

# THE BELONGING PROJECT

Deep senses of Belonging show a massive 56% increase in job performance and a substantial 50% drop in turnover risk.\*  
Our project focuses on the tactics our clients can use to retain exceptional talent.

## Psychological Safety: An Introduction

Psychological  
Safety

Hedley May Psychological Safety Model

As we confront the consequences of two global crises COVID-19 and systemic racial injustice physical safety catapults to the top of corporate risk agendas.

But physical safety is only a part of the equation. If our organizations are to emerge from these crises with enduring strength, psychological safety is just as crucial. Psychological safety enables employees to ask for help without fear of reproach, empowers employees to call out discrimination with the confidence that it will be addressed and overall, supports mental wellbeing.

The leaders of the teams that will outperform now, and in the months to come, are the leaders who promote psychological safety, an element essential to cultures of Belonging.

But what elements shape psychological safety and how can leaders create the space for psychological safety bubbles to rise in this time of crises and beyond?

In our ongoing Belonging Project, Hedley May explores how the highest-performing leaders and entire organizations inspire psychological safety to form and lift off throughout teams. Our research and conversations with over 80 professionals reveal that it is the empathetic, the curious and the transparent leaders who can do this and who fill psychological safety bubbles with the air of trust.

We feel psychologically safe when we can be our authentic selves without fear of negative consequences. Our research shows this dynamic to be critical to a Belonging culture. Psychological safety allows us to share our individual freedom of thought and feeling. Successful leaders whether leading through a crisis or not hold themselves accountable for their part in their employees' mental wellbeing and for emboldening their employees to bring their true and complete selves to work. Employees who feel safe to impart the difficult realities they face outside of the workplace are more likely to be tenacious and resilient.

Micro-moments the everyday attitudes and actions that come and go within seconds will have lasting impact on how teams trust and psychological safety bubbles expand or deplete.

As we speak with a wide range of leaders and their teams (at publication 59% of interviewees are women and 38% of interviewees are people of color), it is obvious that just as the quickest flash of acknowledgment can be uplifting, the quickest flash of feeling overlooked can be isolating. The smallest interactions that are devoid of empathy, curiosity and transparency can deplete trust.

With so many essentials to think about during these crises, the best leaders will use micro-moments to inject trust into their teams. A short pause to observe, acknowledge and react to comments on personal struggles or to praise individual achievements before continuing on with business as usual can have long-term impact exposing the empathy, curiosity and transparency that will coalesce into trust and ultimately, psychological safety.

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## ■ Empathy

As virtual work can leak into every hour of every day, boundaries are blurred, and it is easy to lose the basic human element of professional interactions. Leaders can feel that they must always be the face of strength, but how do they strike the balance between “strong” and “human”? Teams recognize the vulnerable, relatable leaders – the ones who admit how privilege has launched them ahead, who reveal how COVID-19 has impacted their families, or who confess times of self-doubt – as the leaders who successfully establish safe places for their employees to show their own vulnerabilities to supportive and judgement-free audiences.

These leaders recognize the toll that external events may take on their employees and the pervasive effect they may have on their psyche. Vulnerable leaders let empathy be the core of every touchpoint within the team – personal or professional – and do not let a façade of “professionalism” overshadow the “human”. And as a result, empathetic leaders build teams that are more resilient.

## ■ Curiosity

Curious leaders discover the pulse of why and how their teams operate. Leaders who ask the tough questions with an unprejudiced approach – and who understand that they might have to push themselves beyond their own comfort levels to have these hard discussions, learning with and from their teams – lay a foundation of trust. They choose diversity over dominance, pulling the different perspectives and the softer voices into the conversation, validating the importance of each team member and making room for psychological safety to grow.

Teams see these leaders not only asking for feedback on themselves, but also welcoming and receiving it, encouraging debate or new approaches. Curious leaders foster working environments that offer opportunities for employees to challenge existing thinking and to take risks with their own ideas without fearing negative consequences. And as a result, curious leaders build teams who innovate.

## ■ Transparency

Any quest for trust is derailed without a sense of honesty and openness across teams. Celebrating good news can nurture a team bond, but transparency on the bad news is equally important to cultivating genuine trust. Employees remember the leaders who are clear on difficult implications – for example, no lay-offs but no bonuses either – and who come armed with the reasons why. These leaders put the interests of their team ahead of external messaging, reinforcing their decisions with information and engagement.

Psychologically safe teams know that they can trust their leaders to communicate the truth – and these are the teams that last. Transparent messaging from leadership engenders confidence and motivates teams – inflating senses of trust and bubbles of psychological safety all-around. Crises or not, these teams are the ones who will soar above the competition.

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Thank you for reading the introduction to our extended study on psychological safety, part of our Belonging Project. Stay with Hedley May over the coming weeks as we continue our Belonging research and conversations in the market, diving deeper into how psychological safety rises through empathy, curiosity and transparency – and how each of these elements can be built up within teams.

*We started our research into Belonging – the need to be accepted and included by those around you – back in January to support our clients in retaining their exceptional talent. The Belonging Project is grounded in cross-sector research and interviews on the critical roles of recruitment and onboarding in instilling a sense of Belonging.*

*\*These statistics are credited to: <https://hbr.org/2019/12/the-value-of-belonging-at-work>.*

Hedley May is a global executive search firm dedicated to finding exceptional talent to transform your executive leadership teams.

From our offices in London and New York, we exclusively specialize in the most senior corporate functional roles for the world's leading organizations.

