

In 2015, Google commissioned Project Aristotle to answer the question: *what makes a Google team effective?* Over two years, they gathered and rigorously analyzed an enormous volume of data. Their findings concluded that the #1 driver behind an effective team was the collective experience of what is called “psychological safety.”

Psychological safety is the shared belief held by members of a team that others on the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish them for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes. It is intended to promote vulnerability, allow team members to be their authentic best selves, and enable a collective sense of belonging. The benefits of psychological safety also include stronger levels of innovation, improved effectiveness, and enhanced organizational adaptability according to several McKinsey studies.

It sounds like an organizational nirvana, where people feel genuinely valued and embraced for who they are, and organizations achieve stronger levels of performance. And yet, most organizations fail to cultivate psychological safety.

Workhuman conducted a study that indicates that only 26% of us feel psychologically safe at work. They also found that women experience less psychological safety than men, and working parents had lower levels of psychological safety compared to those who aren't parents. Furthermore, they found that white employees experienced the highest levels of psychological safety, with other races falling behind.

This study considered a few demographic categories, but there are many other dimensions of our personal uniqueness that can impact our sense of safety and belonging in the workplace. We are shaped by so many different lenses including our age, sexual orientation, citizenship status, national origin, physical abilities, cognitive abilities, socioeconomic status, religious beliefs, political beliefs, and other ideological beliefs. Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us, helping to better cultivate a sense of psychological safety and belonging.

Feeling a little overwhelmed by all of the complexity? You're not the only one.

The environment and the expectations have significantly and quickly evolved leaving most leaders feeling ill-prepared. The skills and competencies that are needed to lead in this new era are exponentially more complex, nuanced and intricate than ever before. Organizations must do more to develop their leaders if they aspire to create a psychologically safe environment that yields a stronger sense of belonging and better business performance.

About the Institute

The Dr. Nancy Grasmick Leadership Institute is an interdisciplinary research and action-based institute at Towson University. The Institute provides a continuum of leadership development opportunities for individuals and organizations that drives personal, professional, and organizational success. Programs focus on transformational outcomes, improving workplace culture and engagement, talent attraction and retention, and addresses today's most challenging issues.

For organizations or leaders who are seeking support in cultivating a climate of psychological safety, here are some thought starters:

DEFINE YOUR COMMITMENT EXPLICITLY AND CONTINUOUSLY SEEK FEEDBACK

Explain to your team members why creating psychological safety and a sense of belonging at work is personally important to you and how it is connected to your organization's mission. Let them know it is a journey, not a destination, and their continuous honest feedback and input are critical to making advancements.

APPLY "CHARITABLE ASSUMPTION" AND SEEK TO UNDERSTAND

Each one of us has unconscious biases that lead us to jump to conclusions about people. "Charitable assumption" is assuming the best intentions in others as a baseline expectation. Demonstrate curiosity when you are identifying an opportunity for improvement. Start by stating your observations and asking clarifying questions to seek to understand others in a neutral way.

MONITOR YOUR OWN BODY LANGUAGE AND THAT OF YOUR TEAM MEMBERS

Social scientists have found that humans receive only 7% of our communications from written communications, while we receive 38% from tone and 55% from the face and body language. Try using your eyes and facial expressions to authentically demonstrate active listening. And keep a close eye out to read the body language of your team members; it is also important to "listen" to what is not being said.

ENCOURAGE HEALTHY DEBATES

Define the norms for managing conflict and explain how one can respectfully debate the "idea," without debating "the person." Positively recognize those who say something that challenges the status quo and acknowledge their courage.

MAKE IT SAFE TO FAIL

Use mistakes as opportunities to learn and grow and share the learnings so that others on the team can benefit. Role model this behavior by admitting your own mistakes and celebrating the mistakes of your team members as learning opportunities.

Leaders aren't born with the skills to cultivate an environment of psychological safety and a sense of belonging, these skills need to be developed, nurtured, and supported. The Dr. Nancy Grasmick Leadership Institute, anchored at Towson University, exists for the purpose of uplifting our region by developing competent and ethically-driven leaders at all levels of an organization. We benefit from generous donors such as Whiting-Turner and St. John Properties who have underwritten several of our programs to ensure the accessibility of our offerings. We work across all sectors and are proud to support organizations such as Erickson Senior Living, Under Armour, Truist, The National Aquarium, BGE, and Shephard Pratt. If you are interested in learning more about how we can support your leadership development efforts, please reach out.



Meet the executive director

ERIN MORAN is the Institute's inaugural executive director, leading the overall operations and fiscal management of the Institute. Moran has spent most of her 24-year career dedicated to developing leaders who create inspiring work environments that enable people to be fulfilled while also achieving extraordinary business results. Moran believes 'we create a better society when people work in healthy environments.'

