

Why Psychological Safety Determines Whether Workers Speak Up About Risk



In many workplaces, the most serious hazards are not the ones that go unnoticed. They are the ones that workers notice but hesitate to report.

Employees often see unsafe practices, equipment defects, or procedural weaknesses long before those issues appear in incident statistics. Yet in some organizations, workers remain silent. They may worry that raising concerns will create conflict with supervisors, attract unwanted attention from management, or make them appear difficult to work with.

This hesitation represents one of the most significant barriers to effective occupational health and safety systems.

Modern safety research increasingly highlights the importance of psychological safety—the shared belief among employees that they can speak openly about problems without fear of punishment or embarrassment. When psychological safety exists, workers feel comfortable raising concerns, admitting mistakes, and reporting hazards.

When psychological safety is absent, critical information about workplace risk may remain hidden until an incident occurs.

For organizations seeking to benchmark their safety culture, psychological safety provides one of the most revealing indicators of whether the safety system truly functions as intended.

Understanding Psychological Safety in the Workplace

The concept of psychological safety was first introduced in organizational research to describe environments where individuals feel secure expressing ideas, questions, or concerns without fear of negative consequences. In the context of workplace safety, the concept has profound implications.

Workers are often the first individuals to encounter emerging hazards. They operate equipment, perform maintenance tasks, and observe conditions that may not be visible to supervisors or managers. Their willingness to communicate concerns therefore plays a critical role in identifying risks early.

However, communication depends heavily on workplace culture.

If employees believe that reporting a hazard will lead to blame or disciplinary action, they may remain silent. In some cases, workers may assume that raising concerns will slow production or create tension with supervisors.

Over time, this silence can allow hazards to persist unchecked.

In contrast, workplaces that foster psychological safety encourage open dialogue about risk. Workers feel comfortable reporting hazards, asking questions, and challenging unsafe decisions. These conversations allow organizations to address risks before they escalate into incidents.

For safety leaders, the presence or absence of psychological safety therefore becomes a powerful indicator of organizational health.

The Legal Context for Worker Participation

Canadian occupational health and safety legislation recognizes the importance of worker participation in identifying and addressing hazards.

Most provincial statutes incorporate the principle known as the internal responsibility system, which holds that employers, supervisors, and workers all share responsibility for maintaining safe workplaces.

Joint Health and Safety Committees are one of the key mechanisms through which this principle operates. These committees provide workers with a formal channel for raising concerns and participating in safety decision-making.

However, formal structures alone cannot guarantee open communication.

Workers may technically have the right to report hazards yet still hesitate to exercise that right if they fear negative consequences. In some workplaces, employees may worry that raising concerns could affect job security, performance evaluations, or relationships with supervisors.

Regulators are increasingly aware of these dynamics.

During workplace investigations, inspectors often conduct interviews with employees to determine whether workers felt comfortable reporting hazards. If investigators discover that employees feared retaliation or believed that management ignored safety concerns, this information can influence enforcement decisions.

In some cases, courts have also examined workplace culture when evaluating whether employers exercised due diligence.

Supervisors and the Climate of Trust

Supervisors play a critical role in shaping psychological safety within the workplace. Because supervisors interact directly with workers, their responses to safety concerns strongly influence whether employees feel comfortable speaking up.

When supervisors respond constructively to reported hazards, workers receive a clear signal that raising concerns is valued. Simple actions—listening carefully, thanking workers for reporting issues, and addressing hazards promptly—can strengthen trust within the team.

Conversely, dismissive reactions can quickly undermine reporting culture.

If a worker reports a hazard and receives criticism or indifference in response, other employees may conclude that speaking up is risky. Over time, this dynamic can create a culture of silence in which hazards remain unreported.

For safety leaders, evaluating supervisory behaviour provides valuable insight into whether psychological safety exists within the organization.

Supervisors who encourage questions and respond respectfully to concerns help build an environment where safety information flows freely.

The Role of Leadership Transparency

Organizational leaders also influence psychological safety through their communication practices.

When leaders openly discuss safety challenges, share lessons learned from incidents, and acknowledge mistakes, they demonstrate that safety conversations are welcome. Transparency signals that the organization values learning and

improvement rather than assigning blame.

This approach can be particularly powerful following incidents or near misses. When organizations investigate events openly and share findings across the workforce, employees recognize that reporting hazards contributes to meaningful change.

In contrast, organizations that conceal incidents or limit communication may inadvertently discourage future reporting.

Workers who feel excluded from safety discussions may assume that their observations are not valued.

Leadership transparency therefore plays a central role in maintaining open communication about risk.

Benchmarking Psychological Safety

For organizations seeking to measure safety culture, psychological safety can be evaluated through several indicators.

Employee surveys often provide insight into whether workers feel comfortable raising concerns. Questions that explore trust in supervisors, perceptions of management responsiveness, and willingness to report hazards can reveal important cultural signals.

Observation of workplace interactions can also provide valuable information. Safety leaders may evaluate whether workers speak openly during safety meetings or remain silent when hazards are discussed.

Patterns in hazard and near miss reporting may offer additional insight. Declining reporting rates may indicate that workers feel less comfortable raising concerns.

Taken together, these signals help organizations understand whether their safety culture encourages or discourages open communication.

Creating a Culture Where Workers Speak Up

Strengthening psychological safety requires sustained commitment from leadership and supervisors.

Workers must see consistent evidence that raising safety concerns leads to constructive action. Hazard reports should be acknowledged promptly, investigations should focus on learning rather than blame, and corrective actions should be communicated clearly.

Training can also play an important role. Supervisors who receive guidance on effective communication and respectful listening are better equipped to respond constructively when concerns arise.

Over time, these practices help establish a workplace environment in which employees feel confident sharing information about risk.

This transparency strengthens the organization's ability to identify hazards early.

Why Psychological Safety Matters for Safety Culture

Safety systems depend on information. Hazard reports, near miss reports, and safety observations all provide signals about emerging risks within the workplace.

When workers feel comfortable speaking openly, these signals become visible. The organization gains the opportunity to correct hazards before they lead to incidents.

When psychological safety is absent, critical information may remain hidden until an injury occurs.

For organizations seeking to benchmark their safety culture, psychological safety therefore represents one of the most

important indicators of system effectiveness.

A workplace where employees speak openly about safety concerns is far better equipped to prevent incidents than one where workers remain silent.

Ultimately, the ability of workers to speak up about risk may determine whether the next hazard becomes a lesson learned—or a preventable tragedy.