



LEADING WITH
PSYCHOSOCIAL
safety
AND CARE

SUPERCARGE PSYCHOSOCIAL SAFETY,
WELLBEING, AND PERFORMANCE FOR YOUR TEAM

THEleadErsLAB
THE MICHELLEMCQUAID GROUP

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WHY IS LEADING OTHERS HARD?

Leading a team of people has never been an easy task.

While popular management theories would like us to believe people can be controlled like machines, this is rarely the reality experienced by most leaders. Instead, as we try to motivate our team towards achieving a common goal, we tend to see over and over again, that the way each person thinks, feels, and acts are complex, dynamic, diverse, and often surprising.

As a result, studies have found the most successful leaders no longer waste time and energy trying to “manage” others, because they know this tends to result in temporary, and begrudging compliance. Instead, they “care” for their people and invest in building a culture that enables their team to thrive, even when the work is challenging.

In fact, Margaret Wheatley, author of the widely acclaimed *Leadership and the New Science*, explains: “If we believe that there is no order to human activity except that imposed by the leader, that there is no self-regulation except that dictated by policies, if we believe that responsible leaders must have their hands into everything, controlling every decision, person, and moment, then we cannot hope for anything except what we already have – a treadmill of frantic efforts that end up destroying our individual and collective vitality.”

The above may help to explain why in May 2019, the World Health Organization classified burn-out as a workplace phenomenon resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. And, why a growing list of countries are advocating – and in some cases regulating – for workplaces to proactively address the psychosocial (emotional and social) hazards related to both job demands (workplace factors that cause stress) and job resources (workplace factors that protect from stress).

While we applaud these good intentions, as leaders, how can we possibly add one more responsibility to our never-ending to-do list?

The good news is there are small, practical, evidence-based tools that not only make the way we work safer, but also supercharge the wellbeing and performance of you and your team. Let us show you how.

“As leaders, it is your
job to create a safe
environment for people to
bring themselves to work.”

DR. AMY EDMONDSON



WHY DO WE NEED TO ACT NOW?

The statistics don't lie. Even before the global pandemic, the rising incidence of mental health injuries in workplaces were starting to ring alarm bells:

PHYSICAL INJURIES

INCREASE IN CLAIMS



2014 - 2018

DAYS OFF WORK*



2020

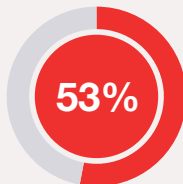
COMPENSATION*



2020

PSYCHOSOCIAL INJURIES

INCREASE IN CLAIMS



2014 - 2018

DAYS OFF WORK*



2020

COMPENSATION*



2020

* = Average

Allianz Australia Insurance Limited. (2020). *Future thriving workplaces report*.

With the costs of psychosocial injuries and lost productivity starting to add up to billions of dollars each year in many countries, governments around the world have taken steps to provide workplaces with better guidance and greater accountability for the way they are caring for the mental health and wellbeing of their people. This is undoubtedly why you've taken the time to join us and read this e-book.

The truth is, every job involves some psychosocial hazards that have the potential to harm people. What, how, when, where and with whom we work can create psychosocial risks due to deficiencies in the design, organization, and management of our work or a poor social context.

Chances are that right now your team may be navigating:

- **LACK OF ROLE CLARITY** – Confusion about how to prioritize tasks, conflicts with colleagues about who owns what, and different instructions from different leaders that can leave people feeling confused and frustrated.
- **UNACHIEVABLE JOB DEMANDS** – A never-ending to-do list with no breaks in sight, a lack of the right training and support, and long, irregular, and unpredictable working hours that can leave people feeling anxious and overwhelmed.
- **INADEQUATE REWARD AND RECOGNITION** – A lack of constructive feedback, colleagues claiming credit for other people's work, and the absence of meaningful gratitude and appreciation that can leave people feeling disengaged and demotivated.
- **POOR CHANGE MANAGEMENT** – Uncertainty about why things are happening, what changes mean practically, and who is taking responsibility can leave people feeling anxious and afraid.

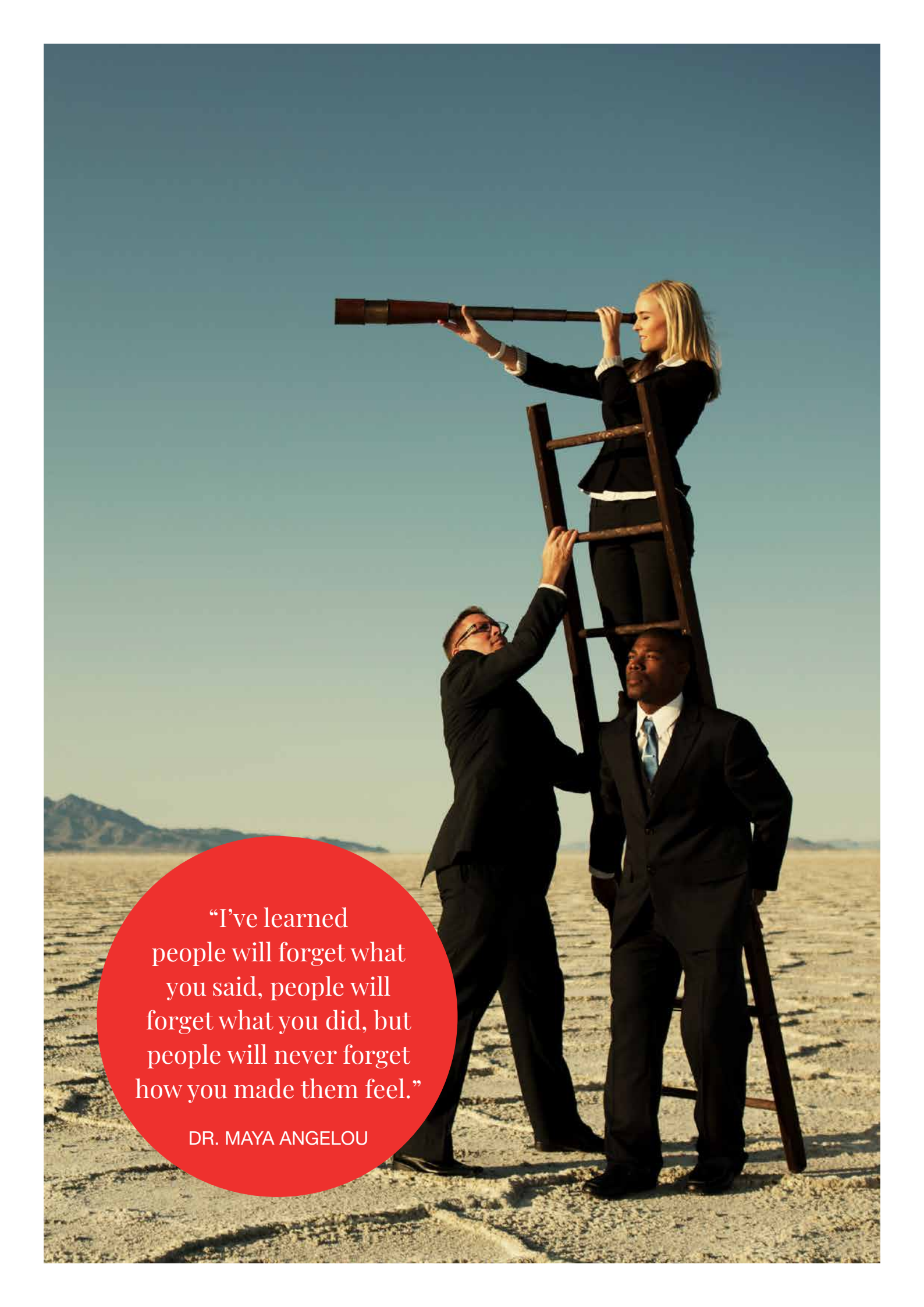
Psychosocial hazards like these can increase the risk of work-related stress, harm people's mental and physical health, and if prolonged, lead to burnout. This is why workplaces (and we as leaders) are increasingly expected to do everything "reasonably practicable" to eliminate or at least minimize these risks.

MINDFUL MOMENT:

What are the psychosocial hazards your team may be navigating? Use the poster on the following page to help you identify the risks or click here to take our free "[Leading With Safety & Care Survey Tool](#)".

WORK DESIGN HAZARDS	 LACK OF ROLE CLARITY Unclear understanding of role and responsibilities may cause confusion and frustration.	 UNACHIEVABLE JOB DEMANDS Too much or too little work or not enough time for completion may cause stress and anxiety.	 LOW JOB CONTROL Little control over one's work or lack of decision-making power may lead to feeling powerless and frustrated.	 INADEQUATE REWARD AND RECOGNITION Not being valued or recognized may lead to feeling demotivated, under appreciated and unimportant.
SOCIAL SUPPORT HAZARDS	 POOR SUPERVISOR SUPPORT Lack of supervisor guidance, feedback and support may cause isolation, insecurity and lack of direction.	 POOR WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIPS Lack of respect & support among workers, leaders & clients may cause conflict, isolation & inability to do the job.	 BULLYING Repeated aggressive behavior that uses power or authority to harm or intimidate may include verbal, physical, and social aggression.	 HARASSMENT Unwanted or inappropriate behavior, may cause feeling stress, anxiety, and depression.
WORK CONDITION HAZARDS	 POOR CHANGE MANAGEMENT Poorly planned, communicated or executed organizational changes may cause confusion, anxiety and job insecurity.	 POOR PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT Exposure to environmental hazards may cause physical and psychological health problems.		 REMOTE OR ISOLATED WORK Work in remote or isolated settings, without regular face-to-face interaction, may cause lack of clear boundaries and disconnection.
WORK EXPERIENCE HAZARDS	 POOR ORGANIZATIONAL JUSTICE Lack of transparency, equal opportunities, and accountability may create a toxic work environment that undermines trust and commitment.		 VIOLENT AND AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIORS The use of force or threat of force to harm or intimidate may cause fear, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorders.	 TRAUMATIC EVENTS Life altering events can have a serious impact on our wellbeing.

(Safe Work Australia, 2021)

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a black business suit, stands on a tall wooden ladder. She is holding a large, dark telescope to her eye and looking towards the horizon. Two men in black business suits are supporting the ladder. One man is on the left, reaching up to hold the ladder, and the other is on the right, standing with his hands in his pockets. They are in a vast, flat, arid landscape under a clear blue sky. In the background, there are low mountains.

“I’ve learned
people will forget what
you said, people will
forget what you did, but
people will never forget
how you made them feel.”

DR. MAYA ANGELOU

DO YOU NEED A SAFETY SUPER-STRATEGY?

When it comes to minimizing psychosocial risks, it's been found that teams who have high levels of psychological safety have been found to experience all of the hazards less frequently. Building psychological safety is a "super strategy" when it comes to minimizing psychosocial risk.

Psychological safety describes a team climate characterized by a blend of trust, respect, and care that enables us all to speak candidly with each other, without the fear we will be rejected or punished later. Practically, this means that instead of:

LOW PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY	HIGH PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY
Assuming the worst and leaping to conclusions about each other.	Slowing down and asking questions to help us better understand each other.
Biting our tongues or avoiding difficult conversations with people.	Speaking up when things aren't working to help people learn.
Moaning and groaning about how incompetent someone is.	Offering our support to help someone build their skills when we see them struggling.
Pointing the finger and blaming others.	Sharing accountability by asking what we can each do to help avoid future mistakes or failures.

For example, a longitudinal study by Google's People Analytics Unit found that their highest-performing teams shared one norm: psychological safety. In these teams, people felt free to share the things that worried or concerned them without fear of embarrassment, rejection, or recrimination.

Psychological safety facilitates our capacity for candor, vulnerability, and learning together. It helps us feel more confident about requesting improvements to the way our work is organized, calling out a lack of social support when encountered, addressing poor working conditions, and asking for help with difficult work experiences as they arise. It makes it more likely we'll ask for help and seek shared accountability for effective solutions.

In short, psychological safety both supports us in talking about the little things before they become the 'big things' while creating an environment where psychosocial hazards are less likely to occur.

WHO CAN HELP YOU IMPROVE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY?

Our safety and care habits, attitudes and behaviors spread through a complicated web of social connections. So, when it comes to creating a culture of psychological safety, the work is both *within* and between us, at the:

- **“ME” (INDIVIDUAL) LEVEL** – When we have “personal portable psychological safety” we feel safe within ourselves no matter who we’re with, what we’re doing, or where we’re doing it. It frees us to be less dependent on the behaviors of others and the environments we are in because we understand that we are each perfectly imperfect. It makes it easier for us to ask for help, seek feedback, take risks, and own our mistakes because we believe there is no shame in learning.
- **“WE” (LEADERS + TEAMS) LEVEL** – When we have “team psychological safety” we believe that it is safe to be honest and take risks as we work together. It frees us from the fear of being humiliated, rejected, or punished by anyone because we trust, respect, and care for each other. It makes it easier for us to ask questions, give each other feedback, be innovative, and to take shared accountability for our mistakes because we want to learn from each other.
- **“US” (ORGANIZATION) LEVEL** – When we have “organizational psychological safety” we can see that a culture of safety and care is prioritized. It frees us from the fear of being unfairly treated because our workplace’s values, norms, and systems (i.e. human resources, technology, finance, internal communications) are designed to signal a long-term investment in a mutually respectful relationship. It makes it easier for us to understand clearly what is okay and isn’t okay in our workplace and to hold ourselves, each other, and our workplace accountable.

For example, studies have found we need to individually learn and practice the skills of perspective-taking, inquiry, and compassion that make it easier to share our ideas and concerns (“Me” level). Then we need to practice having conversations within our teams where we can use these skills to integrate multiple perspectives on complex topics and generate novel solutions that are assessed for their effectiveness as we go (“We” level). And, our workplaces need to value, support, and celebrate these behaviors (“Us” level).

MINDFUL MOMENT:

What are the levels of psychological safety in your team? Is this making it easier or harder to minimize psychosocial risks? If you’re not sure, click here to take our free [“Leading With Safety & Care Survey Tool”](#).



“The more leaders
express care, the better
workers’ levels of
safety, wellbeing and
performance will be.”

DR MANDY O’NEILL

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

How can you help to build psychological safety at the “Me”, “We”, and “Us” level? The truth is that we all share the same deep psychological need to feel respected, valued and appreciated. From the time we are born, we seek out better ways to connect, communicate and support each other because our physical and mental wellbeing depends on it.

For example, studies have found that even when people we don’t know well characterize us as “dependable” or “sincere”, our brain’s reward system lights up. This releases a cascade of neurotransmitters, including dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin, which help us to learn, and make decisions, and motivates us to do things that benefit ourselves and others. It also lowers our levels of cortisol which helps us to recover from work-related stress. It helps us to feel safe.

If this is what the tepid praise of an acquaintance does to our brain, what happens when we exchange mutual feelings of respect, appreciation, and trust with our bosses, peers, and team members? Studies show that each positive interaction we have at work helps to return our cardiovascular system back to resting levels, and that the more of these interactions we have over time, the better protected we become from the negative effects of psychosocial risks.

The good news is our research has found there are small, evidence-based actions of care that help to build psychological safety and can be woven into our existing ways of working. For example, we can express CARE by:

- **COMPASSION** – Reaching for curiosity and generosity, rather than rushing to judgments about each other, to support learning and allyship.
- **APPRECIATION** – Encouraging the asking for and giving of help to harness people’s individual and collective strengths and reduce wasted time and effort.
- **RESPONSIBILITY** – Inviting ownership, clarifying commitments, and holding people accountable instead of indulging incompetence or settling for half-hearted compliance to prioritize growth.
- **EMOTIONAL WISDOM** – Viewing emotions – even the uncomfortable ones – as “information” to be understood to help navigate the feelings of thriving and struggle to fuel resilience.

If we want to supercharge the safety, wellbeing and performance of our teams, the data is clear that we need to be *often* engaging in these actions. So what can you try?

MINDFUL MOMENT:

Choose a CARE practice at the “Me” level for yourself, the “We” level for your team, and the “Us” level to recommend to your workplace. Try to weave the practice into your existing role modeling, rituals, routines, or rules so you don’t have to add another thing to your to-do list.

YOUR PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY TOOLKIT

	COMPASSION	APPRECIATION	RESPONSIBILITY	EMOTIONAL WISDOM
ME	HIT YOUR RESET BUTTON Physical gestures can have an immediate calming effect on stress in our body. Place one hand over the opposite wrist and breathe slowly for at least seven seconds.	TURN A TO-DO INTO A TAH-DAH Choose one thing on your to-do list and note down a strength – something you are good at and enjoying doing- that you can apply to make this task more enjoyable and effective.	REMIND YOURSELF “NOT YET” Tune into the stories you tell yourself about what you can or can’t do. When you hear yourself say “I can’t,” add on the word “yet.” Remind yourself that you’re on a learning curve.	TAKE A JOY BREAK Take a moment to do something that genuinely brings a smile to your face (i.e. listen to a favorite song, watch a funny video, read poetry, take a quick nature walk). Try to be fully present in this moment and savor the joy.
WE	GET CURIOUS If you notice a team member struggling, ask: “What else may be happening for this person?” Reach out and ask – without blame or judgment – if everything is okay.	GIVE STRENGTHS-FEEDBACK Rather than saying “great job”, be specific about the strengths you saw someone use, the difference it made, and why it was appreciated.	TALK TO PEOPLE, NOT ABOUT PEOPLE When issues arise, between team members, encourage them to speak to each other as soon as possible, rather than moaning and groaning to other team members.	INVEST IN FAVORS Encourage your team to spend five minutes each day helping someone else in their team or networks (i.e. share information, connect contacts, offer feedback, or make a recommendation that helps others).
US	ASK FOR HELP Hold a daily 10-minute stand-up meeting and ask: What did you work on yesterday? What are you working on today? And what help do you need?	REDESIGN ROLES Ask people: “How is your role aligned with your strengths? How can we make better use of your strengths? What support do you need to develop your strengths?”.	HONOR YOUR COMMITMENTS Embed accountability as a cultural norm by making it a habit to ask in meetings: “How did you go doing what you said you were going to do?”	EMBRACE FUN Laughter is a sign of safety and connection. Summer barbecues, crazy shirt days, holiday parties, etc. are chances to have fun and build cultural norms of belonging and care.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Leading a team of people is unlikely to ever be an easy task. However, when we have the knowledge, tools, and support to create cultures of safety and care to work in together, it can make leadership a far more enjoyable, effective, and rewarding task.

Figuring out what works will depend on more than just a code or change in legislation. Although the current changes are helping to bring new focus and energy to our responsibilities, in the end, success will depend on the commitment of leaders like you and us to stay curious, continue experimenting, and keep sharing our experiences with each other.

Whatever approach you take, remember that psychological safety starts as an inside job; so give yourself permission to be a perfectly imperfect leader who is always open to learning. After all, as Dr. Kristen Neff wisely said, “You will make mistakes, bump up against your limitations, and fall short of your ideals. This is the human condition.”

We’re honored to be part of your learning journey. You can find more free resources and tools to help and support you at www.theleaderslab.net. Please don’t hesitate to reach out and let us know what impact – good, bad, and anything in between – and what impact all you’ve learned from this e-book is having on your team. This way, we can all keep growing together.

WANT MORE?



YOUR LEADERSHIP BLUEPRINT

Packed with real-world examples and over 60 evidence-based tools that you can immediately apply with your team, this step-by-step guide gives you everything you need to build psychological safety at the “Me”, “We”, and “Us” levels, even amidst the challenges and complexity of the modern workplace. [Click here to order your copy.](#)



E-LEARNING FOR MINIMIZING PSYCHOSOCIAL RISKS

Understand your regulatory requirements and gain the knowledge and skills needed to implement the necessary plans with our four-hour E-Learn training. Created by our world-leading team workplace wellbeing researchers and Minter Ellison's employment lawyers this is the essential training needed to upskill leaders to manage psychosocial hazards at work. [Click here to learn more.](#)



CERTIFICATE IN LEADING SAFETY & CARE SELF PACED

As an innovative blended learning program designed to put the latest science at your fingertips, it includes over ten-hours of training and coaching to help you immediately apply your learning to address any current psychosocial hazards and CARE needs for your team. Walk away with done-for-you tiny nudges, safety coaching conversations, and resources at the “Me”, “We”, and “Us” levels that you can share. [Click here to learn more.](#)