



Teaming & Psychological Safety

Teams don’t often evolve naturally; team building takes effort and intentionality. Understanding the science of teaming shifts how we build and sustain our teams to not only increase efficiency and effectiveness, but ultimately, to create greater team success and satisfaction.

Research has definitively shown that teams make better decisions and achieve better outcomes than individuals working alone, and that teams are constantly evolving and growing. We need to consider how we create the conditions for teams to work in a collaborative, interdependent, and growth-oriented way to achieve both success and satisfaction.

This toolkit introduces some of the main concepts of teaming and how we foster increased psychological safety to make our teams more inclusive and equitable.

CONTENTS

What is Teaming? Understanding Psychological Safety.....	2
Characteristics of Strong Teams	5
Action Steps: How to Increase Psychological Safety	6
Tuckman's Stages of Team Development	10

WHAT IS TEAMING AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Teams are often pictured as entities with consistent membership, who work together seamlessly, and have a high level of rapport, efficiency, and workflow. The truth is, many teams are created in urgency, thrust together for specific projects, and disbanded as needed.

Therefore, it is essential to think about teams as constantly evolving and learning how to work together. Teams should build in appropriate techniques, time, and energy to develop the skills of all members of a team, even as a project is in process. **Teaming is an action, a process of collaborating even in spaces without stable, static team structures.** Leaders today in all fields need to be skilled in teaming in order to promote institutional learning and growth in dynamic, flexible work environments.

Teaming focuses on building individual team member's **tactical** and **process** skills to speed up and support the overall progress of team development.

The tactical skills of teaming—such as meeting management, organizational, and structural skills—are more common in organizations. They are apparent in specific procedures, policies, and structures to help guide teams in making decisions and moving work forward.

However, without interpersonal 'process skills' that help team members to collaborate and communicate more effectively and build trust, it is hard to navigate conflicts when they arise. As a result, teams are less likely to discuss failures, offer feedback, and make changes necessary to improve team outcomes.

“Teaming is a verb. It is a dynamic activity, not a bounded, static entity...Fast moving work environments need people who know how to team, people who have the skills and the flexibility to act in moments of potential collaboration when and where they appear.”

Amy C. Edmondson

UNDERSTANDING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

CREATING SAFER SPACES

In Relational Leadership™, we refer frequently to “psychological safety.” Psychological safety is one of the most important aspects of high functioning teams. A large part of building safer teams is addressing power dynamics. This means encouraging and facilitating active engagement from all members of a team in ways which feel authentic, transparent, equitable, and inclusive.

Amy Edmondson defines psychological safety as a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking.

Timothy Clark further breaks down psychological safety into four stages or aspects. He describes it as a condition in which you feel:

Safety of inclusion- *have a trust and rapport with the people you are engaging with.*

Safety to learn- *able to admit mistakes, ask questions and express vulnerability*

Safety to contribute- *able to offer opinions, perspective, and knowledge with an expectation that you are respected and valued on the team*

Safety to challenge the status quo- *able to critique and speak out when needed without a fear of reprisal*

What both speak to is the ability for team members to openly address what is and isn't working, across hierarchy and role, in ways that are productive and transparent. It is not about feeling comfortable and "nice" to one another; quite to the contrary, real psychological safety occurs when people embrace being uncomfortable for the sake of truly hearing and accepting one another.

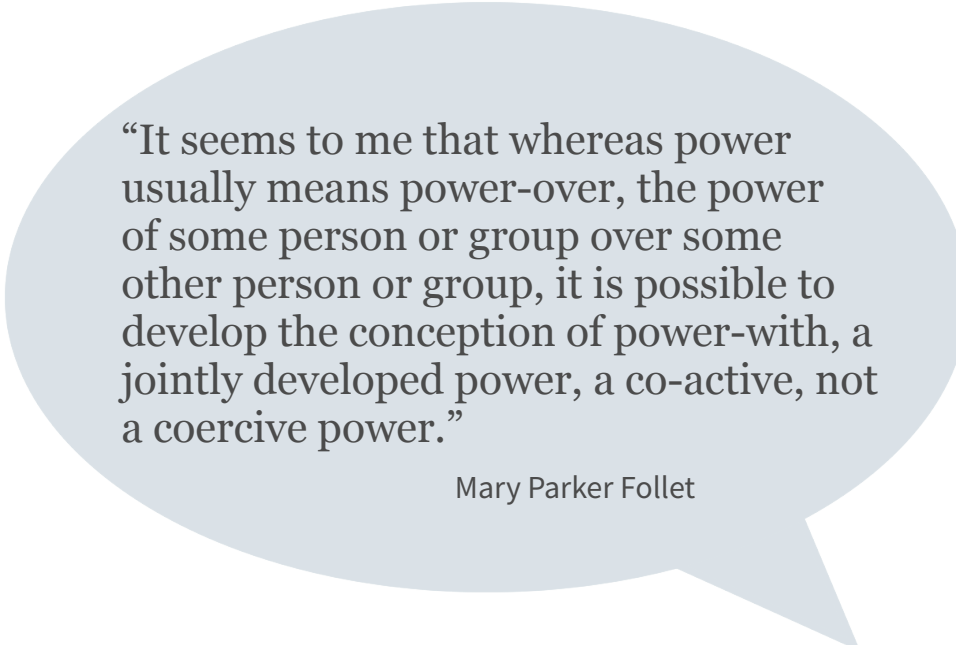
Just like with other aspects of relational learning, safety isn't simply achieved and then checked off. It is a constantly evolving construct. Just because one member of the team feels safety, it doesn't mean that all members do. We need to position the work of teaming as helping to make spaces safer, and that is an ongoing process.

SAFETY & POWER

There are always power dynamics at play among a group of individuals. Power can be given to us formally as explicit roles or positions we hold within or outside of the particular team, but it can also be social, connected to various aspects of our identity, such as race and gender. Those in positions of less power may feel less safe to offer their opinions, ideas, or feedback, particularly if they are in opposition with those who have more power.

Safer environments occur when those who are in positions of power take deliberate actions and set a tone for actively seeking out diverse opinions, critiques, and ideas in a way that feels inclusive and safe. It is not enough to simply say, “anyone share your opinion.” Rather, it is about building concrete procedures for feedback, inclusive decision-making, and positive reinforcement for sharing. As power dynamics shift in various contexts, it's always important to reflect on the ways in which we may have power in certain situations and how we can share that power with others.

Perceptions of psychological safety may vary by team member, and are often influenced by formal and informal power dynamics, and by individuals' perceived ability to impact their workplace culture and policies. While everyone has a responsibility to contribute to a safer space, those with the most institutional or formal power are the ones who can and should be first to model and prioritize psychological safety. However, regardless of your role in the team, it's important to understand how safe you feel, and to **recognize** and hold space for the experiences of your team members.



“It seems to me that whereas power usually means power-over, the power of some person or group over some other person or group, it is possible to develop the conception of power-with, a jointly developed power, a co-active, not a coercive power.”

Mary Parker Follet

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE

- Team members feel a sense of agency and capability in their role.
- Team members trust each other to be honest and transparent.
- Team members feel comfortable raising uncomfortable topics with your colleagues.
- Team members are curious and engaged when others offer new ideas and feel confident to offer their own.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

- Team members ask questions and solicit feedback often, regardless of their position or standing.
- Team members openly raise concerns without retribution or social stigma.
- All team members offer ideas and discuss problem preventions and innovations.
- Mistakes and errors are owned, acknowledged, and shared across the team.

CHARACTERISTICS OF STRONG TEAMS

Teams that operate well together value not only the success of the team's projects, but the satisfaction of the members on the team. They understand that if individuals are not thriving in a work environment, successes will be short-lived or non-existent.

The following characteristics build psychological safety and improve work culture:



DIVERSITY | Value and seek out diverse group of committed individuals

Diversity speaks to aspects of personal identity such as race, gender, and sexual orientation, but it also refers to experience, profession, and perspective. It's not enough to simply recruit diverse team members. It is also important that deliberate space is created to include diverse opinions and perspectives. The strongest teams understand and value the contributions from different life experiences, training, and professions.



SHARED POWER | Co-create goal and plans

Co-constructing team plans creates buy-in because members feel more invested in the outcome and overall success of projects. Co-construction also allows team members also bring their own knowledge and expertise that can greatly improve team goals and visions. Creating a team culture that encourages agency and shared responsibility among team members improves team function and decreases turnover.



STRUCTURE | Develop clear behavioral norms, roles, and processes

High-functioning teams have clearly defined structure and procedures for how they work independently and collaboratively. Providing guidance about how to work together supports team efficacy during leadership transition, eliminates confusion about member roles and responsibilities, and develops a shared language, which facilitates better communication.



TRUST | Encourage high levels of openness, candor, and caring

Trust and openness on a team helps avert or lessen conflict, and studies show that when team members care about each other, the team is more productive. Despite its importance, this is one of the most challenging characteristics to cultivate on teams with a great deal of transition.



GROWTH MINDSET | Take an open, problem-solving approach to conflict and challenges

Embracing conflict as a natural and healthy sign of a high-functioning team can feel counter-intuitive, but it is through conflict and addressing challenges that teams grow and projects improve. If team members do not feel safe to report failures, differences in opinion, or challenges they are facing, overall team morale drops and the project is less likely to succeed. It is important that teams create a culture of feedback in which improving is more important than looking good.

ACTION STEPS: HOW TO INCREASE PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

1. **Establish a Foundation of Exploration.** Create an ongoing, open dialogue about failure, uncertainty, and interdependence so that people normalize sharing their ideas and challenges. The more you set up a culture of curiosity, the more people will be willing to ask questions and call one another into conversations.

“This is uncharted area for all of us, and we are bound to make mistakes. What is important is that we notice them and work together to fix them. What is the best way for us to communicate when things go wrong?”

2. **Make Space to Listen.** Whether one on one or in a group, give people the opportunity to share where they are at. Ask open, honest questions and model active listening. This includes creating time for check-ins, stress relief, and personal connections.

“I know this has been a challenge for me, and I’m sure it’s different for all of us. How is everything going for you?”

3. **Invite Feedback.** Start with yourself and model the behaviors you wish to see. Ask for help or suggestions with your own work and offer thanks when you receive it (hint: how you react to difficult feedback is the most important element to fostering psychological safety).

“I’m not sure that _____ went as well as it could have. Is there something I could have done differently?”

“I want to thank the team for all the suggestions last week. I incorporated them and they really strengthened the project.”

4. **Amplify Voices.** Reinforce the need to hear all voices with your actions as well as your words. If you have the opportunity, raise awareness and create spaces for others to share their thoughts. Build in collaborative tools to help others more easily join into the conversation.

“Hey, I’ve noticed that we haven’t brought x department into the discussion. How would you approach this?”

“We are going to do multivoting so that every person’s opinion counts...”

“We’ve heard a lot from the physicians in the group. I’d love to hear the perspectives of the other care team members.”

BUILDING PSYCH SAFETY: TEAM NORMS

Team norms are essential during the initial formation of a team. One of the defining differences between a team working together and a group of individuals is that teams have clear norms or rules set by the team's members that are used to govern their own and each other's behaviors.

We set these norms together as a team building exercise because individuals are more likely to follow their own rules than those given to them. Creating team norms collaboratively builds trust and buy-in because the whole team is deciding how they want to hold each other accountable.

Team norms are always developed by team members and so they vary from team to team. If you are finding that a team is stuck when trying to create norms together, providing 1-2 examples can help to get them started. Common norms generated by teams include:

- Practice active listening when considering others' ideas
- Everyone's opinion counts
- No interrupting while someone is talking ("one mic")
- Anyone can call timeout for a break to take care of their needs
- Be open-minded and assume best intentions of team members
- Respect and appreciate differences
- Team members will take their share of the time not too much, not too little (Step Up- Step Back)
- Everyone takes responsibility for the work of the team
- Respect everyone's time by starting and ending meetings on time
- Stay focused on goals and avoid getting sidetracked
- When we have a difference of opinion, we will focus on the issue and not the individual
- Work to make meetings transparent and deal with issues and concerns openly
- Give helpful feedback directly and openly
- Team discussions are confidential

****Keep an idea board.** Whether during meetings or in general, make an ongoing (physical or virtual) place for team to write down challenges and solutions. This "parking lot" ensures ideas are captured to come back and address them.

USING NORMS | APPLICATION

It's not enough to simply create norms; you have to use them to be effective! Place them in a visible location during meetings, debrief after meetings and reference norms in feedback, and determine how you will hold each other accountable by creating concrete examples of what happens if people follow or don't follow them.

BUILDING PSYCH SAFETY: COMMON LANGUAGE

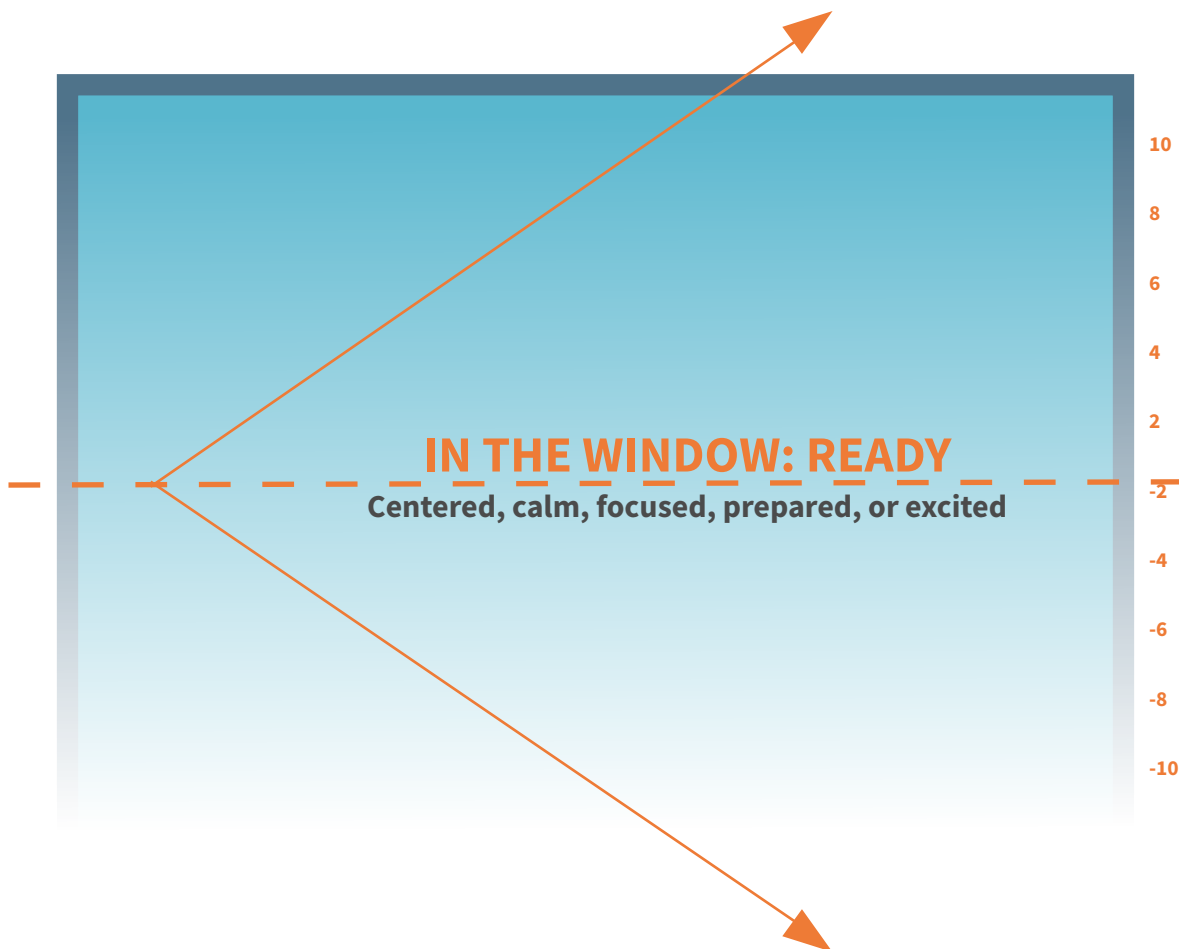
It's also good for teams to have a common language and some common frameworks to reference to make communication easier. Here are three simple concepts that help build trust and get everyone on the same page.

WINDOW OF TOLERANCE | GETTING ON THE SAME PAGE

One effective way to see how everyone is feeling during a meeting is to conduct a brief check-in by asking people to state to what degree they are feeling “in the window.” The window exercise is a self-assessment of energy levels, focus, and presence, developed by Dan Siegel in the late 1990s. Team members can informally talk about it, or identify a number as shown on the diagram below.

ABOVE THE WINDOW: FEEL TOO MUCH

Overwhelmed, anxious, panicked, distracted, reactive, or racing thoughts

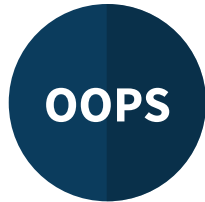


BELOW THE WINDOW: CAN'T FEEL

Depressed, numb, tuned out, exhausted, or disconnected

OOPS OUCH SNAPS | CREATING SAFE PATHS FOR FEEDBACK

One goal for a team is to create not just a safer space, but a braver space, where people feel supported and encouraged to speak up if something is bothering them and admit when they are wrong. These three expressions help team members voice their opinions without interrupting one another.



When you want to acknowledge a mistake you've made and try again



When something someone else has said or done does not land right with you



When something someone else says really resonates with you (audible snap)

COMPETENCY SPECTRUM | DEVELOPING A GROWTH MINDSET

When learning new skills, it can be particularly hard to make mistakes along the way and can often unintentionally lead to people feeling like they have failed. Part of cultivating a growth mindset is knowing that it is normal and natural to move along a continuum; no one is perfect all the time and we all have our growing edges. Noel Burch first described these four stages of learning at Gordon Training International in the 1970s.

Every time we learn a new skill or framework, we gradually move from unconscious incompetence to unconscious competence, though it's not strictly linear. Whether a hard skill in our professions like learning a new software system, or a social skill like learning to ask people which pronoun they prefer, being on a sliding scale gives us permission to grow, make mistakes, and to recognize that we all have opportunities to improve.

**UNCONSCIOUS INCOMPETENCE**

I was doing it wrong and I didn't even know it

CONSCIOUS INCOMPETENCE

I am painfully aware when I make a mistake, usually too late (oops)

CONSCIOUS COMPETENCE

I am very deliberate in how I do this to make sure it is right

UNCONSCIOUS COMPETENCE

I do it automatically and correctly, without thinking about it

TUCKMAN'S STAGES OF TEAM DEVELOPMENT

Teams go through natural stages while working together. While some may follow this path linearly, it's important to note that many teams return to previous stages frequently with the arrival of new leadership, new projects, or new circumstances.

FORMING

- Excitement and anticipation
- Anxiety and nerves
- Optimism
- Politeness, not speaking one's mind

PERFORMING

- Teamwork and cohesiveness
- Productivity is high
- Commitment to team and achieving goals
- Members work independently and collaboratively with confidence

NORMING

- Quiet after storm
- Creation of shared goals and meaning
- Team cohesions increases
- Acceptance of roles and team direction

ADJOURNING/ TRANSFORMING

- Major goal achieved; project is over and team disbanded or crisis/major change occurs on team
- Change in leadership or significant turnover among team members
- Celebration over successes
- Separation anxiety and negativity

STORMING

- Frustration and misunderstanding
- Struggle for power, influence, and control of team direction
- Raising and discussing different values, ideas, and perspectives

There are many preventions and interventions you can implement to help better transition between these stages and maximize your time as a team in the performing stage.

PREVENTIONS & INTERVENTIONS TO SUPPORT TEAMING

TEAM RECRUITMENT

CHARACTERISTICS

May be strangers, unfamiliar with one another. No norms developed for working together.

Often a lack of compelling goal or shared vision for team. There may be individual accountability, but no shared sense of accountability.

PREVENTIONS

- Provide structure for meetings
- Provide clear information about goals, vision, or roles as currently outlined

INTERVENTIONS

- Build buy-in with one-to-one conversations
- Re-orient team if confused about goals, vision, or roles
- Encourage participation

FORMING

CHARACTERISTICS

Some excitement and eagerness; expectations may be high.

Members unsure of one another, their own roles, and group dynamics. Low levels of trust and commitment. People may be exceedingly polite or not speak their mind. Over-dependence on leadership to move work forward.

PREVENTIONS

- Conduct teambuilders to build trust and camaraderie
- Explore how team members approach learning, work, and collaboration
- Co-construct goals, plans, and norms in Team Charter
- Provide structure and framework to operate

INTERVENTIONS

- Team builder exercises or workshops
- Facilitate participation
- Teach teaming and meeting management skills
- Develop clear feedback process

STORMING

CHARACTERISTICS

Emotions and tensions run high. Conflict and frustrations emerge, animosities and allegiances form.

Power struggles between members occur as they begin to question/ re-think assumptions, direction, and goals.

People speak up and raise issues, regarding differences of opinion, values, and ideas.

PREVENTIONS

- Create space for conflict as a healthy and necessary part of team development
- Establish safety for expressing feelings in a respectful way
- Teach communication and conflict transformation skills early on

INTERVENTIONS

- Focus on interpersonal dynamics instead of achieving team goals
- Use conflict transformation to surface and resolve issues
- Use neutral facilitator to guide conversations

NORMING

CHARACTERISTICS

Members begin to “own” problems and strategize new solutions.

Team redefines its norms, procedures and values. Conflicts and issues once raised are resolved.

Clarity around roles and team direction.

PREVENTIONS

- Support team improvement efforts and encourage member empowerment and agency
- Share power and decision making, distribute leadership tasks

INTERVENTIONS

- Use problem solving tools to identify and address problems
- Apply process for personal and team feedback
- Assess meeting effectiveness

PERFORMING

CHARACTERISTICS

High productivity and commitment to goals. Members behave collaboratively and interdependently with high efficiency and effectiveness.

Team continuously improves itself. Members feel committed and bonded to one another and goals.

PREVENTIONS

- Stay alert to potential for storming, and make time to reflect, no matter how effectively the team appears to be behaving
- Reward and celebrate success
- Build tangible mechanisms for feedback and reflection
- Collaborate with members to get constant input

INTERVENTIONS

- Encourage members to take greater responsibilities
- Share leadership roles like facilitating meetings
- Provide training on tangible specific skills, as needed
- Anticipate and facilitate interventions at first signs of trouble

ADJOURNING/TRANSFORMING

CHARACTERISTICS

Stages of grief may be present as members disassociate from team or project, or celebratory feelings for successes.

Time to revisit/question goals and purpose. Can be power struggle to fill leadership void, unclear roles, and responsibilities

Lack of direction or motivation.

PREVENTIONS

- Provide space and structure for change
- Plan a positive ending for the team or a transition and motivation for the next round of teamwork
- Share learning with future team leaders through detailed notes and organization

INTERVENTIONS

- Invite team to suggest closing activities
- Hold a debriefing meeting to look at what worked, what could be improved, and overall learning

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ABOUT RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP™

Relational Leadership™ is a leadership competency model built upon decades of social psychology research into people, their motivations, how they learn and work, and the unique ways in which they influence and are influenced by others when in groups. RL helps interprofessional healthcare teams work together to achieve better results, and is grounded in the premise that all team members should grow and develop as leaders, working together interdependently towards a common vision. Each of the four Relational Leadership™ domains—Manage Self, Foster Teamwork, Coach & Develop, and Accelerate Change—operate on the individual, interpersonal, institutional, and structural levels to change how we approach learning, work, and collaboration.

RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP TOOLKITS

Relational Leadership™ Framework	One-to-Ones	Creating Cultures of Feedback
Cultivating a Relational Mindset	Teaming & Psychological Safety	Conflict Transformation
Narrative Leadership	The 5 Dynamics of Teams	Advocate to Accelerate Change
Awareness, Identity, & Power	Collaborative Decision Making	

LEADERSHIP PATHWAY TOOLKITS

Relational Facilitation	Relational Coaching
Relational Training	Equity in Relational Leadership

ADVOCACY PROJECT TOOLKITS

Team Starter Kit	Developing a Communications Strategy	Project Sustainability
Team & Project Launch	Conducting a Community Inventory	
Navigating Leadership Transitions	Holding a Community Convening	