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COACHING

# PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

*A Personal Guide to Feeling Safe at Work*

> **"Psychological safety is a belief that one will not be punished for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes."**
> *— Amy Edmondson, Harvard Business School*

## Connect Mode vs. Protect Mode

Your brain operates on a spectrum. When you feel safe, trusted, and valued, your brain enters **connect mode** — you think clearly, collaborate openly, and bring your full self to work. When you feel judged, undermined, or micromanaged, your brain shifts into **protect mode** — even small tasks feel overwhelming because your energy is consumed by avoiding personal risk, not completing the work.

Note: You may be in a fairly psychologically safe environment, but if you struggle with impostor syndrome, self-doubt, or anxiety, it may not feel safe to you. Both your environment and your inner world shape your sense of safety.

## What Pulls You Into Protect Mode?

These are called **psychosocial hazards** — risk factors in your environment that undermine your sense of safety and keep your internal alarm system on high alert. Common examples include:

| High Stress | Lack of Clarity | Toxic Colleagues | Past Trauma or Bullying |
|---|---|---|---|

## Four Strategies to Build Psychological Safety

**Strategy 1: Build Trust in Yourself**

Take an honest inventory of what you know — your industry knowledge, your relationships, your skills. Trust yourself in these areas and stop letting fear take them from you. You don't need to be perfect to be valuable. Lean on your strengths while staying curious about your growing edges. When you do, you create space for genuine collaboration — and relationships that become truly transformational.

**Reflect:** *What's one area of genuine strength or knowledge you tend to undersell? How could you lean into it more?*

**Strategy 2: Invest in Relationships**

When you work with people you don't know well, they can feel more intimidating. You have less context for their behaviors, and when we lack information, we fill in the gaps — often in ways unfavorable to ourselves or others. Even brief, genuine connection helps demystify colleagues and reduces the threat response.

**Reflect:** *Who at work could you get to know a little better? What's one small step you could take this week?*

**Strategy 3: Clarify Expectations**

Without clear expectations, it's hard to prioritize, advocate for yourself, or take pride in your work. It's a manager's responsibility to set you up for success. Seek clarity on goals upfront and ask for periodic feedback — this is a professional skill, not a weakness.

**Reflect:** *Where do you feel most unclear about what's expected of you? What would you need to feel more grounded?*

**Strategy 4: Don't Avoid Conflict**

Unaddressed conflict is a slow drain on your energy. Difficult conversations are uncomfortable, but brief — while the lingering anxiety, rumination, and avoidance are far more costly. Once you address conflict, no matter the outcome, you'll have greater clarity to move forward. This, more than almost anything, builds a felt sense of safety.

**Reflect:** *Is there a tension or conversation you've been avoiding? What would it feel like to address it?*

## Want to keep going?

An exercise like this often raises more questions than it answers, and that's a good sign. If something here stirred up a feeling you want to understand, a pattern you keep running into, or a next step you can't quite see yet, I'd love to help you explore it. As your coach, I'm a thinking partner who will listen, ask the questions that move you forward, and offer an honest perspective when you need one. Everything we discuss stays confidential. The first conversation is simply a chance to talk and see if we're a fit, with no commitment. Reach out at danah@unlockyoucoaching.com.

***Psychological safety is not a destination — it's a practice. Small, consistent steps build the conditions for you to do your best work.***