**"THE SECRET SAUCE OF LEADING EFFECTIVE VETERINARY TEAMS"**
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Business leaders around the world are interested in maximizing the effectiveness of their teams.  Forward thinking leaders are also dedicated to cultivating the resilience and wellbeing of the people they serve.  It turns out, there's a common variable between the two that, when developed, contributes to a resilient, effective work team.

The common variable is what organizational psychologists call, "Psychological Safety."

In 1998 Dr. Amy Edmondson of Harvard University facilitated a study meant to identify what differentiates effective nurse teams from their ineffective colleagues.  She hypothesized that the most effective nurse teams must make the fewest medical errors.  However, when the study was complete, the data seemed to suggest the exact opposite – that is, the data showed the *more effective* a nurse team was *the more mistakes* they appeared to be making.

Puzzled, Dr. Edmondson dug deeper and finally discovered a remarkable truth.  It wasn't that the effective teams actually made more mistakes.  Rather, they openly admitted mistakes.  By contrast, the ineffective teams did all they could to mask or hide their workplace errors.

What Dr. Edmondson had uncovered is a dynamic present or absent in every team in every workplace.  She called it psychological safety and has spent the last 20 years studying its presence in and impact on teams and organizations.

Almost 15 years later Google began a research project of their own.  Victims of their own exponential growth and committed to developing strong management leaders, Google wanted to know what factors were most predictive of effective teams and leaders in their organization.  They spent 2 years studying over 250 variable across 180 teams in the company.  They looked at objective variables such as years' experience, educational background, previous leadership experience, etc.  None of these factors predicted team and leadership effectiveness.

One thing did consistently correlate to the kinds of teams and leaders Google wanted.  Psychological safety.

## What is Psychological Safety?

Simply put, psychological safety is the perception within a team that it is safe to both make (honest) mistakes and/or ask for help, *without risk or fear of being punished.*

As a concept it is elegant and simple.  And yet it is lacking in many (possibly most) workplaces, with serious consequences.

Do not be fooled by its simplicity.  It is easy to lose sight of what psychological safety looks like.  Let us first consider what it is NOT:

- It is NOT **Forced/Toxic Positivity** where people are not allowed to have a bad day
- It is NOT the "**Get Along Gang**" where everyone's opinion is treated like gold all the time
- It is NOT the "**Touchy Feelies**" with people singing Koombaya around a firepit all day long

Psychological safety works best when combined with High Standards.  This leads to both a purpose-driven desire to grow and improve, and an environment in which learning outshines the fear of looking bad.  Without High Standards, high psychological safety leads to excessive comfort and little drive.  However, High Standards without matching psychological safety results in a deep, overwhelming sense of anxiety at work.  The result is underperformance, in effectiveness, more errors and mistakes, and burnout.

Unfortunately the Anxiety Zone is more common than it should be.  According to Gallup, only 3 in 10 of all US employees believe their opinion matters at work.

## The Business Case for Psychological Safety

Some companies do a decent job of cultivating psychological safety to match their high standards. In organizations in which 6 in 10 employees believe their opinion matters, doubling the average number, we see:

- A **27% reduction** in employee turnover
- A **40% reduction** in safety incidents
- A **12%** increase in business profitability

And that's in places where 40% of people still believe their opinion doesn't matter! Imagine the possibilities!

## How to Cultivate Psychological Safety

I advocate a 5-step process for growing an appropriate sense of psychological safety in veterinary teams.

1) **Measure it!** Psychological safety can actually be measured using simple, validated, psychometric assessments. Email me at josh@flourishveterinaryconsulting.com and I'll gladly share one of them with you. *We can best manage only what we actually measure!*

2) **Set the Stage** – Once you've measured it, it's now time to establish shared expectations and meaning in the work. This involved "Framing the Work" around learning opportunities, "Clarifying the Need for Voice" with a common belief that no one person has all the answers and collective effort is the only way to reach the highest potential, "Reframing the Role of the Boss" away from a director and more toward a guide who empowers others to get the work done in the way they see fit, and, "Emphasizing Purpose" by identifying what's at stake, why it matters, and for whom.

3) **Invite Participation** – Now it is up to leaders to "Demonstrate Humility," and begin "Practicing Inquiry" by developing a habit of curiosity at work in all interactions with the team. Finally, leaders must "Setup Structures for Input" that regularly and easily allow for the team to offer their input and perspective.

4) **Respond Productivity** – Now that you've set the stage and invited participation, "Express Appreciation" and celebrate the *behavior of speaking up,* even if and especially when you disagree with the opinion offered. You must also continue to "Destigmatize Failure" as an inevitable part of growth and learning. It's now time to stop punishing failure and celebrate fast learning. Finally, "Sanction Clear Violations." Most of the time mistakes and failures are of the honest variety or, at the very least, the result of breakdowns in policy, procedures, or systems. That said, on occasion a clear violation (eg, a behavior clearly in violation of the cultural values in the team) do occur. If such a violation occurs, to maintain psychological safety a leader must act decisively and swiftly to sanction it.

5) **Re-Measure It!** – Periodically run a 'psych safety re-check' and measure it again to see (and celebrate) where progress has been made and where the opportunities exist for new 'fast learning.'