

Enabling safety improvement by enhancing psychological safety in workplace conversations

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SUMMARY

A rail industry organisation sought to develop a proactive approach to safety by better engaging with their contractors and gaining a clearer understanding of challenges, barriers and successes experienced at work. A review of the literature on psychological safety and coaching culture was undertaken to determine how staff engagement and safety conversations can be improved. Practical tools and guidance were developed and delivered to the organisation's leaders to enhance their ability to enable meaningful candid conversations with staff.

KEYWORDS

Psychological safety, coaching culture, leadership

Introduction

The UK rail organisation, responsible for operation and maintenance, sought to improve its safety tours with contractors. It wanted to improve the quality of these tours, moving away from an inspection-based, target-driven approach, towards safety conversations built on the principles of psychological safety, which explored safety, sustainability, security, and health. The organisation wanted to truly understand what was happening 'on the ground' to maximise organisational learning.

Psychological safety is associated with improved team learning and performance (Newman et al, 2017) and described as a vital aspect of modern leadership (Edmondson, 2019). The organisation wished to identify the common objectives of safety conversations and leadership styles and behaviours that inspire the psychological safety needed for staff to report issues, successes, 'failures', and ideas without fear of reprisal.

Method

Consultation with the client

The research team met with the Head of Assurance and other senior leaders to gain a thorough understanding of their approach to safety tours, to clarify the objectives of the conversations, and the behaviours they wanted to develop going forwards. The agreed objectives were:

- Improve safety, security, sustainability, and health by engaging with staff.
- Uncover issues relating to safety, security, sustainability, and health.
- Better understand 'work as done'.
- Improve exploration of challenges and barriers to work.
- Help drive through behavioural safety in the supply chain.
- Improve consistency in how safety conversations are carried out.

- Win “hearts and minds” towards working together to improve safety, security, sustainability, and health.

Literature review

The purpose of the literature review was to determine a common set of objectives for safety conversations and the leadership behaviours required to achieve these objectives. Literature on safety conversations, psychological safety, and leadership behaviours was reviewed and synthesised.

The review covered literature research, articles and industry guidance from UK Rail and safety critical sectors such as healthcare, aviation, and manufacturing. Examples of existing good and poor practice to safety tours from within the rail organisation were also reviewed.

The findings were presented to the organisation, setting out the common objectives of safety conversations, and the leadership behaviours required to help build psychological safety and optimise discussion.

Findings

Common objectives and leadership behaviours for safety conversations

The overall aim of safety conversations is to maximise learning so that proactive steps can be taken to create a safer and more supportive working environment, reducing the likelihood of adverse events and building upon good practice. This can be broken down into a set of common safety conversation objectives identified through the literature, as set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Common safety conversation objectives and rationale

Common objectives	Rationale
To understand what is ‘really’ happening.	Focusing on understanding ‘work as done’ (Shorrock, 2016) and checking the ‘pulse’ of the work team and site. This can help to facilitate ‘work as disclosed’ and focus the conversation to uncover relevant improvements.
To destigmatise failure in teams.	This can help to focus the conversation on learning and improvement rather than ‘blame and shame’.
To recognise and reinforce what is going well.	This can help to understand, promote and build upon successes as well as help to motivate.
To involve and empower staff.	Help staff become part of action identification within the conversation because staff are often best placed to identify improvements and solutions.

The literature suggests that to meet these objectives a strong sense of psychological safety is needed i.e. a shared belief amongst individuals that it is safe to engage in interpersonal risk-taking in the workplace, that they will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes (Edmondson, 2019). In other words, a sense of psychological safety means that people feel comfortable in safety conversations to report on the reality of work, challenges faced and sharing ideas about how things could be improved.

Newman et al’s 2017 systematic review of research across a range of industries suggests that psychological safety is associated with better performance outcomes including reduced employee errors and enhanced safety in safety-critical industries. A report published by NHS Horizons (2021)

states that over 20 years of research indicates that organisations with higher levels of psychological safety perform better on almost any metric or key performance indicators (KPI) in comparison to organisations that have lower psychological safety. From their work in the rail industry, Morrow et al (2010) outline the importance of psychological safety for improving safety behaviours and outcomes. And in a longitudinal study by Google's People Analytics Unit, psychological safety was identified as the number one characteristic of successful high-performing teams (Bergmann & Schaeppi, 2016).

The development of psychological safety has been linked to core leadership behaviours. These behaviours reflect the core components of the leader as a coach, align to democratic and coaching leadership styles described by Goleman (2017) and support the coaching approach required to build a high-performance culture (Whitmore, 2019). These core leadership behaviours are set out in Table 2.

Table 2: Core leadership behaviours and description

Core leadership behaviours	Description
Promote continual improvement, learning from failures, challenges, and successes.	Stating and demonstrating during safety conversations that safety is a priority, that it is acceptable to make mistakes and errors, and these are opportunities to reflect and learn. Seeking to understand staff perspectives and rationale for their actions. Facilitating reflection and growth through coaching questions during the safety conversation.
Acknowledge your own fallibility, the importance of gaining and providing feedback.	Being able to admit that you do not know all the answers and want to learn and understand. Look to dismantle hierarchy within the conversation.
Model curiosity, listening and asking questions.	Taking a coaching style to safety conversations such as asking open questions, listening without interrupting, paraphrasing, checking understanding, acknowledging what has been said and trying to be non-judgemental. Looking for signs someone is holding back or not disclosing what they would like to disclose.
Building open and honest relationships, being actively inclusive and responding productively.	Talking to staff at all levels. Exploring alternative perspectives. Thanking staff for their involvement in the conversation. Showing appreciation for honesty in difficult conversations. Responding productively: taking actions away from the conversation and being transparent e.g. clear about what will happen next and when staff will hear back on progress.

Research shows that encouraging and enabling staff to learn from ‘failures’ is a key part of developing psychological safety and improving performance (e.g. Edmondson, 2019; Hirak et al, 2012). It opens dialogue around ‘work as done’ and enables individual and organisational learning. It is important also to demonstrate the value of learning from what goes right, as well as what goes wrong (e.g. Hollnagel et al, 2022).

The concept of servant leadership, a term first coined by Greenleaf in 1970, is also relevant, as it is important for leaders to embody the belief that they do not have all the answers – taking more of a humble approach – and demonstrating genuine interest in the reality and suggestions of their staff.

Leaders showing this awareness and demonstrating this to staff can make them more approachable and break down status barriers.

Stepping away from telling staff what to do, listening and asking questions are another vital component (Edmondson, 2019). Kline (1999) describes how creating a ‘thinking environment’ empowers staff to share what is really happening and to think for themselves to reach the best solutions. To facilitate this, leaders model curiosity and allow staff to lead the conversation.

The literature consistently highlights the importance of leader inclusiveness – actively inviting, empowering and appreciating input from others – for psychological safety and improved performance (Nembhard and Edmondson, 1996; Hirak et al, 2012; Shen et al, 2015, Khan et al, 2020).

Organisational enablers

Training and support should be provided to managers and leaders undertaking safety conversations so that they understand the objectives, the behaviours they should exhibit and have opportunity to practice and reflect on these in a safe space. However, the effectiveness of safety conversations will be dependent on particular organisational enablers in the context of broader organisational systems and culture.

For example, an accident investigation process that is focused on understanding the underlying causes of accidents and incidents and identifying organisational improvements rather than focusing only on individual interventions (and potentially seeking to apportion blame), will support efforts to improve safety conversations. The literature reveals several other organisational enablers that facilitate the success of psychological safety development and safety conversations. For example:

- Consistently identifying safety as a priority (O’Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020).
- Setting out clear structures, roles, objectives, and priorities for teams (Rosovosky, 2017).
- Setting high performance standards, which encourage continued improvement and enable people to be in the ‘learning zone’ (Edmondson, 2019).
- Developing an overarching belief across the organisation that a) high performance requires collaboration within and across teams, b) everyone can make mistakes and learn; c) everyone is responsible for performance, improvement, learning and development.
- Visible leadership modelling the above points (O’Donovan and McAuliffe, 2020).

Intervention

The evidence from the literature was used to develop:

- An ‘aide-memoir’ for the rail organisation leadership team to use when conducting safety conversations, and
- A leadership evaluation questionnaire to encourage reflection and continual development.

Safety conversation ‘aide memoir’

The aide-memoir sets out the core behaviours that the rail organisation leadership team were expected to demonstrate during the safety conversations (Table 3). The aide memoir presented these behaviours within an overarching framework that integrated the GROW model of coaching conversations (Goal, Reality, Options, Will - Whitmore, 1992) with an adapted version of the key stages in psychologically safe leadership conversations identified by Edmondson (2019). Example

conversational statements were provided to help the leaders understand what the behaviours and framework stage looked like ‘in action’. An overview of the aide-memoir is presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Overview of the aide memoir structure

Stage	Leadership behaviours
1. Set the scene (Goal)	Introduce yourself and explain what you are doing and why e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Building a better understanding of the job - Understanding and acknowledging challenges - Opportunity to learn and identify improvements
2. Invite participation and explain what you need (Goal)	Involve staff, empower them, and show humility. Promote growth mindset and continual improvement. Destigmatise failure and challenges.
3. Grow your understanding of their reality (Reality)	Use open questions. Explore and acknowledge successes. Explore, acknowledge and understand challenges. Encourage discussion and invite other points of view.
4. Explore options for improvement (Options)	Ask what help staff need, empower them to identify solutions.
5. Reinforce that information they share is valuable and empower them to act (Will / Way forward)	Respond productively. Thank them for speaking up (and acknowledge it if it was not easy).

Leadership evaluation questionnaire

To support continual improvement and help leaders reflect on their safety conversations, a ‘reflection and action’ questionnaire was developed (overview provided in Table 4). This asked leaders to gather feedback from their colleagues and gain a clear view on areas of strength, weakness, and development. The questionnaire asked leaders to reflect on where else – beyond safety conversations - they can demonstrate these leadership behaviours.

The questionnaire used the ‘Stop, Start, Continue’ approach to help leaders plan for their next safety conversation e.g. What will I Start? What will I Stop? What will I Continue?

Table 4: Summary of leadership reflection and action questionnaire

Leadership behaviours	Example reflection questions
Promote continual improvement, learning from failures, challenges, and successes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did I acknowledge uncertainties, potential failures, challenges? • Did I share examples of learning from previous challenges?
Acknowledge your own fallibility, the importance of gaining and providing feedback.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did I show that I don’t know all the answers, that I make mistakes too, and that it is important to learn from them?
Model curiosity, listening and asking questions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did I base my questions on what was said? • Did I remain open to information and explore the range of aspects that can affect performance e.g. individual, job/ workplace and organisational issues?

Building open and honest relationships, being actively inclusive and responding productively.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Did I encourage everyone to participate and did everyone present get involved?• Did I seek views from a broad range of people?
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Implementation

A training session supported implementation of the aide memoir and questionnaire. It covered the objectives of safety conversations and leadership behaviours for promoting psychological safety. It combined information on what psychological safety is, why it is important, required leadership attitudes and behaviours, the aide-memoir, 'reflection and action' questionnaire, and practical scenarios to apply the learning (based on real-life safety conversation and challenge scenarios provided by the organisation).

The training sessions were delivered to senior leaders in 2022 and 2023. Leaders were encouraged to practice their conversations using the aide memoir in the role-play operational scenarios, and wider conversations were facilitated around the culture of the organisation and the strategy that could be taken to embed a culture of psychological safety and coaching.

Evaluation

Initial feedback

Delegate feedback was collected immediately following the course. Delegates described the course and materials as "informative and thought provoking" and the example conversational statements within the aide memoir were reported to be particularly useful for less experienced members of the leadership team. The delegates found discussion around psychological safety to be especially valuable, as well as the use of operational scenarios for practice.

Longer-term change

Feedback was sought from the project sponsor several months after the intervention. It was reported that the aide memoir, reflection and action questionnaire and training documentation were added to the management system and made available to all staff members - particularly those with safety conversation responsibilities. This was valuable in meeting the organisation's objective to promote a simple approach to safety conversations that could be easily implemented across the business.

The aide memoir was used across the senior team as a prompt for them during safety conversations. The senior leaders put it into practice within their regular planned safety conversations, and quickly became familiar with the format. The aide memoir was described as particularly helpful when onboarding a new member of the senior team, making clear the organisation's approach in a quick and succinct way.

Following implementation, the organisation started to record key themes and trends from their safety conversations. This allowed them to identify themes across the year and work out how and where they target efforts in their annual safety plans.

The 'reflection and action' document is also being used after safety conversations to drive continual improvement.

The sponsor reported that they had observed a transition across the executive team in the focus of the safety conversations, with the mindset moving from that of inspection to one of interest in the activities being undertaken 'on the ground'. The sponsor described the work as effectively targeting 'hearts and minds' and improving engagement during safety conversations. It has also reportedly helped to broaden the scope of these conversations to cover more organisational levels, thus helping to break down hierarchy and as such increase the approachability of the senior team within the

supply chain. More broadly, it has been noted that the project supported the organisation's ongoing drive to improve relationships with the supply chain by encouraging positive two-way challenge and building psychological safety.

Conclusions

Effective safety conversations can be an enabler for improvements in safety, sustainability, security, and health. To be effective they require clear objectives and a set of leadership behaviours to be exhibited, both of which are set out in this paper. These objectives and leadership behaviours have their foundations in psychological safety and coaching culture. Indeed, one of most important enablers for effective safety conversations is the development of culture and behaviours that build psychological safety and an approach to learning, improvement and development that embodies coaching. Organisational systems and processes need to be considered as they help shape behaviours, attitude, and culture. These systems and processes as well as how they are implemented should support, not hinder, the development and demonstration of psychological safety and a coaching culture. Finally, managers and leaders benefit from support and training to undertake safety conversations. This can sometimes mean a shift in behaviour and attitude and therefore creating a structure for the conversation (as described in this paper), along with practical based training and opportunity for discussion, reflection and continued improvement can help leaders and managers better understand the purpose of these conversations, the behaviours to exhibit, and feel more comfortable and able to undertake these conversations effectively.

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