

September/October 2024

Nurturing psychological safety while upholding accountability

ProAct Safety

By: SHAWN M. GALLOWAY CEO ProAct Safety

Sustained Safety Excellence



P psychological safety and accountability are vital elements in creating a healthy work environment, especially in pursuing safety excellence. Sometimes they can appear to conflict with each other, making their coexistence seem elusive. Finding a way to achieve this delicate balance can be rewarding when leaders understand how to make them coexist and support and harmonize these elements throughout the culture.

Psychological safety refers to an environment where employees feel safe speaking up, sharing their concerns and taking appropriate risks without fear of negative consequences. On the other hand, accountability is essential for maintaining standards, ensuring compliance and preventing accidents. They can conflict in some instances.

Fear of reprisal. Without psychological safety in a workplace emphasizing accountability, employees may fear speaking up about mistakes or errors, worrying that admitting fault could lead to negative consequences. This fear can

hinder a culture of open communication and learning from mistakes.

Blame culture. When accountability is enforced through a culture of blame, this discourages employees from taking ownership of their mistakes and makes a culture of transparency and trust within the team impossible.

Lack of support for risk-taking. If accountability discourages risk-taking and experimentation, it may stifle innovation and creativity. Employees may feel reluctant to propose new ideas or initiatives for fear of negative repercussions if things don't go as planned.

Unhealthy competition. Where accountability is prioritized over collaboration, employees may feel pressured to prioritize their individual results over the team's well-being. Striking a balance between personal and team results is vital, as this can foster trust and cooperation.

Micromanagement. Excessive monitoring and micromanagement in the name of accountability can erode trust and psychological safety. Employees may feel that their autonomy is restricted, leading to a lack of creativity and motivation.

Unattainable performance metrics. Un-realistic performance expectations can lead to burnout and stress. This can create a culture of fear and anxiety.

When employees feel safe to voice their concerns without fear of retribution or ridicule, they are more likely to identify and report potential hazards and risks. By encouraging open dialogue, leaders create the capacity to become more proactive with injury and incident prevention.

While psychological safety encourages employees to report safety concerns, accountability ensures that those concerns are addressed promptly and effectively. Holding individuals accountable for their actions or lack thereof creates a culture of responsibility and compliance. This, in turn, helps prevent negligence and ensures that safety protocols and procedures are followed consistently.

Striking the right balance between psychological safety and accountability can be challenging. Overemphasizing psychological safety without accountability may lead to a lack of discipline and complacency, compromising occupational safety.

...lead to a loss of discipline and compliance, compromising occupational safety.

Conversely, an excessive focus on accountability without psychological safety can create a fear-based work environment, hindering communication and preventing employees from speaking up about potential safety hazards.

Finding stability requires effective communication, transparency and commitment from all leaders. A harmonious integration of psychological safety and accountability ultimately results in a safer and more productive workplace. How balanced is your organization?

Shawn M. Galloway is CEO of ProAct Safety and an author of several bestselling books. His latest book is "Bridge to Excellence: Building Capacity for Sustainable Performance." He also hosts the highly acclaimed weekly podcast series Safety Culture Excellence®.

For more information, call (936) 273-8700 or email info@proactsafety.com.