Empowering ethics: Unleashing compliance program success through psychological safety

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Since Harvard Business School's Amy Edmondson applied the term "psychological safety" to work teams in 1999, the concept has evolved considerably as employers have become increasingly focused on supporting mental health, engaging in more agile ways of working, and promoting inclusivity. In today's organization, psychological safety has shifted from a notion that is merely "nice to have" to an essential, as it improves team members' professional lives, promotes their personal well-being, drives innovation, establishes meaningful relationships, builds trust, and just makes good business sense. As organizations are recognizing the value through improved team member engagement, business innovation, and profitability, we'd be remiss—as compliance professionals—if we didn't also recognize the undeniable impact it has on the effectiveness of the programs we strive to build and maintain.

What is 'psychological safety'?

Psychological safety is a concept that refers to an individual's perception of the work environment as a safe space for taking interpersonal risks, sharing ideas, asking questions, and expressing concerns without the fear of negative consequences.[1] In psychologically safe environments, team members feel comfortable being themselves, contributing their opinions, and engaging in open and honest discussions, which ultimately fosters collaboration, innovation, and well-being.

Why the evolution

When Edmondson first presented the notion of psychological safety, the emphasis was on creating a team environment conducive to learning and improvement. Her research underscored that psychological safety fosters open communication and risk-taking, positioning teams to think differently and learn from their failures.[2] As teams with psychological safety thrived and organizations reaped the benefits, the concept expanded beyond individual teams to shape overall organizational culture.

Leaders now appreciate that cultivating an environment where team members can freely express concerns and ideas without fear enhances trust, collaboration, and adaptability. Even before the pandemic (but increasingly more so because of it), the more progressive approach to employee mental health has further driven the evolution of psychological safety in the workplace.[3] Team members have faced having to contend with unprecedented challenges at home, working long hours, and making tough decisions between right and wrong and sometimes even between life and death when they report to work each day. As a result, employers are increasingly focused on creating an environment where team members can openly discuss stress, mental health challenges, and work-related pressures without judgment or repercussions. Such an environment contributes to individual and organizational well-being and cultivates trust among leaders and teams.

In this post-pandemic world, the workplace is now more diverse and dynamic than before.[4] You have team members who never leave their homes or their computers and may rarely physically interact with their colleagues or leaders. You have team members balancing the challenges of a hybrid role where there is sometimes frequent travel, limited work time in front of their computers, and family commitments on top of it all. And then you have those who have had to consistently report to the hospital, practice, or office but may potentially harbor some resentment for their colleagues who had more flexibility during the pandemic and who may continue to do so now. These team dynamics, coupled with the increasingly more common need for cross-functional collaboration among colleagues, further drive the importance of fostering an environment where team members consistently feel comfortable sharing ideas and raising concerns regardless of how or where they work.

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