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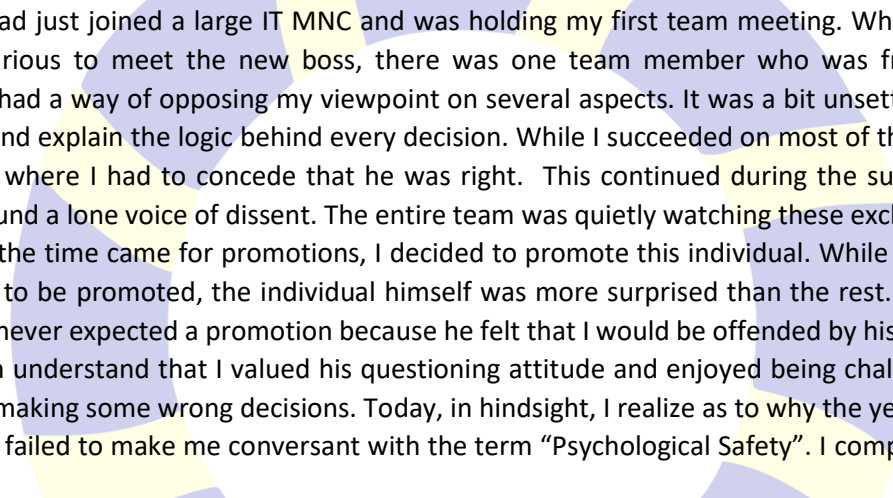
Leadership Role in promoting Psychological Safety

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It was the year 2006. I had just joined a large IT MNC and was holding my first team meeting. While all the team members were curious to meet the new boss, there was one team member who was frequently interrupting my talk. He had a way of opposing my viewpoint on several aspects. It was a bit unsettling but I tried to be very patient and explain the logic behind every decision. While I succeeded on most of the points, there were some points where I had to concede that he was right. This continued during the subsequent meetings too, where I found a lone voice of dissent. The entire team was quietly watching these exchanges. A few months later, when the time came for promotions, I decided to promote this individual. While the team had never expected him to be promoted, the individual himself was more surprised than the rest. He came and told me that he had never expected a promotion because he felt that I would be offended by his attitude. I had to gently make him understand that I valued his questioning attitude and enjoyed being challenged. It had prevented me from making some wrong decisions. Today, in hindsight, I realize as to why the years spent in obtaining an MBA had failed to make me conversant with the term "Psychological Safety". I completed my MBA in 1995.

Perhaps what I had subconsciously done at that time was spurred by my instinctive response as a leader. I am glad that my ego did not come in the way of my decision at that time. During my subsequent career, I had occasion to witness several instances where managers victimize subordinates who question their decisions.

It was Amy Edmondson who first coined the term "psychological safety" in a 1999 Harvard journal article exploring its relationship to team learning and performance.

What is psychological safety in the workplace?

Let's start with a definition. Team psychological safety is a shared belief held by members of a team that it's OK to take risks, to express their ideas and concerns, to speak up with questions, and to admit mistakes — all without fear of negative consequences.

How many of us, as leaders, are willing to accept this? Most of us are defensive by nature. Our ego always comes in the way. However, a workplace that is not open to new ideas might not be very conducive to productivity. Our workplaces have also undergone a paradigm shift from the days when employers ruled the roost. The current generation of workforce have their own ethos and look at a lot of factors beyond financial remuneration while choosing their place of work. Organizations too, need to understand that a toxic workplace does not provide an ideal climate for productivity.

What are the steps that you can take to promote psychological safety at your workplace?

Employers can do a lot towards creating a conducive environment at the workplace. The workplace should be one where the employee feels respected and valued.

Some of the steps that can be taken are as follows:

• Foster a communication culture that is open and respectful.

• Create an atmosphere of transparency and trust.

• Have clarity in goals and expectations.

• Accept failures as natural obstacles impeding the path to success and treat them as opportunities for improvement.

• Take a supportive and consultative approach to leadership.

Inclusion has become an integral part of our workplace culture. However, it is common to see organizations doing lip service to this vital aspect. We need to understand that employee engagement is the by-product of employee experience at the workplace. It is vital that an employee feels valued and respected. His/her contributions need to be acknowledged. While there is a lot of song and dance about diversity and inclusion, line managers are often found wanting in simple acts like a timely pat on the back for good work done or lending a gentle ear to their team members. A good leader should not only be engaged with the team but also demonstrate the engagement. Similarly, the team needs to know that you understand. Instead of looking for scapegoats, a good leader needs to step forward and take accountability when things go wrong. This is essential to build trust. Self-awareness and positivity are not only to be preached but also practised by the leader. A culture of openness where feedback is appreciated and the team is championed will help the leader make a winning team.

How often do you accept mistakes?

A leader needs to understand that he is not a superhuman. He is quite prone to mistakes and wrong decisions. I have invariably accepted the fact that out of ten decisions taken, one or even two could be wrong. And I have applied the same principle when a member of my team has made mistakes.

I remember an incident that had occurred almost a decade earlier. The Aero India show was going on at Bangalore and there was acute paucity of hotel rooms. A senior leader planned a visit to Bangalore. My hospitality lead informed the leader that rooms were not available and requested him to postpone his visit. However, the leader insisted on going ahead with his travel plan. Being left with no other option, the hospitality lead spoke to another guest who had a room and arranged for shared accommodation for both. I received a call from my boss who was visibly unhappy. He felt that my hospitality lead had failed. He told me that he wanted the resignation of the person responsible for the fiasco. In a very soft and humble manner, I asked him whether it would be okay if I tendered my resignation immediately. He was taken aback and wanted to know as to what I was trying to convey. I cooly replied that the ownership for any failure within my team vests with only one person. Me. Period. The fact that matter ended there, reinforced my faith in my boss and his maturity.

The linkage between workplace safety and productivity had gained relevance right from the period of Industrial Revolution when accidents at the workplace resulted in disruption of the concerned assembly line. When production increased, there was a need felt for marketing and supply chain logistics. Offices with a horde of typists mushroomed across various towns and cities. In these workplaces, it was not a serious accident or injury that posed risks. Health and hygiene became very important. A health insurance plan helped mitigate the risk to some extent. However, even during that period, mental health was a neglected area. It was only during the eighties that stress at work became a topic of debate. Today, especially in the aftermath of the recent pandemic, mental health and wellness has gained enhanced focus. One aspect that is hard to ignore is that the focus on workplace safety was never triggered due to any altruistic notion or genuine care. The key driver has always been productivity. In a business world where fates and fortunes are dependent on quarterly earnings and stock values, profit will continue to be a key indicator of performance. The linkage between profit and productivity has always been amply clear to all. It is fortunate to see that the linkage between employee satisfaction and productivity has also finally gained recognition.

While AI and Robotics are disrupting the manner in which work is done, human resource would continue to play vital roles in workplaces. Perhaps the nature of work being done might undergo a change but workplaces without human resources might not be realistic to contemplate, at least in the immediate future. Technology might make the roles of generalists redundant but niche skills would continue to add value to organizations. The dearth of talented workforce could seriously erode the competitive advantage of organizations. Toxic workplaces would fail to attract the right talent.

In such an environment, Line managers and HR managers would be wise in creating workplaces where the fundamentals of psychological safety are key drivers of the organization's culture and philosophy. It is here that the leader at the apex can make a difference.