organizational success.” Employees must feel if they have an idea they can share it. They must feel that if something doesn’t work

or can work better, they can share it without fear of ridicule or retaliation.

Think about a shop floor. Who is going to know what process is and isn’t working? Unless it’s a small shop, it probably isn’t the owner or supervisor. It’s the employee running or monitoring the process. And how would the owner or supervisor know to fix a process unless someone told them there is an issue? If that employee is afraid to mention it for fear of losing their job, the owner may not find out until it’s too late. Or what if the employee has an idea as to how to improve the process, but has been ignored or made to feel bad for suggesting ideas in the past?

How about tools? What if the estimator/engineer thought a tool would work for a certain part and the machinist has an idea that would help run the part more efficiently? If the work culture encourages the sharing of ideas, the result could be a no-fail part that runs with fewer tools or changes.

Listening to an idea doesn’t mean you have to implement the idea. Taking the idea into consideration and being grateful that the employee shared the idea is how psychological safety works. That employee may give you 10 ideas and if even one of them helps the shop, it was worth listening. And that employee feels valued.



## Innovation

Our industry is built on innovation. Innovation doesn’t happen without failure. Improvements don’t happen without ideas. For our shops to keep supplying the world with no-fail parts, our shops should encourage psychological safety to keep improving. Hopefully, it won’t take 40 attempts to get there. **P**

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