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Building Psychological Safety in Academic Libraries

Fostering Innovation, Well-Being, and Engaged Teams

In today's evolving academic library environment, technological change intersects with persistent post-pandemic challenges and shifting institutional expectations. Library workers face increasing pressure to innovate while managing expanding workloads. This landscape has contributed to concerning reports of burnout, low morale, and disengagement among library professionals.

Employee engagement in the United States has fallen to its lowest level in a decade, with only 31 percent of employees feeling engaged at work.[1] The percentage of workers who strongly feel someone at work cares about them as a person has dropped from 47 percent in March 2020 to just 39 percent, while only 30 percent strongly agree that someone encourages their development.[2] These statistics reflect a troubling trend of employee detachment that extends to library workplaces.

Multiple recent studies have highlighted the issues of low morale, burnout, dysfunction, and toxic culture in academic libraries.[3] The evidence paints a concerning picture of our profession's workplace well-being. Over 75 percent of academic librarians reported that worry about the possibility of making a mistake caused stress in their work lives.[4] This statistic suggests that libraries may harbor cultures where errors are viewed as failures rather than learning opportunities, creating environments where risk-taking and innovation are stifled by fear. These challenges underscore the importance of fostering psychological safety, a workplace condition where employees feel safe to take interpersonal risks, share concerns, and contribute meaningfully without fear of retaliation.[5]

Understanding Psychological Safety

You may have heard the term "psychological safety" in workplace discussions, but what does it mean in practice? The concept has evolved since its introduction, but today's understanding stems from the work of Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson, who defines it as "a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking."[6] In plain language, it's about creating an environment where people feel comfortable speaking up, asking questions, admitting mistakes, and proposing new ideas without fear of embarrassment or punishment.

Psychological safety is particularly relevant for academic libraries because it enables knowledge sharing and innovation. When library staff feel safe to suggest new ideas without fear of ridicule or punishment, libraries can better adapt to changing user and institutional needs.

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It also promotes error reporting and continuous improvement. In psychologically safe environments, mistakes are viewed as learning opportunities rather than failures to be hidden, enabling continuous improvement in services and processes. Additionally, psychological safety creates spaces where diverse perspectives can be heard, regardless of position, identity, or experience level. Finally, when staff feel supported and respected, they experience greater job satisfaction. Libraries without psychological safety often develop patterns and behaviors that contribute to low morale, burnout, dysfunction, and toxic culture.

The Impact of Psychologically Unsafe Library Workplaces

The costs of these cultures extend beyond individual well-being to organizational performance.[7] Psychologically unsafe environments inhibit learning, innovation, and individual, team, and organizational performance. When library staff cannot speak up about concerns, suggest improvements, or admit mistakes, libraries lose valuable opportunities for innovation and growth and create a culture where dysfunction and toxicity can flourish.

Psychological safety disproportionately impacts marginalized staff in library environments. Fostering an inclusive workplace requires prioritizing psychological safety as a key component of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. Employees with disabilities face significant challenges in workplaces that lack psychological safety.[8] Without this foundation, they may hesitate to disclose their conditions or request necessary accommodations due to fear of stigma or retaliation.[9] Beyond disability inclusion, psychological safety also helps level the playing field in creative self-efficacy between men and women and mitigates the potential adverse effects of age diversity.[10] These factors underscore the importance of creating psychologically safe environments, especially for marginalized staff.

The consequences of psychologically unsafe environments extend to users as well. When library staff feel unsupported and unheard, their ability to provide high-quality service diminishes. Library workers who feel psychologically unsafe are less likely to speak up about workplace problems, including issues that affect service quality and user experience.[11]

Barriers to Building Psychological Safety

Several factors hinder the establishment of psychological safety in academic libraries. Hierarchical structures often discourage employees from voicing concerns, particularly in organizations where power distance is high.[12] Employees who challenge the status quo may fear retaliation, making it difficult to foster open dialogue.[13] This fear can be particularly pronounced in environments where communication is unidirectional, with leadership failing to engage in active listening and meaningful feedback loops.

Managers who fail to demonstrate competence, transparency, and active listening can erode psychological safety.[14] If leadership does not model inclusive behavior, employees may hesitate to raise concerns, leading to workplace stagnation and inefficiency. Workplace microaggressions further damage psychological safety, particularly for employees with disabilities, neurodiversity and those from marginalized groups. Additionally, toxic leadership creates an atmosphere where staff feel undervalued and powerless to enact positive change.

Unclear organizational goals and inconsistent communication exacerbate workplace frustrations. When expectations are vague or frequently shift without explanation, employees may feel lost, frustrated, and unable to perform their jobs effectively.[15] Without psychological safety, employees may disengage, leading to lower morale and decreased overall workplace

productivity. Addressing these barriers requires a commitment from leadership to prioritize transparency, inclusivity, and employee support.

Academic libraries face unique structural challenges that can impede psychological safety. These include dual governance structures (where librarians navigate both library and faculty reporting lines), budget dependencies that create resource competition, and status disparities between different classifications of library employees.

Creating Psychological Safety in Academic Libraries

Building psychological safety is not a single event but an ongoing process of continuous adjustments that contribute to meaningful progress. This process consists of three interconnected practices: establishing a supportive environment, encouraging engagement, and responding constructively.[16]

Leadership's Critical Role

Leaders at all levels are crucial in fostering psychological safety. Research consistently shows that supportive leadership enhances psychological safety, while self-serving behaviors reduce it.[17] Library managers shape workplace culture and set the tone for psychological safety. One of the most effective ways to cultivate psychological safety is through open communication and active listening. Managers should encourage staff to voice their concerns and ideas without fear of retaliation and ensure that feedback is met with appreciation rather than defensiveness. Creating structured discussion opportunities, such as regular one-on-one check-ins, anonymous surveys, and open forums, can help foster trust and transparency.

Managers can lead by example by practicing active listening, vulnerability, competence, transparency, and reducing power distance. Leaders who practice active listening signal that they value staff perspectives and demonstrate that employees' opinions matter by addressing their concerns thoughtfully.[18] Showing vulnerability by admitting mistakes and acknowledging limitations sets an example for team members, fostering an environment where taking risks and learning from failures is encouraged.[19] Competent and transparent leaders build trust by demonstrating expertise and openly communicating with their teams.[20] Additionally, reducing power distance by ensuring that authority is not perceived as rigidly hierarchical improves psychological safety.[21] Leaders can achieve this by actively seeking input from all staff, involving them in decision-making, and fostering open, nonhierarchical communication.[22]

In practice, library leaders can foster psychological safety by:

- Explicitly stating that mistakes are learning opportunities
- Acknowledging their own mistakes and limitations
- Soliciting feedback and responding constructively
- Protecting staff who speak up from retaliation
- Modeling respectful discourse, especially during disagreements
- Addressing harmful behaviors promptly and consistently
- Psychological Safety for Library Managers

While much of the literature focuses on how managers can create psychological safety for their teams, less attention is paid to creating psychologically safe environments for managers

themselves. This oversight is problematic, as Gallup's research shows that managers are faring no better than those they manage, with only 31 percent engaged in their work.[23]

Library managers occupy a challenging middle space, navigating pressures from both upper administration and the staff they supervise. They often lack the authority to address systemic issues while bearing responsibility for implementing policies and practices that may conflict with their values or their team's needs. In any academic library, individual managers have limited control over certain aspects of employment, such as salaries, leave policies, and benefits, which are typically managed at a higher administrative level."[24]

Creating psychological safety for managers requires intentional effort at multiple levels. From upper administration, library directors and deans can support middle managers by providing clear expectations and decision-making authority, acknowledging the constraints under which managers operate, creating regular opportunities for managers to provide candid feedback, modeling the vulnerability and openness they expect managers to demonstrate with their teams, and developing management training that addresses psychological safety.

Fellow managers can support each other by creating communities of practice where they can discuss challenges and share strategies. They can offer perspective and emotional support during difficult situations, collaborate across departments to address common concerns, and champion each other's successes while advocating for needed resources.

Staff can contribute to their managers' psychological safety by providing constructive feedback in appropriate settings, acknowledging the constraints and competing priorities managers face, approaching disagreements with curiosity rather than accusation, and recognizing the human behind the position.

When managers experience psychological safety, they are better equipped to extend that safety to their teams. Psychological safety is contagious; when leaders demonstrate vulnerability and openness, they create conditions where others feel safe to do the same.[25]

How Team Members Can Foster Psychological Safety

Creating psychological safety isn't solely the responsibility of formal leaders. Every library staff member can contribute to building a psychologically safe environment. In a workplace setting, any individual has the potential to influence how others perceive the acceptability of speaking up, seeking help, or engaging in other behaviors that carry interpersonal risk.[26]

Library staff at all levels can foster psychological safety through active participation. Engaging fully in discussions, asking questions, and sharing ideas signals to others that their contributions are also welcome. When one person takes an interpersonal risk and receives a positive response, others become more likely to do the same. Supportive responses are equally important. How team members react to each other's ideas, questions, and mistakes powerfully shapes psychological safety. Responding with curiosity rather than criticism, acknowledging good ideas, and offering help with challenges create a positive cycle of engagement.

Team members can build psychological safety by bridging differences, seeking to understand different perspectives, advocating for inclusive practices, and ensuring all voices are heard, especially those from marginalized groups or junior positions. Clear communication about capacity, needs, and expectations helps create sustainable work environments where team members feel respected. By modeling healthy boundaries, staff demonstrate mutual respect and care.

Creative engagement is another pathway to psychological safety.[27] Staff can initiate creative

projects, form reading groups, or organize skill-sharing sessions that build community and stimulate innovation. They can counteract the tendency to micromanage by advocating for space and time for creative exploration and demonstrating its value through improved services and increased engagement.

Measuring and Evaluating Psychological Safety

Assessing psychological safety provides valuable data for targeted interventions and measuring progress. Kukal Curtiss explains this through use of a psychological safety survey with two sections: one focusing on the team, where individuals rated the managers that they felt most and least comfortable with, and another addressing management.[28] Sample survey questions might include statements rated on a Likert scale.

- Team members can bring up problems and tough issues.
- People on this team sometimes reject others for being different.
- It is safe to take a risk on this team.
- It is difficult to ask other members of this team for help.
- Members of this team value and respect each other's contributions.
- Management listens to concerns raised by team members.
- Mistakes are held against you in this library.

Regular assessment helps identify areas for improvement and track progress over time. However, as Edmondson cautions, measuring psychological safety should never become more important than creating it. Surveys are tools for understanding, not ends in themselves.

The Business Case for Psychological Safety in Libraries

While the moral case for psychological safety, creating humane workplaces where people can thrive, should be compelling on its own, library administrators often need to justify investments in workplace culture through demonstrable outcomes. Fortunately, research provides ample evidence of psychological safety's practical benefits.

Improved performance is consistently linked to psychological safety.[29] Research shows that psychological safety enhances outcomes such as creativity, error reporting, and overall performance. It fosters an environment that encourages experimentation and creative risk-taking, which is essential for libraries to adapt to evolving user needs and technological advancements.

A psychologically safe workplace also helps reduce staff turnover by increasing job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Organizations that prioritize psychological safety tend to perform better across key performance indicators. Additionally, service quality improves when staff feel secure in reporting issues and suggesting improvements,[30] an especially critical factor in libraries, where responsive, user-centered service is fundamental to the mission.

Efficiency improves in psychologically safe environments by reducing unproductive behaviors such as defensive documentation, excessive checking, and information hoarding, which often emerge in workplaces lacking trust. Research indicates that employees in high-trust organizations experience 74 percent less stress, demonstrate 50 percent higher productivity, and face 40 percent less burnout.[31] These advantages directly enhance library services, allowing for a more effective and resource-efficient work environment.

Conclusion: Creating a Psychologically Safe Future for Academic Libraries

Psychological safety is a critical factor in driving employee engagement, innovation, and overall organizational success in academic libraries. When staff feel safe voicing concerns, sharing ideas, and taking creative risks without fear of judgment or retaliation, libraries benefit from improved performance and higher job satisfaction.

Psychological safety enhances service quality, reduces costly turnover, and increases efficiency by minimizing unproductive behaviors like defensive documentation and information hoarding. Start small by implementing regular check-ins, creating anonymous feedback channels, or establishing cross-departmental discussion forums. Consider assessing psychological safety in your library. Most importantly, recognize that building psychological safety is an ongoing process that requires commitment from both leadership and staff. ⁊

Notes

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