

# Getting Comfortable with the Uncomfortable: Building Psychologically Safe Teams in Correctional Organizations

## *The Moss Group*

In corrections, our number one priority is safety. Our understanding of what safety means for the populations in custody has expanded over the last 20 years, to include physical, emotional, sexual and relational safety. This expansion is undoubtedly making our facilities safer for incarcerated individuals.



**Physical Safety:**  
Protection from physical harm.



**Sexual Safety:**  
Protection from sexual abuse or harassment



**Emotional Safety:**  
Feeling safe to express who one is and what one needs.



**Relational Safety:**  
Feeling safe in interactions with others.

In recent years, agencies have also been aware of the need for a focus on **staff safety** beyond protection from physical harm as well, to promote staff wellness and resilience. Perhaps this shift was due to the impact of COVID-19 on not only physical health but also mental health; perhaps it was a shift that had been in the works for years but accelerated by the pandemic. In any case, the safety and wellness of professionals in many fields has garnered more attention.

### **Defining Psychological Safety and Organizational Benefits**

While these traditional forms of safety are vital to our work, so is **team psychological safety**. This concept takes our focus beyond the individual to how we work together as professionals. Many

correctional organizations are working hard to ensure that daily operational practice and innovations draw input from all levels and strengthen teamwork and collaboration.

#### *Benefits of psychological safety in organizations*

- ✓ *Greater employee engagement*
- ✓ *Better ideas and decision making*
- ✓ *Increase in overall safety*
- ✓ *Decrease in staff stress and strain at work*
- ✓ *Increase in retention*
- ✓ *Increase in feedback and upward-directed communication*

Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson coined the term **team psychological safety** in 1999, which can be summarized as a “shared belief held by members of a team that it is okay to take risks, to express ideas and concerns, to speak up with questions, and to admit mistakes – all without fear of negative consequences.”<sup>1</sup> The research is compelling. When people feel psychologically safe, they are more engaged, decisions are better because of multiple perspectives, and the individuals within those teams develop professionally. Without this kind of safety, people may feel less likely to speak up and less likely to engage. That means organizations lose out on many great ideas, decrease overall safety, and can lead to staff turnover and retention challenges.

It is important to note that psychological safety is not about coddling staff or consensus decision making. Rather, it is about healthy engagement and healthy conflict among team members to speak up without

<sup>1</sup> [What Is Psychological Safety?](#)

fear of punishment. In all cases, a sense of safety is vital to obtaining accurate information on current operations and developing systems and procedures that move operations forward.

### ***Discerning between being unsafe vs. uncomfortable***

The challenge faced by leaders today is how to create teams that are safe enough to risk being uncomfortable. This is key because growth is very rarely comfortable. So, what is the difference between feeling unsafe and uncomfortable?

Being unsafe in general means that you believe that something is going to happen that causes you pain or loss (material or physical). Feeling unsafe can lead us into fight, flight, or freeze mode. Lack of safety at work can be the result of bullying, discrimination, and other unprofessional behaviors.

Being uncomfortable means that you are in a situation that you are unfamiliar with, have little or no experience with, or makes you question your attitudes, values, or beliefs – the things you hold as truth. This is a complicated reaction which can manifest feelings of being nervous, anxious, or afraid. It is important to be able to spot the differences because feeling unsafe is never a positive thing, but feeling uncomfortable and moving through that feeling is the way that we grow so it can be positive.

Developing more awareness of our own experiences and coming to be able to determine if you are uncomfortable or unsafe in a situation, is a key component of building team safety. When you are in a situation that is uncomfortable the key is to find ways to move through that discomfort. When you are in a situation that feels unsafe the key is to find a way to restore safety.

*Are you unsafe or uncomfortable and what is the path forward, ask yourself these key questions<sup>2</sup>:*

- Am I at immediate risk of being harmed?
  - If yes, remove yourself from the situation and seek support.
  - If no, proceed to the next question.
- What is my professional responsibility in this situation?
  - What do I need to do to meet that responsibility?
- What do I want? What would I do if I really wanted these things?
  - What do I want for myself?
  - What do I want for the other person?
  - What do I want for the relationship?
- What if you have done something that is not in line with what you really want?
  - Apologize.
  - Fix misunderstandings by explaining what you didn't intend or mean and what you did intend or mean.
  - Identify a shared purpose.

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from: Patterson, Kerry, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler. 2002. *Crucial Conversations*. Maidenhead, England: McGraw-Hill Contemporary.

***Building psychologically safe teams, where to start?***

Team psychological safety applies to all levels of an organization, to include a commissioner working with division leaders, a warden working with facility supervisors, and the officer-in-charge managing a shift.

In order to determine the level of team psychological safety, team leaders should review multiple facets of the workplace. Amy Edmondson's seven item scale can help you and your team think about dimensions of psychological safety and identify where your team is strong and where there is opportunity for improvement:

1. If you make a mistake on this team, it is not held against you.
2. Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.
3. People on this team sometimes accept other for being different.
4. It is safe to take a risk on this team.
5. It is not difficult to ask other members of this team for help.
6. No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my effort.
7. Working with member of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized.

As corrections faces new challenges and opportunities, effective teams are essential in meeting the mission in new and innovative ways. It is important to evaluate whether you as an individual and your team as a whole is operating in a culture of safety in order reach the best results.

***Additional resources***

- [\*The Fearless Organization\* by Amy Edmondson](#)
- [\*The Four Stages of Psychological Safety\* by Timothy R. Clarke](#)
- [\*Turn The Ship Around\* by David Marquet](#)
- [\*Five Dysfunctions of a Team\* by Patrick Lencioni](#)

**About The Moss Group (TMG):** TMG is a criminal justice consulting firm dedicated to organizational and operational excellence. Our mission is to be a trusted partner to leaders and their organization to create optimal safety for staff and the people under their supervision. We have developed proven frameworks to support team building at all levels of an organization specific to correctional and public safety settings. We offer a range of solutions including hourly coaching, training, strategic planning, and multi-session experiential learning and team building initiatives.

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