



THE FOUR STAGES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Timothy R. Clark

Innovation is almost always a collaborative process and almost never a lightbulb moment of lone genius.

Yet, as the historian Robert Conquest once said, “What is easy to understand may have not been easy to think of.” Innovation is never easy to think of. It requires creative abrasion and constructive dissent—processes that rely on high *intellectual* friction and low *social* friction.

Most leaders don’t comprehend that managing these two categories of friction to create an ecosystem of brave collaboration is at the heart of leadership as an applied discipline. It is perhaps the supreme test of a leader and a direct reflection of personal character. Without skill, integrity, and respect for people, it doesn’t happen. Nor can perks such as foosball tables, free lunch, an open office environment, and the aesthetic of a hip organization bring it to life.

One of the first things you learn about leadership is that the social and cultural context has a profound influence on the way people behave and that you as the leader are, straight up, responsible for that context. The other thing you learn is that fear is the enemy. It freezes initiative, ties up creativity, yields compliance instead of commitment, and represses what would otherwise be an explosion of innovation.

The presence of fear in an organization is the first sign of weak leadership.

If you can banish fear, install true performance-based accountability, and create a nurturing environment that allows people to be vulnerable as they learn and grow, they will perform beyond your expectations and theirs.

For the past twenty-five years, I've been a working cultural anthropologist and a student of psychological safety, learning from leaders and teams across every sector of society. I've discovered that psychological safety follows a progression based on the natural sequence of human needs.

First, human beings want to be included. Second, they want to learn. Third, they want to contribute. And finally, they want to challenge the status quo when they believe things need to change. This pattern is consistent across all organizations and social units, that I have come to define as The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety.

Psychological safety is a condition in which you feel (1) included, (2) safe to learn, (3) safe to contribute, and (4) safe to challenge the status quo—all without fear of being embarrassed, marginalized, or punished in some way.

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CRACK YOURSELF OPEN

Please don't read this for information. Read it for action. Read it for change. Crack yourself open and look inside. This is a time to summon the courage to conduct a searching, fearless personal inventory. And if you happen to lead a family, team, or organization, conduct institutional examination of conscience while you're at it. I have four questions to ask you:

- First, do you truly believe that all men and women are created equal, and do you accept others and welcome them into your society simply because they possess flesh and blood even if their values differ from your own?
- Second, without bias or discrimination, do you encourage others to learn and grow, and do you support them in that process even when they lack confidence or make mistakes?
- Third, do you grant others maximum autonomy to contribute in their own way as they demonstrate their ability to deliver results?
- Fourth, do you consistently invite others to challenge the status quo in order to make things better, and are you personally prepared to be wrong based on the humility and learning mindset you have developed?

These four questions align with the four stages of psychological safety. In large measure, the way you answer these questions will define the way you value human beings and your relationships with them. It will define the way you draw people out or shut them

down, create confidence or induce fear, encourage or discourage. It will determine how you lead and influence others.

The philosopher Thomas Hobbes said that there is “a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death.” That lust for power, wealth, and aggrandizement runs counter to human flourishing because we’re connected, not self-contained. “We are,” as the former archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams said, “healed by relation, not isolation.”

Drawing lines of exclusion is not rooted in our biology. It’s the adoration of power and distinction, insecurity, and ordinary selfishness that lead us to partition ourselves. As humans, we look for loyalties to attach to. Out of our attachments emerge our differences. Out of our differences emerge our divisions. Out of our divisions emerge our classes, ranks, and stations. And it is out of those spaces between us that the comparisons begin, the empathy flees, the fear and envy emerge, the conflicts arise, the antagonisms gestate, the destructive instincts and impulses for abuse and cruelty arise. In the spirit of our bigotry, we invent dogmas to justify the ways we torment each other. Ironically, in our digital age, we connect and feel alone, compare and feel inadequate. Indeed, if you have a sudden urge to feel “less than,” spend an hour on your favorite social media platform.

Though we can be foul friends to each other, we can also be cool rain on scorched earth—ministers, healers, and good neighbors. We are capable of breathtaking compassion, generosity, and selfless service. I’m not advocating heroism and grand expressions of self-sacrifice. No, my charge to you is, in the most basic sense, to treat human beings as they deserve to be treated—without arbitrary distinctions. Accept them, encourage them, respect them, and allow them.

If you want to be happy, come to terms with your fellow creatures. Lose the mock superiority. Stop nursing wrongs and start reaching out. Too many of us live far beneath our privileges, locked in what W. B. Yeats called the “foul rag and bone shop of the heart.” If you can create a little more psychological safety for your fellow travelers, it will change your life and theirs. I’m inviting you to change. Change the way you view and treat humanity.

The real frontier of modernity is not artificial intelligence; it’s emotional and social intelligence.

Think of a time when you were embarrassed, marginalized, or otherwise rejected in a social setting—a teacher ignored your question, a boss criticized your idea, a coworker mocked your English pronunciation, a casting director ridiculed your audition, a coach yelled at you for making an unforced error, your team ditched you and went to lunch. I’m referring to times when you were deprived of psychological safety. Do you remember those wounding experiences? They’re sticky because they sting.

Do those occasions influence your behavior? As the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild reminds us, “Feeling is a form of pre-action.” When we’re snubbed, ignored, silenced, brushed off, ostracized, or humiliated; when we’re bullied, harassed, or shamed; when we’re scorned, passed over, or neglected, those experiences are not neutral events. They’re demoralizing, lead to alienation, and activate the pain centers of the brain. They crush confidence and leave us in resentful, stupefied silence. In fact, sometimes the fear of these things can be more debilitating than the actual thing. Clearly, how we feel influences what we think and do.

Not given a voice and being mistreated can have a profound impact on our ability to perform, create value, and thrive. As humans, we instinctively sense the vibe, tone, and atmosphere around us and respond accordingly. But it's not a binary proposition—psychological safety is not something you either have or don't. From the nuclear family to the Navy SEALs, from the food truck to the president's cabinet—every social unit registers some level of psychological safety.

In organizations, it's an uncontested finding that high psychological safety drives performance and innovation, while low psychological safety incurs the disabling costs of low productivity and high attrition. Google's Project Aristotle proved that IQ points and money don't necessarily produce results. After studying 180 of its teams, Google found that smarts and resources can't compensate for what a team may lack in psychological safety. In fact, the company landed on psychological safety as the single most important factor in explaining high performance.

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When psychological safety is high, people take more ownership and release more discretionary effort, resulting in higher-velocity learning and problem solving. When it's low, people don't muscle through the fear. Instead, they shut down, self-censor, and redirect their energy toward risk management, pain avoidance, and self-preservation. As Celia Swanson, a former executive vice president at Walmart, said, "Making the decision to speak up against a toxic culture is one of the most difficult decisions employees may face in their careers."

My fieldwork with organizations across industries, cultures, and demographics has led me to identify a consistent pattern in the ways that social units grant psychological safety and how individuals perceive it. There's a natural progression across four developmental stages based on a combination of respect and permission. By respect, I mean the general level of regard and esteem we give each other. To respect someone is to value and appreciate them. By permission, I mean the permission given to others to participate as members of a social unit, the degree to which we allow them to influence us and participate in what we are doing.

As organizations grant increasing levels of respect and permission, individuals generally behave in a way that reflects the level of psychological safety offered to them. Each stage encourages individuals to engage more and accelerate both their personal development and the value-creation process. The "four stages of psychological safety" framework can be used as a diagnostic tool to assess the stage of psychological safety in any organization or social unit.

STAGE 1 | INCLUSION SAFETY

The first stage of psychological safety is informal admittance to the team—whether it’s the neighborhood book club or the College of Cardinals. In other words, the members of the social collective accept you and grant you a shared identity. You are now destigmatized as an outsider and brought into the fold. But it’s important to understand that inclusion safety isn’t merely tolerance; it’s not an attempt to cover up differences or politely pretend they’re not there. No, inclusion safety is provided by genuinely inviting others into your society based on the sole qualification that they possess flesh and blood. This transcendent connection supersedes all other differences.

As a species, we have both natural instincts and acquired socialization to detect social boundaries as well as gestures of invitation or rejection across those boundaries—to perceive the levels of respect and permission offered to us.

For example, when a new high school student asks her peers, “Can I eat lunch with you guys?” The response to that question extends inclusion safety if the students say yes. If they say no, the individual is not allowed to cross the threshold of inclusion. In a more subtle version of this encounter, the student is simply ignored by her peers as she passes by. In some cases, we ignore each other as a gentle way to pour scorn. Regardless, it hurts when you’re cast off and acceptance is denied. As one poignant example of the acute need for inclusion, an American College Health Association survey of undergraduate college students found that 63 percent of the students surveyed reported feeling “very lonely.” That’s nearly two-thirds of the student population. In spite of our material plenty, we increasingly suffer from social and emotional poverty.

William James, the father of American psychology said, "No more fiendish punishment could be devised, were such a thing physically possible, than that one should be turned loose in society and remain absolutely unnoticed by all the members thereof. If not one turned around when we entered, answered when we spoke, or minded what we did, but if every person we met 'cut us dead,' and acted as if we were nonexistent things, a kind of rage and impotent despair would before long well up in us, from which the cruelest bodily torture would be a relief."

Why do active shooters kill innocent victims? Why do citizens spew vitriol and hate? Why has the suicide rate in the United States increased by 33 percent in just the last eighteen years? Directly linked to alienation, disaffection, and ostracism, these tragic outcomes result from deeply unmet needs. Clearly, granting and receiving inclusion safety is a matter not only of happiness but, indeed, life and death.

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Inclusion safety is created and sustained through renewed admittance to the group and repeated indications of acceptance. In the business world, we are formally admitted to a team when we're hired, but informal membership is granted or withheld by the people with whom we work. You may be the new hire on the software development team, which gives you official membership status, but you still need the team's sociocultural acceptance to gain inclusion safety. Giving inclusion safety is a moral imperative.

STAGE 2 | LEARNER SAFETY

Learner safety indicates that you feel safe to engage in the discovery process, ask questions, experiment, and even make mistakes—not if, but when, you make them. Without learner safety, you will likely remain passive due to the risk of acting beyond a tacit line of permission. In children, adolescents, and adults, the patterns are the same: We all bring inhibitions and anxiety to the learning process. An environment that grants safe passage to learning opens the buds of potential, cultivating confidence, resilience, and independence.

While individuals can remain relatively passive in the stage of inclusion safety, learner safety requires them to exert themselves and develop self-efficacy. They are no longer spectators. The transition to learner safety means crossing into the anxiety of the unknown. When learner safety is present, the leader and team may even supply some of the confidence that the individual lacks. For instance, days after the French philosopher Albert Camus won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1957, he wrote a letter of gratitude to his elementary school teacher. He said, "Dear Monsieur Germain, Without you, without the affectionate hand you extended to the small poor child that I was, without your teaching and example, none of this would have happened."

Learner safety implies activity and participation within defined limits. For example, I observed an apprentice plumber assisting a more experienced master plumber at a job site. The apprentice was given learner safety to observe, ask questions, prepare tools and materials, and contribute in a limited way to the work. As the master plumber responded positively to the apprentice's questions, the apprentice released more discretionary effort to learn, do, and become.

In a contrasting case, I watched a hotel manager's frustration escalate with a front desk clerk who was trying to resolve a pressing customer problem. The more questions the clerk asked, the more frustrated the manager became. That frustration replaced respect and permission, ask more questions and initiate action. As expected, the clerk began to behave as a compliant victim, losing both initiative and enthusiasm.

STAGE 3 | CONTRIBUTOR SAFETY

As individual performances climb higher in a nurturing environment that offers respect and permission, we enter the stage of contributor safety, which invites the individual to participate as an active and full fledged member of the team. Contributor safety is an invitation and an expectation to perform work in an assigned role with appropriate boundaries, on the assumption that you can perform competently in your role. If you don't offend the social norms of the team, you're normally granted contributor safety when you gain competency in the required skills and assigned tasks.

The transition to contributor safety may also be tied to credentials, title, position, and the formal conferral of authority. For example, when a coach selects a player on an athletic team to join the starting lineup, there's often an immediate transition to contributor safety.

When a hospital hires a well-qualified surgeon, she's formally granted contributor safety. Thus, where formal authority or credentials are prerequisite to a role, they act as partial proxy for psychological safety based on the official or legal right to contribute.

Despite an ability to do the job, an individual may nonetheless be denied contributor safety for illegitimate reasons, including the arrogance or insecurity of the leader, personal or institutional bias, prejudice or discrimination, prevailing team norms that reinforce insensitivity, a lack of empathy, or aloofness. Contributor safety emerges when the individual performs well, but the leader and team must do their part to provide encouragement and appropriate autonomy.

STAGE 4 | CHALLENGER SAFETY

The final stage of psychological safety allows you to challenge the status quo without retribution, reprisal, or the risk of damaging your personal standing or reputation. It gives you the confidence to speak truth to power when you think something needs to change and it's time to say so. Armed with challenger safety, individuals overcome the pressure to conform and can enlist themselves in the creative process.

Analyzing its massive database of more than fifty thousand skills, LinkedIn conducted a study to identify the most important soft skills. Can you guess what skill was most in demand? Answer: creativity. But creativity is never enough. Only when people feel free and able do they apply their creativity. Each of us protects our creativity under emotional lock and key. We turn the key from the inside out—when it's safe to do so. Without challenger safety, there's little chance of that because threats, judgement, and other limiting beliefs block curiosity in ourselves and others.

A middle manager from a global corporation summed it up this way, "I'm very careful to stick my neck out and challenge the status quo. If I do and don't get my head chopped off, I'll do it again. If I get my head chopped off, you can rest assured I'll keep my ideas to myself."

This statement illustrates the self-censoring instinct all humans possess and the inherent competitive advantage that challenger safety provides. The open climate of challenger safety allows the organization to circulate local knowledge from the bottom of the organization to the top to increase its adaptive capacity. But that's not all: it also empowers people to be curious and creative.

If you conduct a postmortem analysis of failure for almost any commercial organization that dies, you can trace the cause of death to a lack of challenger safety. For example, why did Kodak, Blockbuster, Palm, Borders, Toys "R" Us, Circuit City, Atari, Compaq, Radio Shack, and AOL fail? They lost their competitive advantage by failing to innovate, but why? These organizations were filled with large numbers of highly intelligent people, and yet they all fell prey to competitive threats that were hiding in plain sight. The countervailing strategies their competitors put in place were not mysterious. They were, in fact, obvious. What these organizations failed to do was challenge the status quo and disrupt themselves. They were, as Thoreau observed, "buried in the grave of custom." They allowed the status quo to fossilize and would not allow themselves to change it.

The process of scrutinizing the status quo normally injects a degree of conflict, confrontation, and sometimes a measure of chaos. When there's censure or punishment, when intellectual conflict turns into interpersonal conflict, when fear becomes a motivator, the process collapses and people go silent.

Challenger safety is a license to innovate. It's the leader's job to manage the tension and draw out the collective genius of people, and then sustain that recursive process through trial and error. Brilliance emerges from the interdependence of the team. But organizations are often reluctant to grant challenger safety because it threatens the power structure, allocation of resources, incentives, reward system, and speed of operation. Innovation is the lifeblood of growth and yet a formidable cultural challenge. Some organizations never get it. Others get it and then lose it. "Organizations have habits," Brad Anderson, the CEO of Best Buy, observes, "and they will cling to their habits at the expense sometimes of their own survival." This pattern is true at an individual level as well.

For many leaders, asking for something that makes them personally vulnerable is beyond their moral, emotional, and intellectual capacity. That's why they're unable to cross the threshold of innovation and create this high level of psychological safety in their organizations. Consider the Challenger space shuttle disaster caused by the failure of O-ring seals used in the field joints of the solid rocket boosters. The seals were not designed to function properly under the cold conditions that existed on the day of launch.

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Experts warned NASA not to launch the shuttle at temperatures below 53 degrees, but feeling the pressure of previous launch delays, senior leadership silenced the detractors, dismissed warnings, and proceeded. Arrogance and a lack of challenger safety contributed to the tragedy.

Those that create challenger safety gain a competitive advantage because they are able to accelerate the process of innovation. Those prone to cherish formal status and amass power cannot because they don't, as chess grandmaster Gary Kasparov said, "have the guts to explode the game." Unable to embrace vulnerability, sacrifice personal interests, and escape their ego needs, they're not up to the job.

Finally, to scale innovation throughout the organization, leaders must establish a norm of challenging the status quo. No technology enabled suggestion box or collaborative jam session will work without underlying challenger safety. And keep in mind that not responding to a suggestion can be worse than outright rejection—which is at least an acknowledgment.

In the twenty-first century, the need for challenger safety is becoming more important as accelerating markets squeeze the average span of competitive advantage. In 1966, the average tenure of an S&P 500 company was thirty-three years. It shrank to twenty-four years by 2016 and is projected to plummet to twelve years by the year 2027.

The assumption going forward is that this trend will continue without a new equilibrium or state of normalcy. Except for a few organizations that seem to have an impenetrable moat of competitive advantage, organizations will need to create and sustain challenger safety as the incubating force that enables perpetual innovation. Without it, they won't have the agility to compete.

THE BOWLING LANE AND THE GUTTERS

What happens when a team grants some respect or permission to its members, but not both—when the pattern of psychological safety moves out of the bowling lane, so to speak, into the gutter on one side or the other?

When a team offers a measure of respect, but very little permission, it falls into the gutter of paternalism. Paternalistic leaders act like helicopter parents and benevolent dictators who micromanage their children, patting them on the head and telling them not to touch things.

On the other hand, what happens when a team grants a measure of permission to contribute, but little respect? In this case, the team falls into the gutter of exploitation—a condition in which the leader attempts to extract value while not valuing those who create the value. Taken to an extreme, this is slavery and the sweatshop. But there are everyday examples all around us in the form of shaming, harassing, and bullying behavior. You would think it would incite a populist revolt, and yet people routinely endure this mistreatment out of fear of losing their jobs.

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CONCLUSION

I see uncritical celebrations of diversity everywhere, but diversity produces nothing and blesses no one unless its value can be drawn out.

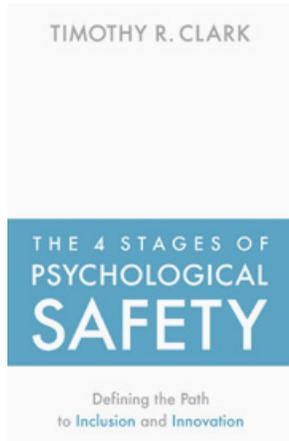
What if an organization has not purged its legacy of prejudice toward women, minorities, religious identities, or other human characteristics? Most organizations grant equality and inclusion as a matter of policy; few live and breathe it as a matter of culture and behavior. How, then, can an organization convert diversity in composition into active, confident, and vibrant diversity in action? Without psychological safety, intellectual diversity will lie fallow. Those who live and work in the shadows will repress their instinct to explore. They won't engage in constructive dissent because they've never seen it done. Nor have they been granted the respect and permission to participate.

A leader's most important job—above that of creating a vision and setting strategy—is to act in the role of social architect and nourish a context in which people are given the respect and permission to (1) feel included, (2) learn, (3) contribute, and (4) innovate. It's the culminating stage of both leadership development and organizational culture to create and sustain this kind of environment.

Creating psychological safety depends on setting the tone and modeling the behavior. You either show the way or get in the way. **If you can learn to harvest the full fruit of psychological safety, you will transform families, schools, organizations, and societies, enabling people to realize their deep yearnings—to live happy, connected, creative, contributing, and more beautiful lives.** 📖



Info



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Timothy R. Clark is founder and CEO of LeaderFactor, a leadership consulting and training organization, and works with leadership teams around the world. He earned a triple degree and first-team Academic All-America honors as a football player at Brigham Young University and completed a doctorate in social science from Oxford University. He is also the author of *Leading with Character and Competence*.

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