



# Building a Psychologically Safe Environment User Guide

The concepts discussed in this user guide can be applied at the level of the sports teams that the person you are supporting might, for example, be coaching. To help you gain the most from this resource, this user guide has been written with a focus on the two-person team formed by you and the other person you are supporting. The one exception is the Contextual Scenario which looks at how you might use this model to help the person you are supporting to achieve an outcome with their team.

## The Learning Zone Model



**Source:** Amy Edmondson, *Building a Psychologically Safe Workplace*





This model looks at the interaction between two states that can exist in teams.

The first state, psychological safety, is represented on the vertical axis. In the context of your two-person team, 'psychological safety' refers to a state where both you and the other person believe that you are able to take interpersonal risks with each other. You can admit you don't know something, ask each other 'dumb' questions, admit mistakes, and ask for help without the other person mocking you, thinking less of you, or punishing you.

The second state on the model, motivation and accountability, is shown on the horizontal axis. This refers to how motivated you and the person you are supporting are towards achieving the best performance of which you are individually and collectively capable, and how accountable you are willing to be to each other in the pursuit of that best performance.

Considering the interaction of high and low levels of those two states creates four zones:



<p><b>APATHY ZONE</b></p> 	<p>When both psychological safety and accountability are low, your team will be in what Edmondson calls the <b>Apathy Zone</b>. In this zone, you and the other person will be going through the motions of a relationship to support development. Neither of you is likely to feel safe to take risks with each other, which doesn't matter too much as neither of you is genuinely pursuing better individual or collective performance.</p>
<p><b>COMFORT ZONE</b></p> 	<p>When psychological safety is high, but accountability is low, your team is in the <b>Comfort Zone</b>. In this zone, you can take risks with each other without fear of reprisal, but neither of you is challenging yourself or the other person to genuinely pursue better performance. As a result, while the developmental relationship feels good, your individual and collective growth will always be limited by that absence of motivation to be as good as you can be or the willingness to be accountable to that goal.</p>
<p><b>ANXIETY ZONE</b></p> 	<p>When accountability is high but psychological safety is low, your team sits in the <b>Anxiety Zone</b>. In this zone, you and the other person both pursue better individual and collective performance, and hold yourselves and each other accountable to that goal, but you do not feel safe to take risks with each other. Your chances of achieving the goal are restricted as you both avoid bringing your concerns to the attention of the other; neither of you seeks the other's help, so you cannot improve.</p>
<p><b>LEARNING ZONE</b></p> 	<p>But when both psychological safety and accountability are high, your team is in the <b>Learning Zone</b>. In this zone, you see each other as valuable assets to help you learn and grow so that you can overcome any limitations and perform better. That gives you the freedom to take the informed risks necessary to achieve higher levels of performance. You still hold yourselves and each other to account as you work towards better performance, but the environment you create is not fearful.</p>

## How we use the model and why the model is useful

When working to support the development of another person, we can use this model to support our reflection on how that two-person team is going in pursuit of the best performance of which we are collectively capable.

If we think we are not operating in a way that demonstrates freedom to learn by taking informed risks in dedicated pursuit of our goal – that is, we are not in the Learning Zone – this model helps us to identify in which of the other zones the team sits. That then allows us to figure out whether we need to focus on increasing our psychological safety, our motivation and accountability, or both.

And if we think our team is already in the Learning Zone, then we can concentrate on maintaining the conditions that will keep our team there.

## What it looks like in practice

There are several things that you can do to increase psychological safety to encourage the other person to move into and stay in the Learning Zone, including the following.

<p><b>Frame the work as a learning problem, rather than an execution problem:</b></p>	<p>Asking questions such as “What have you learned from this?” or “What might you do differently next time?” helps instill a learner’s mindset, encouraging learning and growth and building a sense of safety that it is okay to encounter setbacks or make mistakes.</p>
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<b>Acknowledge your own fallibility</b>	Validate and share that you also make mistakes or may yourself have encountered struggles similar to those the other person is working through.
<b>Model curiosity by asking a lot of questions</b>	Curiosity is at the heart of a good developmental relationship and demonstrates to the other person that you genuinely want to engage with and understand their experience. Showing the other person that you prioritise being curious helps them to do the same.
<b>Be supportive, inclusive, open and trusting</b>	While it is fine to have self-interest in the success of the team, don't let that derail you. Success for the team ultimately means that the other person develops and grows, which means the focus is on them, not you.
<b>Tailor your relationship building approach to the individual</b>	Don't be afraid to ask the individual how they best like to work and wish to engage with you. They will feel like you are more interested in supporting them to succeed, and you will be better able to do that because you will know how they would like to be helped.
<b>Check in on their emotions</b>	A quick 'emotional pulse check' demonstrates that you care and provides you with a quick insight into how you might need to adjust the way you are supporting them, depending on how they are at that time.
<b>Encourage open communication and conversation</b>	Your questions should encourage and enable the other person to raise opposing points of view, helping you to get a clearer sense of how they see things. For example, you might ask questions such as, "That's what it looks like to me, but I know I can't see the full picture; what does it look like from your perspective?"
<b>Use generative language</b>	Language like "Let's give it a go and see what we learn" or "Why don't we build on that idea?" can demonstrate to the other person that it is safe to take risks.



## Contextual scenario

The scenario depicts how a coach developer might support a coach who recognises that her team is currently in the Anxiety Zone and wants to help move them to the Learning Zone. The competitive nature of sport, including the ability to look at a scoreboard to see how successful the team is in a game, means that this is likely to be the most common zone-to-zone shift that the people you support will be trying to achieve.

Coach Developer	Relevance to model	Coach
Hi Sarah, how are you going? How's your under-18s water polo team doing this season?	High motivation and accountability	Hi Mike. Good question, and I am not really sure of the answer to be honest. From one perspective, they are a joy to coach. They are really keen to play well because they want to win. We have set out our expectations of each other, and the girls hold each other to account to meet those expectations.
That does sound really good. I can hear the "but" coming; what's the other perspective?	Low psychological safety	Ah, yes. The bit that is more frustrating than joyful! Well, when we have training in the school pool the girls work really hard, always challenging themselves to be more creative, more free flowing in their play. It is glorious to watch... and then they are almost completely the opposite when we play an opponent. They freeze up. They run a very basic offence that is too easy to defend for under-18s, so they are really struggling to score.
Why do you think they are doing that?	They are in the Anxiety Zone	I think they are scared to bring their creativity to game day. Terrified, even.
Any thoughts on why that is?	Features of the Anxiety Zone	There's an obvious difference in the location. In the school pool, it's only us, so if they try something new and it doesn't work, only we see it. When they make mistakes on game day, it is in front of a crowd, and crowds react to mistakes. I think there might also be pressure coming from parents and the prospect of selection into representative teams, or even professional teams, if they do well.
How would you like them to show up on game day?	Coach wants them to have more psychological safety	I would love it if they could feel free to play on game day like they play in training. Free to get creative, to try new things to adapt to what's in front of them, and to worry less about making mistakes.
OK, I get that. Do you think they'd feel more freedom if it didn't matter whether they won?	Coach does not think the players want to be in the Comfort Zone	Hmmm, I'm pretty sure that's not the answer. These girls love to compete and they want to win. I just want to free them up so that their fear of making mistakes is not the thing that is almost guaranteeing that they will lose.
Right. So, we want to help them feel free so that they can be as competitive as possible?	The Coach wants to help the team get to the Learning Zone	Yes, that's pretty much the challenge. That's about psychological safety, right? I think what I am saying is that I want to help the team take the psychological safety they have in training into game day.



How do you think you might do that?	Identifying some strategies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning problem, not an execution problem</li> <li>• Reducing the perceived risk</li> <li>• Normalising the game day environment</li> <li>• Acknowledge own fallibility</li> </ul>	<p>I guess I could just be upfront about that desire with the players. Tell them I want them to feel freedom, to play a style that looks to learn about the other team's weaknesses, and then adapts to win. We can only identify those opportunities for scoring by trying things that might not work.</p> <p>I could also talk to the parents to have them encourage the girls to play with freedom; knowing that your parents don't care about mistakes might be helpful.</p> <p>We could probably invite a few people into our training sessions so the girls get used to playing with creativity in front of a crowd.</p> <p>And it would probably help if I told them that I was also always wary of making mistakes – and that I still make mistakes anyway – but know that making mistakes helps me to learn and to be a better coach for them.</p>
Those are some great ideas, Sarah. Let me know when I can come to training to help!	Allow time for psychological safety to form	Thanks Mike. It would be great to have you come along in a couple of weeks' time. I'll get the girls comfortable with these ideas and we'll ease our way into it with a few of their friends first. When they're ready for a rent-a-crowd, I'll give you a call!

## How to know if it's working

When your team is operating in the Learning Zone, you will notice that you and the other person are both willing to speak up when you need help without fear of being thought of as a liability, and to share your doubts and concerns in a spirit of wanting to improve rather than blaming. And you will be doing those things because of your strong shared commitment to helping each other to become as good as you can be.

## Other useful tips

If your two-person team is not yet in the Learning Zone, allow some time to move there. While developing a clear shared goal to which you are both committed can be relatively quick, building higher levels of psychological safety will take time as you demonstrate to each other that taking small risks with each other is safe, meaning that you can take slightly bigger risks, and so on. Put in the work to move your team onto a trajectory to reach the Learning Zone and keep working on it.

## Self-reflection and action learning

Use the [Action Learning Guide](#) to practice applying the models and techniques in your specific context and situation.