Psychological Safety is the Response You Get

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Introduction

In our last paper we attempted to outline the processes occurring inside a person when they feel psychologically unsafe. In this paper, we look at all those forces that can operate in group settings to make individuals unsafe, the process behind it and what we can do about it as leaders.

As team leaders right through to CEOs and Board members, we find ourselves in so many situations where we need to change our behavior and demeanor due to prevailing circumstances. Some would say we need to wear different hats, others to put on different personas. It is something that we often end up taking for granted – it's just what you do.

But what works in one setting can be lethal in another. And often unless we are really alert it is hard to tell on some occasions what is called for or when we may be unwittingly making the environment unsafe for someone (or everyone!)

The greater the gap in hierarchical power between the leader and a team or individual the larger will be the impacts to manage.

Moreover, and unfortunately, power is invisible downwards, to quote Michael Grinder.

Rugby: Union or League?

Hitler wasn't "Hitler" twenty-four hours a day, seven days per week, three hundred and sixty- five days a year.

In between the frenzied foam-flecked ranting, relentless warmongering, and genocide scheming; in private, this vegetarian, teetotaller and animal-lover was reported to be "always polite and charming".

In another sphere, a client told one of us that his boss *"comes across as really caring when she is alone with me; but, when we are with the rest of the team, she'll treat my opinion and what I've got to say as though it doesn't count; or just take the other side of the argument as though to test me. The thing is, I don't want to have public arguments at all, never mind 'just for the sake of it'".*

This echoes another example, where the feedback from a team member went, *"if there is a senior manager present, he treats us with*

courtesy, respect and deference. As soon as they leave, he comes across arrogant, judging and dismissive".

A decade and a half ago, one of us had a colleague who was relaxed and shared engaging stories each Friday afternoon but was tense, grisly, and snippy each Monday morning. His team hated coming into the office on Monday mornings and developed some innovative ways of being somewhere else. The way one of his team described it was that he never knew which version of the same bloke he was going to run into.

Like us all, whether Hitler was playing "old-movie reel" Hitler or a jack-booted version of "St. Francis of Assisi", whether our colleague was playing a "raconteur" or "Scrooge", or whether the boss was playing "Dr. Jekyll" in private or "Mr. Hyde" in public, what changed was the game they were playing.

What is perhaps even more scary is that, by extension, in each case the leaders determined the new game for themselves and the new rules under which they were now playing.

The average team member finds this very

difficult to deal with particularly if one of the games a leader may be playing triggers bad experiences for them.

If you are prone to have close caring engagements with a person in one context yet prefer more dispassionate or combative engagements with the same person in another, you are presenting inconsistently and altering the terms of engagement. Some leaders do this continually and out of their awareness. If you do it from a position of hierarchical power you are playing with fire and, in our opinion, need some serious help.

If you happen to lead people in a group who are naturally aloof or combative, this can be additive to the relationship. For the vast majority of people, however, not only will this approach strain rapport, it will also rupture their psychological safety.

It is not unusual for an absence of cues of safety from a leader alone to trigger fight-or-flight; and … if a team or family member senses actual cues of danger, their neurology can react with emotional implosion or explosion.

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Expectations vs reality

The children's program, **Sesame Street**, has a song that goes, *"One of these things is not like the others. One of these things just doesn't belong"*. There are pictures presented of an apple, a banana, a mango, and a chocolate-chip cookie, with the suggestion that one of the items is incongruent with the others. The happy smiling kids have to choose the misfit.

When some things are a mismatch with other things in the outside world, it can be fun to compare and contrast. Not so when there is a mismatch between our expectation on the inside and what we actually get from the outside.

The grandfather of one of us was a bare-knuckle boxer in his youth, and used to tell his kids, *"If you show no fear when a bully is in your face, you're going to scare him. He might get fired up and act angrily; but he's going to be confused, scared and thinking badly"*: expecting to get fear and getting fearlessness can intimidate the intimidator.

Indeed, whenever reality has the audacity not to conform to our expectations, we can become disappointed.

Indeed, whether being annoyed by unexpectedly slow traffic, inclement weather, a person in a team meeting who is slow to respond to our direct verbal challenges, poor KPIs or any other letdown, then a fight-or-flight response, to a greater or lesser degree, can follow.

Pet-peeves are another bountiful source of tension, such as people being late for meetings, being interrupted mid-thought, a friend who borrowed something from you but hasn't returned it yet. If you were to walk into the office and say "Hi" to a colleague, who looked at you blankly and then just walked away, you could be shunted into fight-or-flight. These kinds of incongruencies between the expectation and the actuality are what might be termed, *"the gap between the book and the movie"*.

The important thing to note is that, for us to be annoyed by the *'Disappointment'* movie, we needed to have really bought into the *'Expectations'* book in the first place.

If you are a parent, a teacher, a sports coach, a team leader, or a CEO and you are apt to get "triggered" by stupid stuff like slow traffic, test fails, missed targets, life being not

Our game, our rules

All primates seek safety in their relationships with one another and humans are no exception.

In our relationships with others, if we expect a pleasant attitude and behavior consistent with our last encounter and we are greeted with something starkly different, or if we expect behavior congruent with the accepted norms of our group, our autonomic nervous system often detects these differences as a threat to disconnect.

In doing so, our body will instantly and involuntarily phase-shift us out of a socialised biological setup (if that is where we were) into a mobilised or an immobilised setup (fight, flight or freeze).

Our conscious mind will then run a narrative, which in the moment will be entirely convincing to us; such as, *"I hate that guy!"*, *"I must be in trouble"*, *"What an evil bully"*, *"How narcissistic of him"*, or *"I have no one"*.

Accordingly, whether or not the breach was real or intended, the disconnection occurs. When one senses at some level a threat to disconnect, we are experiencing a sense of what has been termed biological rudeness. This is an instantaneous neurological and unconscious bodily response.

It should not be mistaken for social rudeness, which may be how it is consciously perceived after the event: apprehending biological rudeness is an entirely instantaneous unconscious perceiving of a threat to disconnect.

When team members (or, even worse, leaders) either 1) do not play our game by our

"just so" when you need it to be, vague and confused reporting (or just someone who processes their experience in a way that is very different from you), then please realise that you have just sent your blood and glucose from your brain to your limbs.

This means you have impaired your judgement and ability to think. On such occasions, do not be surprised that things aren't going so well with the people you lead. If you conduct yourself in a fight-or-flight mode, others will pick up autonomic warnings to which their own biological setup will respond without volition. Airline passengers do not like to fly with captains who give inappropriate or unusual cues in their voice tone and speed of speech when making cabin announcements!

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rules or 2) elect unilaterally not to play our game at all, this will rupture individual psychological safety and fray group cohesion and identity.

The most damaging and destructive CEO, team leader or parent to deal with is the one who plays by a different set of rules on each encounter.

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Locked out

One of us was asked to help a night shift manager of a fast-food restaurant, which had been robbed by two armed assailants, one wielding a gun, the other a large combat knife.

When meeting the manager, David, displayed his scars on his face and arms and he unbuttoned his shirt and displayed the one on his stomach. He described his mental and physical torture: whilst one assailant pointed the gun at David's head, the other assailant set about cutting and stabbing him, in order to motivate him to unlock the drop safe.

Once visitors were able to attend his bedside, David received a visit from his brother-in-law. He walked up to David's hospital bed, armed

only with grapes and an expression of deep concern, where, as David described it, "I completely freaked out".

David's brother-in-law was a black man, as were the two men who had held David at gunpoint and tortured him. Even though his brother-in-law was dressed in a business suit, that similarity alone was sufficient to act as a phobic trigger.

To put it mildly, the phobia put a strain on his relationships with his family and friends, in which several black men were numbered. David attempted to "get a grip" and control his responses but his attempts were unconvincing.

Of course, intellectually, David knew that all black men were not threats to his safety, especially those who loved him. Regardless of his cognition, David's biology refused to cooperate with what he desperately wanted: to feel safe at home.

It was put to David that he had an unconscious racial bias and that, whilst he had gone through a terrible experience, it was time he stopped blaming good people for what bad people had done to him.

David was crushed by this and began to feel increasingly isolated, alone, anxious and depressed. David began to regret that he had ever woken up from the attack.

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Unconscious similarities

So, how does all this come about?

Well, in the instance that a trigger is unconsciously detected, a person's biological setup switches to another mode and a suite of behavioral reflexes are engaged. This is an inherited trait. It is not a learned response. It happens outside conscious control and it happens instantly.

We call this a phobic response. But don't be confused by the term. Indeed, instantaneous phase transitions into and out of the socialise, mobilise and immobilise states (fight, flight, freeze) involve different metabolic and behavioral reflexes, which, together, are packages of evolved competencies.

Depending on the circumstances, a phobic response can be lifesaving or completely embarrassing.

The fascinating thing is that a phobic trigger usually has a very specific stimulus: the thing that actually caused the phobia or something sufficiently like it.

For example, one Autumn (Fall) day, one of us stepped out of our home and found that we had jolted violently backwards: we had experienced a phobic response.

The cause was a carpet of dead leaves in front that were not there the previous day. To one's peripheral vision, they resembled spiders. And we were not even aware that we had a phobia of spiders. Fortunately, we knew how to get rid of phobias and, moments later, waded through the leaves with a giggle.

For just a moment, the leaves mimicked something else – spiders. We experience mimicry when something objectively resembles something else - a common evolutionary feature. It has great survival benefit to the person or creature experiencing it – the survival benefit of an aversion response from something which attacked them, typically, in older times to eat them.

This once-off bad experience by the subject is called one-trial learning. Once the aversion response has been acquired, the person or animal will strenuously avoid further encounters.

An interesting aspect of mimicry is that small increases in resemblance between similar experiences for the subject, has dramatic increases in the effectiveness of the mimic.

This is magnified again by orders of magnitude if the person who may be a trigger is in a position of hierarchical power. That being the case, an objectively imperfect mimic can be more than good enough to achieve the aversion response.

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Trauma

People will move into a mobilised fight/flight state immediately upon sensing danger. Once they can no longer sense danger and can sense safety, their biology setup will switch, and their social engagement behaviors will enable them to approach and connect successfully with others.

However, if they do not sense safety, they will remain in their mobilised state and their biological setup will make it difficult for them to form social connections and functional relationships.

Trauma, therefore, has been described as "a chronic disruption of connectedness". To end a trauma is to enable the traumatised person to sense cues of safety and allow their evolved competence to shift their biological state.

Once this shift occurs, completely outside of their conscious awareness, their autonomic nervous system will detect other people's openness to be approached and connect, as well as send cues, which invite others to do the same.

After David's phobia was removed, he asked if he could explain things to his sister and brother-in-law, whom were in the room next door. They were invited in and they were struck by the big smile of welcome from David, but there was still tension evident.

It was explained to the brother-in-law that, although he was not the original cause, superficial resemblance works really well as a trigger. That being the case, neither the person experiencing the phobic response nor the person triggering it can be to blame for the situation. And, because a phobia can be removed as fast as it was acquired, the

person experiencing the phobic response could not have been exhibiting an "unconscious bias".

One of us has worked with a CEO who had been caught in a number of simultaneous pairings such as David and his brother-in-law, only this time they were occasioned by an over-enthusiastic and verbal questioning technique the CEO used in group settings.

The CEO behaved with good intention, but did so from a position of hierarchical power. He was largely unaware of the mimicry between his own behavior, the setting in which he choose to do it (frequently), and the deep trauma or "chronic disruption of connectedness" he triggered in others.

Deep and severe alienation between the CEO and a number of key players who were subject to mobilize or immobilize response resulted. It grew and grew in the company as employees talked (and embellished) with one another. Before long the company was in crisis.

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A Way Forward

The vast majority of CEOs with whom we have both worked over many years do not, in our experience, set out to cause members of their company trauma and pain, nor generate states that are psychologically unsafe. The same is true of parents, colleagues and team leaders whom we have had the privilege of helping.

The processes described in this paper (and the previous one "When Safety Is Lost") would tend to imply that being in a position of responsibility and power and engaging with groups or teams can be a little like trying to walk through a minefield. When done with gusto and abandon the result is always not good, when done with timidity and over-caution it can be equally ineffective.

To minimize the chance of making individuals in the workplace, particularly subordinates, lose a sense of psychological safety here are some pointers:

- Accept that with the best intentions in the world there will be occasions where your behavior triggers other people to feel psychologically unsafe. There is nothing really that anyone can do to prevent these unanticipated occasions.

- Understand that on such occasions the reaction in the other individual is often involuntary, outside their awareness and not in any way a statement about their psychological maturity, intelligence or mental performance, or yours!
- Never use this as a crutch, excuse or rationale for not taking responsibility for your own behavior, especially if you occupy a position of power in a social system – organization, community, family.
- Try and play the one game (rugby or league) in all settings: team meetings, one on one encounters, informal gatherings.
- Always remember group settings are generally less safe places than one on one interactions.
- Be particularly vigilant of your own behavior in group settings and team meetings.
- Don't ever make side comments or evaluations about individuals in group settings.
- Individuals who are interrogated in front of others by someone in power over both them and the group will always be challenged, and if that sense of challenge happens to mimic in some way situations in which they were once unsafe then you can more or less expect them to feel similarly again.

- If you are in the position of power and you do not match your rhythm to that of the speaker, but instead ask questions or make statements directed at an individual quickly, starting immediately after or sometimes before their last word, you will almost certainly kill off psychological safety.
- If you ask them closed questions in this type of group setting you will almost certainly trigger a lack of psychological safety.
- If you are in a position of power and you over talk a speaker in the group then you will almost certainly trigger a lack of psychological safety in that person and in others.
- If you maintain high levels of direct eye contact in this type of setting with the individual concerned you will almost certainly trigger a lack of psychological safety.
- If you, have a raised voice or faster speech or a higher tone (compared to normal) and you focus on an individual in a group setting then you will almost certainly trigger a lack of psychological safety.

- If you do any of these things in a group setting you are most likely to trigger a greater but unexpressed lack of psychological safety among the bystanders.
- In the longer term you will be setting up protective information filtering and self-censoring patterns among team members that will ensure you lose access to valid information.

Then you will be walking through the minefield in deep fog.

Leadership of teams, families and corporations is a bit like flying an aircraft. One of the core accountabilities of the captain is to ensure that the passengers have a safe experience and are motivated to fly again with the airline. Passengers just won't buy tickets again for a flight with an airline with which they feel unsafe to fly, or who have a captain that behaves erratically.

You may have the compliance of a workforce under such circumstances, but you will not have their willing commitment.

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