



The Three Essentials for Creating Psychological Safety at Work

If “authenticity” was the word of the year in 2023, then “psychological safety” is well on its way to becoming the word(s) of 2026. Psychological safety is the shared belief that people can take interpersonal risks (speak up, question, and admit mistakes) without fear of embarrassment or punishment. It’s popping up everywhere these days, and I’m here for it.

As an introvert, I’ve been told my entire life to “speak up more” or “jump into the conversation.” If it were only that simple. But here’s the truth most people (including extroverts) won’t say out loud: people don’t stay quiet because they lack ideas, courage, or conviction. They stay quiet because the room doesn’t feel safe enough to hold what they might say. When psychological safety is missing, the brain shifts from contribution to protection. We edit ourselves. We shrink. We calculate the cost of every word. And eventually, silence becomes the safer strategy.

So, as leaders, how do we help people shift from protection mode to contribution mode? In my experience, it takes three things: trust, modeling, and inclusivity. And, of course, I’ve taken a curated approach to introducing these components to you.

1. Tailored Trust

Trust is familiar, but what we often forget is that trust is not one-size-fits-all. Leaders must understand personalities, experiences, and communication styles and then tailor their relational approach. This means:

- **Reading the room** with precision and empathy
- **Responding rather than reacting**
- **Creating micro-moments of safety** through consistent, attuned presence

Trust is created through reliability, warmth, and visible respect.

Tailored Trust in the Wild (an example)

A team member hesitates before sharing a concern in a meeting. Instead of pushing them to speak on the spot, the leader notices the hesitation, circles back privately, and says, “I sensed you had a thought you didn’t get to share. I’d really value hearing it.” Then, the leader offers coaching on how to contribute in the next meeting and how he can be supportive in the moment. That’s tailored trust: noticing, adjusting, and signaling safety in real time.

2. Courageous Modeling

When leaders proudly wear their humanity, not by oversharing, but by demonstrating grounded vulnerability they:

- **Normalize imperfection** by sharing learning moments

- **Invite dissent** as a mark of intellectual confidence
- **Ask better questions** to signal curiosity over control

Courageous modeling is not loud; it's intentional. It's the quiet confidence to go first.

Courageous Modeling in the Wild (an example)

A leader opens a project debrief by saying, "Here's where I misjudged the timeline and what I'm learning from it." Suddenly, the room relaxes. Team members begin sharing their own missteps and insights, not to assign blame but to improve the process. The leader's vulnerability becomes permission for everyone else to be human too.

3. Structured Inclusion

Structured inclusion means creating conditions where people can think out loud, challenge the status quo, and work through disagreements together. Inclusive leaders design experiences, rituals, and norms that ensure every voice has a place. This includes:

- **Ritualizing contribution** (e.g., structured rounds, brainwriting)
- **Setting conversational guardrails** that protect curiosity and candor
- **Creating belonging cues** that signal "you matter here"

Structured inclusion is like a well-designed space: intentional, inviting, and impossible to ignore.

Structured Inclusion in the Wild (an example)

In a weekly team meeting, the leader introduces a simple ritual: everyone gets one uninterrupted minute to share a win, a challenge, or an idea. (Better yet, she lets everyone know to expect this ahead of time.) The quieter ones begin contributing regularly. Over time, the team's creativity expands because the structure ensures everyone is heard, not just the fastest or the loudest.

Psychological safety is intentional, not accidental. Intentional leaders create workplaces where people feel safe, seen, and able to contribute at their highest level. When trust is tailored, courage is modeled, and inclusion is structured, contribution becomes the norm, not the exception.