The human right of psychological safety at work

By Renate Scherrer

Human Rights Day in South Africa commemorates ordinary people asserting themselves and standing united to proclaim their rights. It serves as a reminder of people's rights and the costs paid for it.

Despite the fact that the world has probably never been more mindful than it is now of the issue of human rights, there is no doubt that the human race is a far cry from being able to honour the universal human rights of the United Nations established on the basis of humanity, freedom, justice and peace.

Thriving vs surviving

In organisations, the modern-day realities of the pace of change and the demands of being switched on all the time adds significant complexity, pressure and uncertainty to work life.

Agile principles for organisational sustainability also advocate for greater interdependence and team coherence to enable the realisation of organisational goals.

The Bill of Rights preserved in our Constitution determines that everyone has a right to life, equality and human dignity. This points to more than just the basic requirements to survive.

Employees and teams need more than decent working hours and fair pay to flourish.

The case for 'psychological safety'

As Peter Drucker put it:

> " *Culture eats strategy for breakfast.* "

Therefore, organisations who are looking to succeed need to create a culture that will facilitate innovation, collaboration and extraordinary performance.

This is where an environment of psychological safety can play a vital role in creating a safe space for team members to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other.

One may want to argue the relevance of vulnerability and risk-taking in the work environment. But these characteristics also go hand-in-hand with factors such as diversity, trust and respect, which all lay the foundation for sustainable performance.

'A leader shows the way, whether he intends to or not'

Since leaders have a significant impact on crafting work culture, they need to be mindful of, and model/implement, the following:

- **Be okay with being wrong:** It is important that the leader himself must be humble, can acknowledge when he is wrong and show others that he does not have all the answers. Inviting team members to healthy debate on issues will lead to more innovative solutions and positive energy in the team.
- **View failure as an opportunity to learn:** People need to be held accountable, but consistent blaming and finger-pointing will lead to less contribution and more self-preservation. When leaders treat mistakes as learning opportunities that can lead to even better results in the future, teams are authorised to experiment and improve.
- **Invite everyone to contribute:** It may be harmonious to be part of a team where a few people do most of the show-and-tell and everyone conforms. This does not, however, facilitate for the contribution of potentially valuable alternative knowledge and expertise for fear of dismissal or alienation.

What you sow, is what you reap

Just as the infringement of human rights have dire consequences for those impacted, having to work in a psychologically dangerous environment only leads to negative outcomes for the individual, the team and, ultimately, the organisation.

If the already challenging demands of the world of work are not mitigated with a psychologically safe environment where employees are valued and supported, their physical and mental health is at stake.

The leader needs to be tuned in to the dynamics of the team interactions and proactively deal with it. This will create the climate and conditions that are necessary for sustainable and exceptional performance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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