



Psychological Safety:

**A Game Changer for
Constructive Conflict Management**

The **Myers Briggs** Company

Successful teams are good at managing conflict. Yet constructive conflict management rarely occurs naturally. Research shows that a key link between conflict and team performance is psychological safety.

According to Amy Edmondson, author of *The Fearless Organization*, psychological safety is a shared belief among team members that it is okay to take risks, express competing ideas, ask challenging questions, and openly discuss mistakes without the fear of negative repercussions.

The three types of conflict—task, process, and relationship—can be influenced by psychological safety. Research shows that team leaders who create psychological safety early in the life of a team can encourage constructive conflict management for task conflict and decrease the likelihood of destructive process and relationship conflict.

Task conflict and psychological safety. Bradley and colleagues found that psychological safety can encourage constructive disagreements about substantive issues (task conflict). Leaders who create an open and respectful team climate can support a constructive discussion of differences where team members feel safe to speak up, challenge each other's ideas, and engage in rigorous problem solving. When team members feel comfortable debating issues related to the task, they are less likely to take disagreements personally.

Process conflict and psychological safety. When a team has disagreements about the "hows" of teamwork, they are experiencing process conflict. Examples might be conflicting opinions about deadlines, decision-making authorities, or in-office presence. Team members who feel safe to express their opinions without retribution can engage in constructive conversations about team processes that will work best for all members and maximize positive outcomes.

Relationship conflict and psychological safety. Interpersonal incompatibility often arises among individuals and causes tension, animosity, and frustration. In teams where psychological safety is high, individuals are more likely to address personality differences and less likely to experience destructive relationship conflict.

The five conflict-handling modes and psychological safety. Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann, authors of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI®), show how individuals can benefit from the use of five

different conflict-handling modes: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. In addition to studies that show the relationship between psychological safety and the three types of conflict, researchers have found that teams that experience high psychological safety are more likely to use the collaborating and compromising modes. Where psychological safety is low, team members will often avoid or accommodate.

Taking action. Practitioners can help teams improve their performance by engaging in discussions and creating action plans around psychological safety and constructive conflict. Here's a game-changing strategy.

1. Administer the TKI® assessment to team members and generate the TKI Team Report from their results. The report provides a team conflict-handling profile by identifying possible overuse and underuse of the five conflict-handling modes. It also tees up discussions about the challenges to and remedies for employing constructive conflict management.
2. Couple the TKI Team Report with the **seven-question assessment** about team members' assessment of psychological safety. Pay close attention to the distribution of scores among the team members.
3. Discuss the team's TKI conflict-handling results alongside the psychological safety results. Lead a discussion about their current approach to conflict management, their desired future state of constructive conflict management, and how psychological safety might help them close any gaps.

A practical application

The special project team was six months into their year-long assignment. Up until that point, things seemed to be going okay, but the team lead, Johanna, was concerned that team members weren't offering up their best ideas. One issue she noticed was that one of the team members, Harold, seemed to be taking up most of the airtime and pushing others to accept his solutions. When questioned about his increasing assertiveness, he simply said he was doing it to increase efficiency. Johanna also wondered how her leadership abilities might be contributing to the team's lack of effectiveness.

Johanna felt like it was a good time to do some professional development to improve her leadership and increase the team's engagement toward successful completion to the project. Through her corporate L&D unit, Johanna learned about the importance of psychological safety and constructive conflict management to improve team performance. Now seemed like a perfect time to introduce these topics to her team.

Johanna called Jack from the L&D unit and asked if he would conduct a workshop with her team. Jack agreed and suggested that he administer two assessments that would shape their learning and discussions: the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument and a psychological safety assessment.

TKI results

Here is the 7-person team profile from the TKI Team Report.

TEAM CONFLICT MODES, WITH PERCENTAGE OF TEAM MEMBERS SCORING HIGH AND LOW FOR EACH MODE



Johanna's team profile showed a strong team preference of accommodating and avoiding. As suspected, Harold scored very high on competing and very low on accommodating and avoiding.

Psychological safety results

Jack anonymously administered Amy Edmondson's 7-question survey to learn about the team members' willingness to speak up and engage on important issues. Here is the distribution of scores for the team.

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
If I make a mistake on this team, it is not held against you.	1	2	2	1	1
Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.	2	1	1	2	1
People on this team sometimes accept others for being different.	2	4	0	1	1
It is safe to take a risk on this team.	2	4	1	0	0
It isn't difficult to ask other members of this team for help.	1	3	1	1	1
No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.	0	2	1	2	2
Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized.	1	2	1	2	1

Overall, it seemed that psychological safety wasn't stellar for this team. Johanna and Jack noticed a wide distribution of scores on the 7 items which meant there was a lack of agreement on these important attributes of psychological safety.

Given these scores on psychological safety, it wasn't surprising that the team might be overusing the accommodating and avoiding conflict-handling modes. The question now was how to improve psychological safety and improve the team dynamics.

With assistance from Jack, Johanna and the team created clear norms and expectations for the team dynamics. Team members came up with a list of standards that they would use to guide team behaviors. Here's their list:

- Treat one another with respect.
- Everyone contribute to discussions so that one person isn't dominating the discussions.
- Actively listen to one another.
- One person speak at a time (no side bars or talking over each other).
- Give and receive feedback constructively to enforce these standards.

The team's new standards did a good job of boosting the psychological safety among the team members. Through their discussion about how they wanted to interact with one another, they learned what was working and what was undermining their ability to be open and share information more freely. Johanna appreciated the "yard stick" that the 7-question survey provided. It allowed her to check her leadership behaviors around the messages she was sending about risk taking, her reaction to mistakes, and the general tone she set at weekly team meetings. It also helped her figure out better ways to illicit more ideas from the group.

To boost the team's ability to tackle the three types of conflict, Johanna made sure to structure conversations around best-practice processes to reduce uncertainty and decrease destructive process conflict. Johanna asked Jack to do additional workshops on problem solving and collaboration. Both of those sessions were well received and provided new skill sets for the team to engage in constructive task conflict. Jack also provided tips for heading off destructive personality conflict that everyone found useful both for work and their personal lives.

Fast forward to the end of the project. Team members received bonuses for their exemplary work that was completed ahead of schedule and offered some innovative solutions to some challenging problems.

Get started.

Here's how you can help your company teams improve their psychological safety and conflict-handling.

- Check out the [TKI Team Report here](#). (free sample)
- Download the 48-page [TKI Team Report Facilitator's Guide](#)



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