

Psychological Safety

A Pre-Condition for Continuous Improvement

Slides & More: MarkGraban.com/PSJan2023

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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.”

Amy Edmondson
Harvard Business School
The Fearless Organization



Why Psychological Safety?

“You will lose
top talent
without this.”

Timothy R. Clark
LeaderFactor

The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety



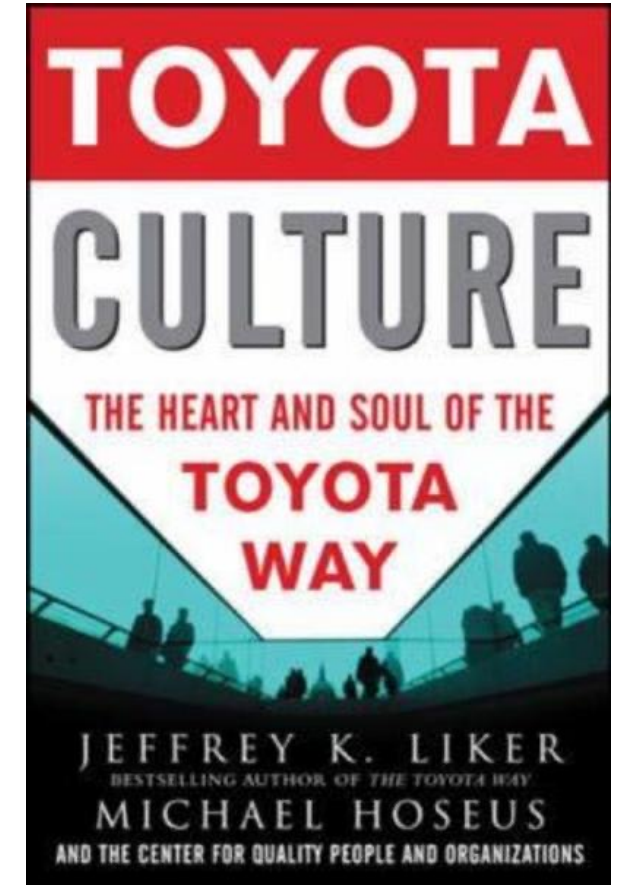
What is Psychological Safety?

- “Psychological safety is a social condition in which you feel:
 1. Included
 2. Safe to learn
 3. Safe to contribute
 4. Safe to challenge the status quo
- ... all without fear of being embarrassed, marginalized, or punished in some way.”



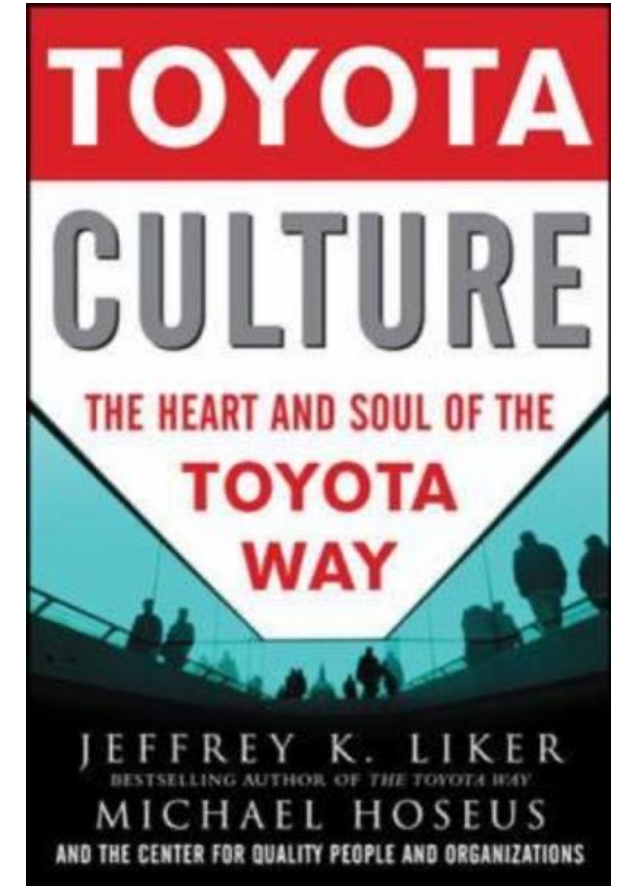
For a World-Class “Lean” Culture

- “Safety [at Toyota] includes more than just physical safety; it also means feeling safe psychologically. This starts with a respectful environment where team members do not fear psychological abuse.”



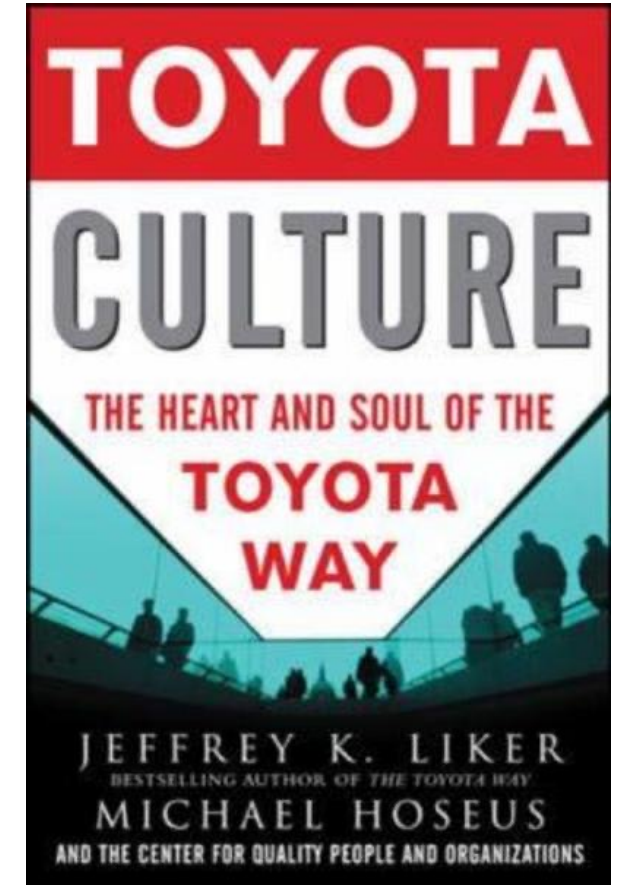
For a World-Class “Lean” Culture

- “[Toyota believes] people must be treated fairly, they must feel psychologically and physically safe and secure in their jobs, they must believe that any concerns they have will be taken very seriously and given due process.”



For a World-Class “Lean” Culture

- “Mistakes are OK, as long as people learn from them.”



Why Psychological Safety?

“The level of psychological safety on a team is the central measure of that team’s culture, health, and vitality.”

Google's Project Aristotle

- What makes teams there most successful?

**Psychological
Safety**

Clark's Shorter Definition of P.S.

“A culture of rewarded vulnerability”

Vulnerability =

“exposure to the risk of harm or loss”

A Partial List of Vulnerable Acts

- asking a question
- sharing an idea
- acknowledging we don't know something
- saying “I made a mistake”
- sharing an experience
- just showing up
- sharing something about yourself
- doing anything for the first time
- asking for help
- introducing yourself
- calling out a potential error
- disagreeing with somebody

The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety

Teams progress through these stages as they intentionally create cultures of rewarded vulnerability.

- 1. Inclusion Safety:** Can I be my authentic self?
- 2. Learner Safety:** Can I learn and grow?
- 3. Contributor Safety:** Can I contribute and create value?
- 4. Challenger Safety:** Can I be candid about change?

... all without fear of being embarrassed, marginalized, or punished in some way.”

What's My Level of Psychological Safety?

- It's not yes/no – it's a spectrum
 - How much Psychological Safety do I have?
 - To what degree?
 - It's a feeling or a perception
- Psychological Safety is an **outcome** of:
 - Our interactions with others, especially leaders

You Can Measure It – Company A

- We can measure perception of its presence through occasional surveys
- We can act every day to build Psychological Safety



Overall 60th %-tile

You Can Measure It – Company B

Possible scoring range is -100 to +100



74

Stage 1
Inclusion Safety



76

Stage 2
Learner Safety



74

Stage 3
Contributor Safety



52

Stage 4
Challenger Safety

Percentile: **74th**

81st

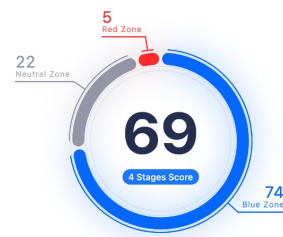
76th

77th

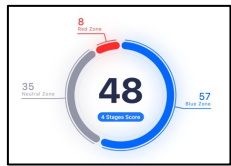
Black box = only direct reports

No box = rolls up to them

ALL COMPANY



TEAM 1



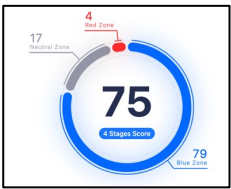
TEAM 2



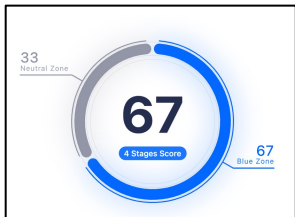
TEAM 3



SUB 1

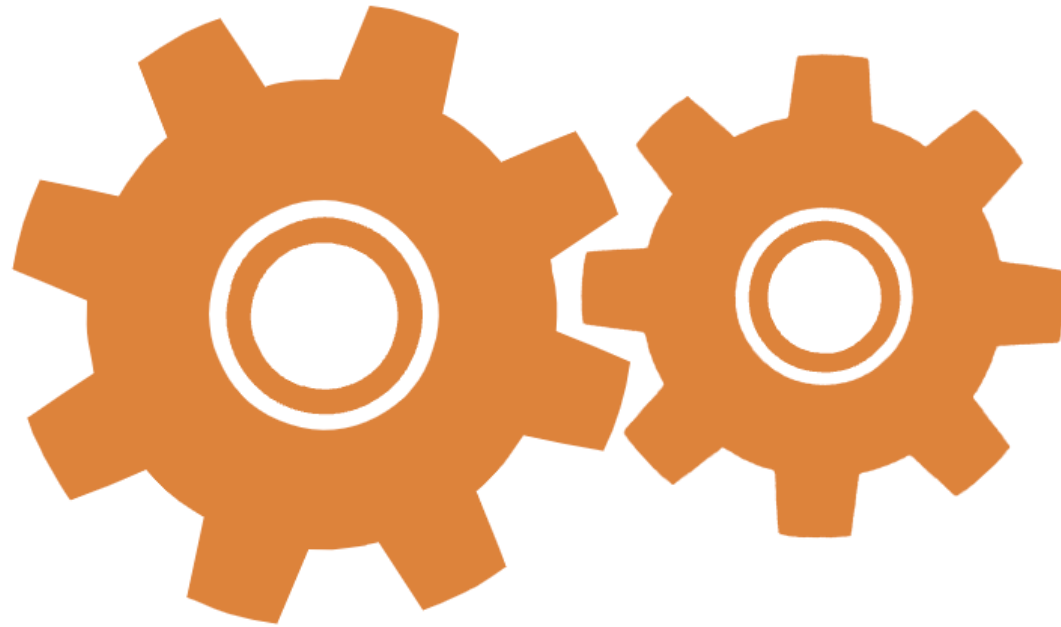


SUB 2



You Can Improve Psychological Safety

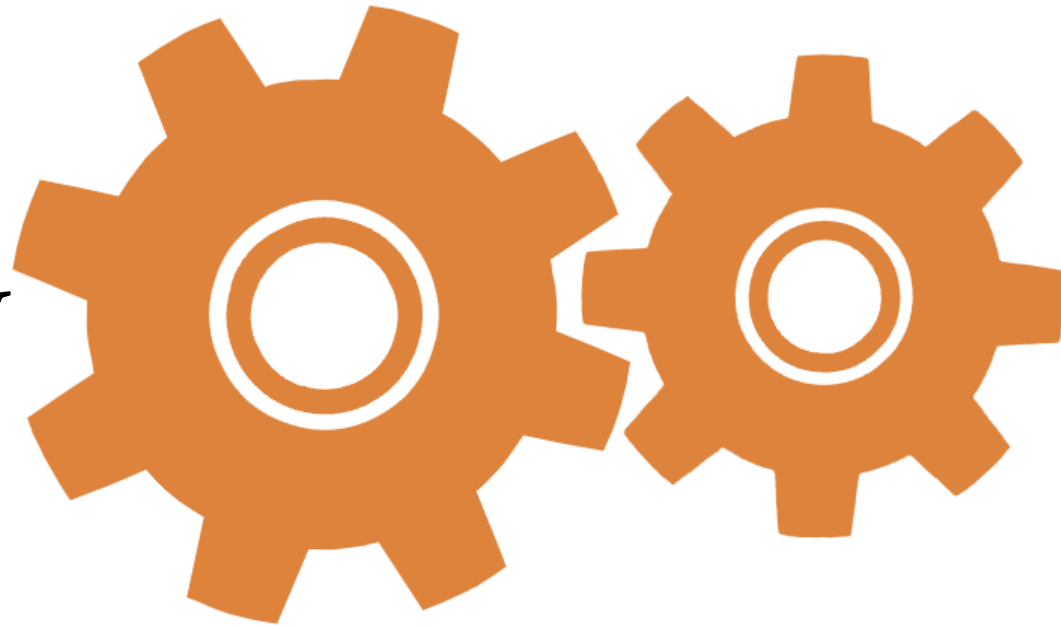
**Modeling
Vulnerable
Acts**



**Rewarding
Vulnerable
Acts**

Leaders Can Destroy It

**Not
Leading by
Example**



**Punishing
Vulnerable
Behaviors**

You Can't Mandate Safety!

“[Some leaders] mistakenly believe they can decree it into existence by simply saying, ‘Psychological safety is a priority for our organization. Please speak up. Give us your honest feedback and candid input. It’s now safe.’”



**You Can't
Mandate
Innovation!**

You Can't Force People to Speak Up!

- Physical safety, where we can see risks in advance
 - Calling out a risk, near miss, or harm can be scary
 - It's a “vulnerable act”
- Calling out events that harm our perception of Psychological Safety can be scarier!
 - What is one thing that prevents you from feeling included on your team?
“It's really not safe to say why”

Stage 4: Challenger Safety

- Is it safe to challenge the status quo???

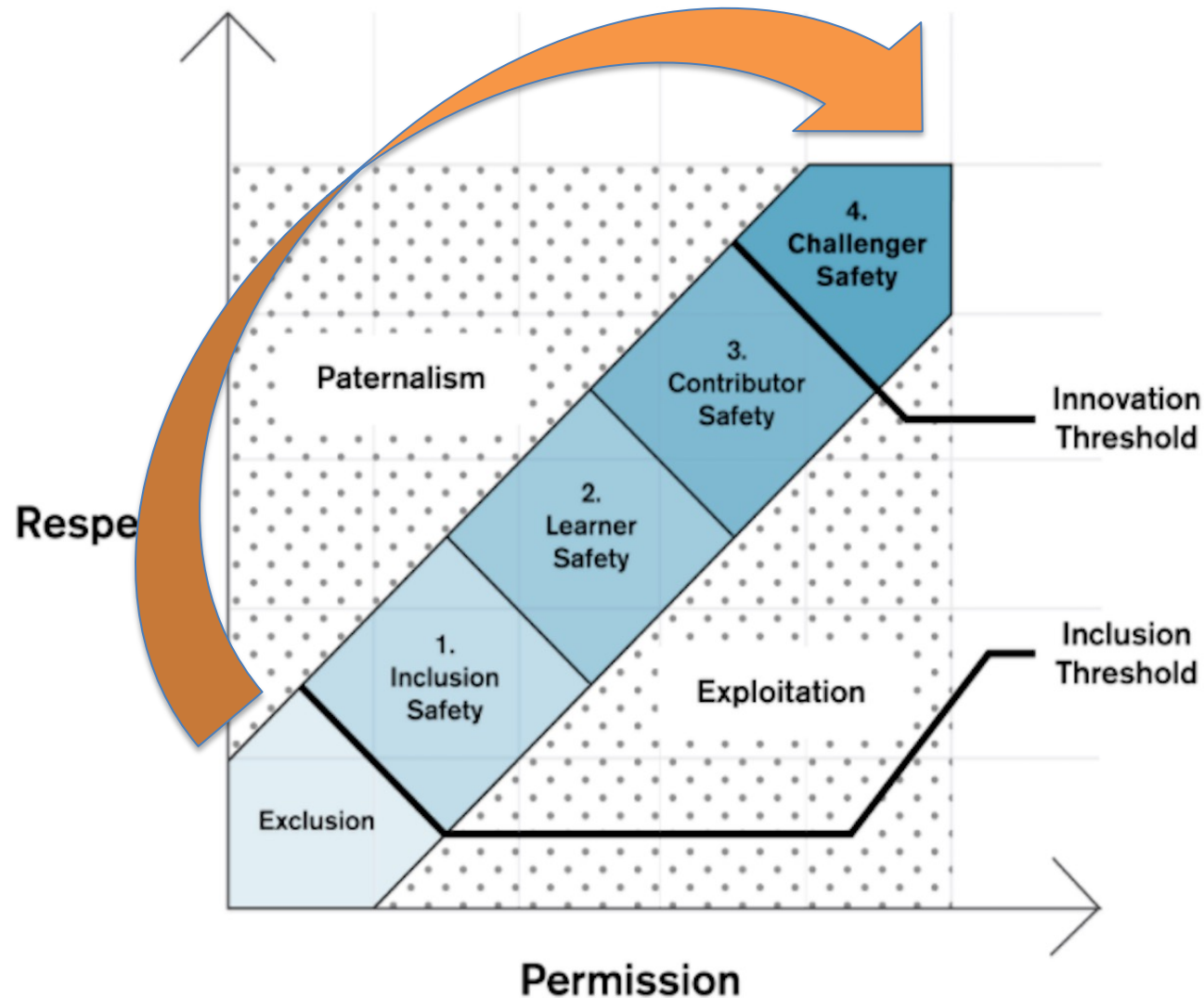
Kaizen!

- Any form of improvement or innovation

Stage 4: Challenger Safety

- “If you can bring a team to Stage 4, you’re world-class.”
- “We don’t just tolerate challenging behavior, we encourage it.”
- “It’s hard to get to this place.”

You Can't Jump Ahead to Stage 4!



**Research-
based
progression**

Stage 1: Inclusion Safety

- Satisfies the basic human need to be:
 - Included
 - accepted, and
 - belong
- Makes it not expensive to be yourself
- You are accepted for who you are, including your
 - unique attributes and
 - defining characteristics

Stage 1: Inclusion Safety

- I am accepted as a member of my team
- I am treated with respect
- I feel included by the people I work with

Stage 2: Learner Safety

- Satisfies the basic human need to learn and grow
- You feel safe in the learning process
 - Asking questions
 - Giving and receiving feedback
 - Experimenting
 - Making mistakes

Stage 2: Learner Safety

- I am allowed to learn from my mistakes
- I feel comfortable asking questions
- My team supports my efforts to learn

Stage 2: Vulnerable Acts

- Asking questions
- Soliciting feedback
- Floating ideas
- Experimenting
- Making mistakes
- Failing

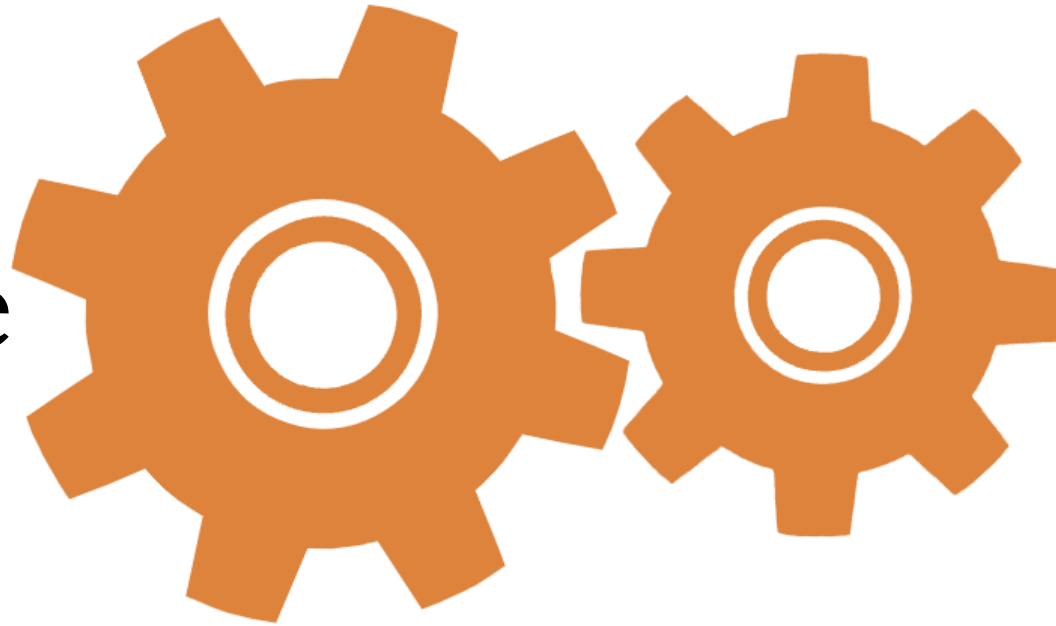
Kaizen!

“Disconnect
mistakes from
failure and fear.”



Stage 2: Learner Safety

Modeling
Vulnerable
Acts



Rewarding
Vulnerable
Acts

**Psychological
Safety**



**Learning from
Mistakes**



**Performance
& Innovation**

**Leaders
Model
Behaviors**



**Psychological
Safety**



**Learning from
Mistakes**



**Performance
& Innovation**

**Leaders
Reward
Behaviors**



**Inclusion
Safety**



**Challenger
Safety**



Stage 3: Contributor Safety

- Satisfies the basic human need for
 - *Autonomy*
 - *Contribution*
- You feel safe and are given the opportunity and role clarity to use your skills and abilities to make a difference

Stage 3: Contributor Safety

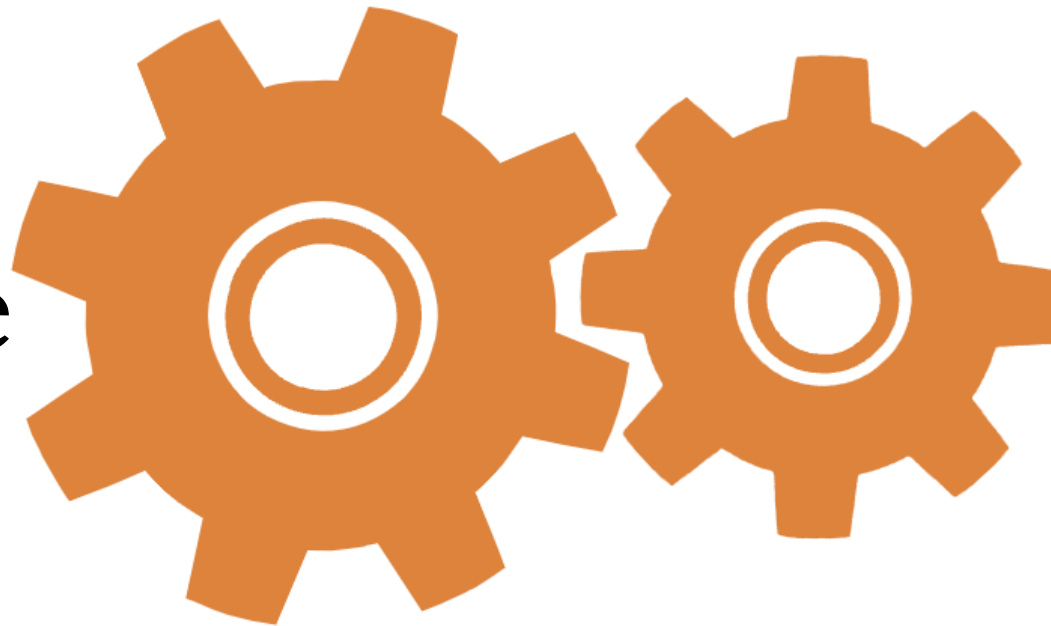
- *Autonomy is not a right*
- *Autonomy with guidance is given in exchange for results*
 - “Mutual investment”

Stage 3: Contributor Safety

- My team allows me to do my job
- My team values my contribution
- I am encouraged to contribute as much as I can in my role

Stage 3: Contributor Safety

**Modeling
Vulnerable
Acts**



**Rewarding
Vulnerable
Acts**

Stage 4: Challenger Safety

- Satisfies the basic human need to make things better
- When you think there's the need or an opportunity to improve, you feel safe to
 - Speak up
 - Challenge the status quo

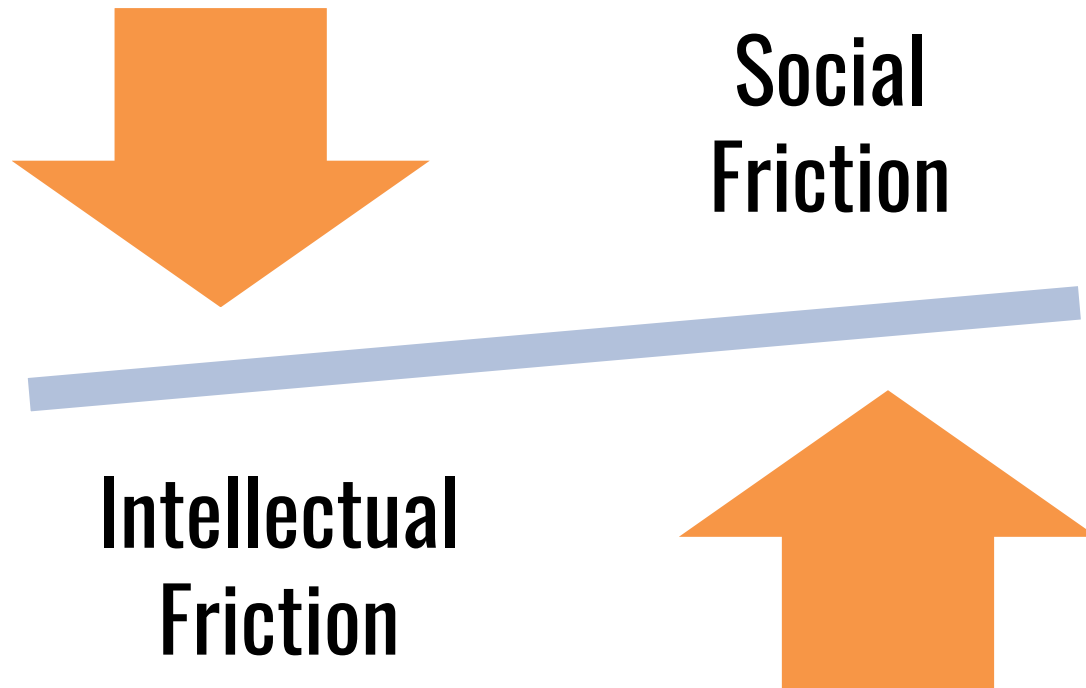
Stage 4: Challenger Safety

- I can take reasonable risks without being punished
- I feel safe disagreeing with the way my team does things
- I have the freedom to challenge the status quo

Is it Challenging to Challenge?

- Without challenger safety...
- A few unusually brave people will speak up...
- Is that enough to drive innovation?

“Innovation is not some kind of frictionless, comfortable process.”



Breaking Down Hierarchy



“An exaggerated deference to the chain of command will not lead to innovation.”



Which Ideas Win Out?



- What is more highly regarded?
 - Source of the idea?
 - Substance of the idea?

SPEAK

“Leaders ~~Eat~~ last”

When Giving Feedback...

- Are you able to give unvarnished feedback?
- Or are you protecting yourself by self-censoring?

Are They REALLY Open to Feedback?

- Is your feedback rewarded or punished?
- How long do I have to wait?

We Need a Culture of Candor

The ideal:

“Creative abrasion
with a high tolerance
for candor.”



How Does a Leader React to Bad News?



“I want to hear the bad news. I want to hear it fast.”



How Does a Leader React to Bad News?



“The moment of truth:
Do you shoot the
messenger, or do you listen
even if you are unhappy?”



We Need a Culture of Candor

- What's potentially problematic about this?
- A leader who frequently says:
 - “To be candid...”
 - “Candidly...”

Candor Always Comes Out...

- In the meeting?
- Or in the hallway?
 - Or the text message?
 - Or the private chat Zoom message?



Dissent is Good and Necessary

- Leaders are RESPONSIBLE for inviting dissent
- Encouraging dissent
- Rewarding dissent
- Creating the obligation of dissent

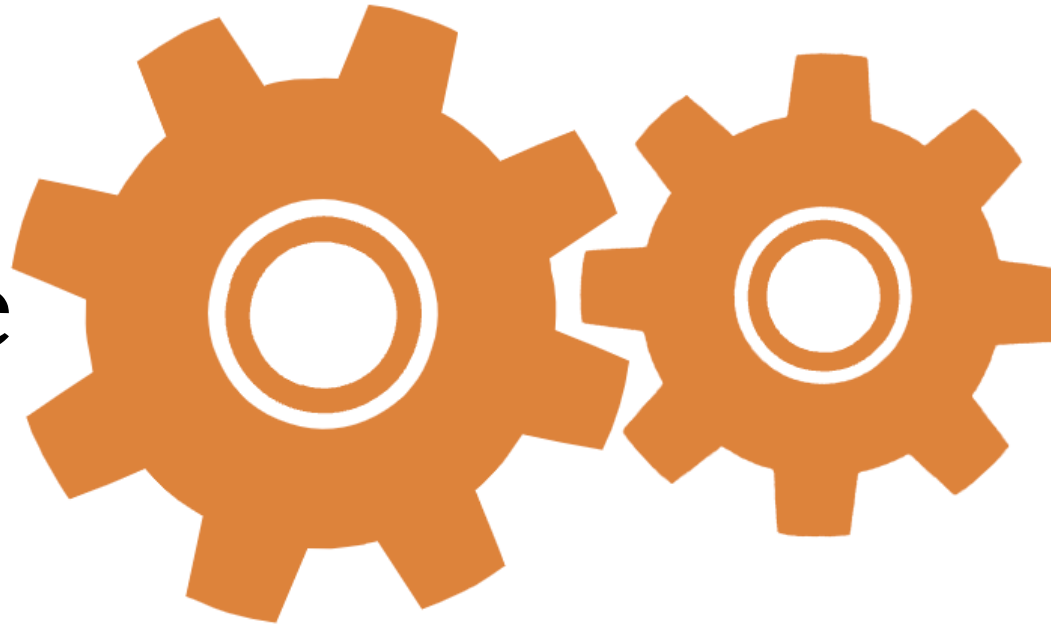
Action: Assign the Role of Dissenter

- Tell me why this is a bad idea...
- What are the vulnerabilities?

This takes away
the personal risk

Stage 4: Challenger Safety

**Modeling
Vulnerable
Acts**



**Rewarding
Vulnerable
Acts**

What We Can Do to Build Psychological Safety

1. Frame the work as a learning problem, not an execution problem
2. Acknowledge your own fallibility
3. Model curiosity and ask lots of questions
4. Solicit input and opinions from the group
5. Share information about personal and work style preferences, and encourage others to do the same



The Culture Formation Hypothesis

- The leader sets the tone
- Culture of a team reflects, more than anything, the behaviors modeled by the leader
- Teams do not outperform the leader, they reflect the leader



What Psychological Safety is NOT (1)

- Niceness – false harmony, shying away from intellectual debate
- Coddling – overprotecting people from anxiety, fear, stress, adversity, and trauma
- A Shield – from accountability when you don't perform

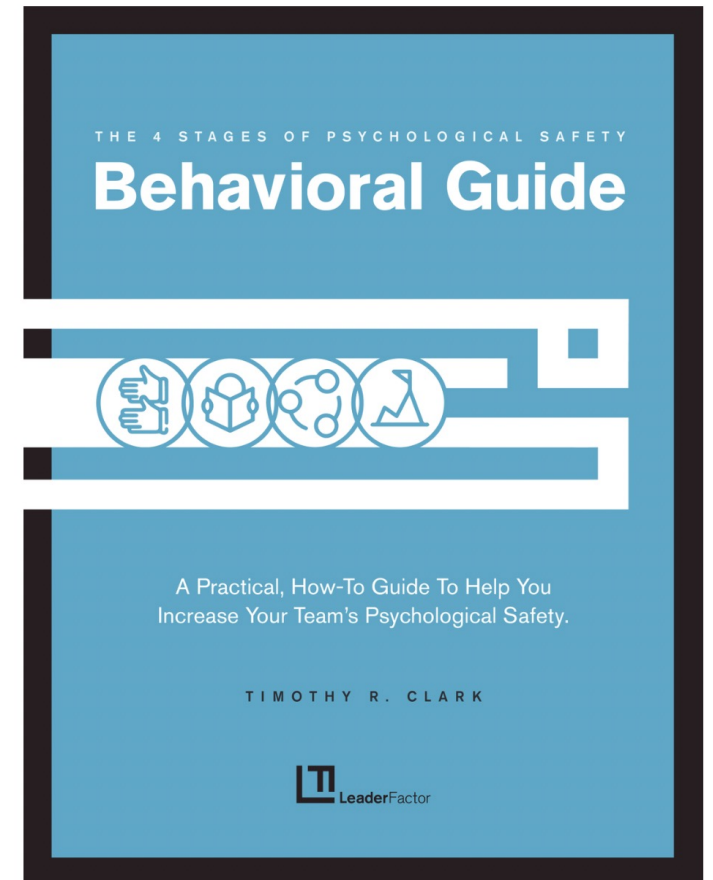
What Psychological Safety is NOT (2)

- Consensus Decision Making – but it DOES reduce power differentials based on title, etc.
- Unearned Autonomy – autonomy is earned through competence, not entitlement
- Rhetorical Reassurances

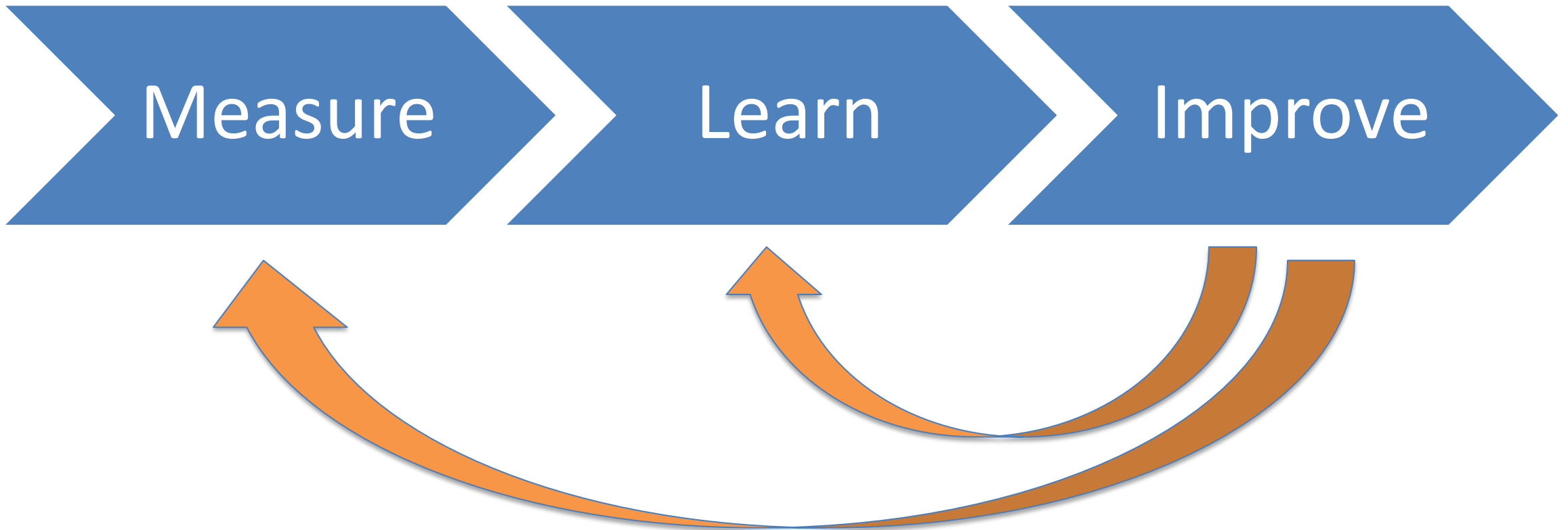
33 Starting Point Behaviors

- <https://www.leaderfactor.com/resources/the-4-stages-behavioral-guide>
- Free PDF from LeaderFactor

- I've linked to it here:
 - <http://www.markgraban.com/MGMC2022>



The Journey to Psychological Safety



Thank You!

- **Slides & More:**

<http://www.markgraban.com/PSJan2023>

- **Email:** Mark@MarkGraban.com

- **Podcasts:** MyFavoriteMistakePodcast.com

