

HUMAN-CENTERED LEADERSHIP AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

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HUMAN-CENTERED LEADERSHIP AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Remember: working on mental balance does not mean being happy all the time. After all, everyone goes through moments of worry, sadness, and distress.



HUMAN-CENTERED LEADERSHIP: WHAT IS IT?

Human-centered leadership focuses on what truly matters: people. That is why this leadership style is highly valued in today's corporate world. When the workplace is healthier and more humane, engagement, satisfaction, and productivity naturally increase.

Leaders who adopt this approach consider the human factor in their decisions and strategies. They lead with greater empathy and build closer relationships, understand their teams, and assign tasks more effectively while respecting individual profiles, challenges, and needs. Results remain important, of course, but without losing sight of the people who make those results possible.

Human-centered leadership requires continuous self-development, particularly in self-awareness, openness, and emotional intelligence. This not only affects the team but also directly influences business results. In today's world, developing soft skills is no longer simply a competitive advantage—it has become essential for every leader.



Human-centered leadership is the opposite of the traditional “hero leader” model—someone who believes they must handle everything on their own, avoids showing vulnerability, and sees command and control as the only ways to lead. Consider the differences and reflect on where you see yourself today:



HERO LEADER

- Has all the answers.
- Withholds information.
- Micromanages.
- Has little trust in the team.
- Does not admit when they are wrong.
- Looks for someone to blame when problems arise.
- Has low emotional intelligence.
- Makes decisions individually or authoritatively.
- Bases decisions solely on intuition.



NON-HERO LEADER

- Asks questions and encourages collaborative solutions.
- Gives team members visibility and opportunities to support their development.
- Empowers the team with autonomy.
- Holds people accountable for results.
- Is not afraid of being wrong or showing vulnerability.
- Seeks solutions and encourages learning.
- Develops emotional intelligence in themselves and others.
- Makes decisions collaboratively and democratically.
- Uses data and monitors key indicators when making decisions.

What are the key competencies of a human-centered leader?

1. **Empathy:** : Understand the team's perspectives and feelings, and use individual motivations to connect people with challenges.

2. **Active listening:** Show genuine interest in the team's opinions, provide support when needed, and offer encouragement when appropriate.

3. **Flexibility:** Adapt strategies to changing needs and circumstances, using different communication styles and adjusting the pace as necessary.

4. **Humility:** Recognize limitations, pursue continuous learning, remain open to learning from others, and be willing to show vulnerability.

5. **Clear communication:** Ensure everyone understands the goals and strategies, while continuously and openly aligning expectations and agreements around what truly matters.

What does a human-centered leader do on a daily basis?

If you are a manager and want to make your leadership more human-centered, start with small, everyday changes.

• Give frequent, constructive feedback. Do not wait for formal performance reviews to recognize achievements or address areas for improvement.

• Listen attentively and create space for your team to share ideas, questions, and challenges.

• Value people not only for what they deliver, but also for their talents, motivations, and challenges—see the person beyond their role in the organization.

• Create a safe environment. A team that feels comfortable being authentic works with greater confidence and innovation.

• Lead by example by demonstrating the qualities you want to develop in your team.

How can I become a human-centered leader?

Assertive communication is one of the essential pillars of human-centered leadership because it creates an environment of transparency, trust, and growth while helping everyone develop greater maturity. In her book Radical Candor, Kim Scott emphasizes that effective leadership requires balancing care with accountability—knowing how to say what needs to be said without losing sight of the people involved.

This means that a human-centered leader does not avoid difficult conversations, but also does not treat the team with unnecessary harshness. They provide honest feedback with empathy and listen actively, without losing clarity or focus on results.

Within this approach, assertive communication is based on three pillars:



Genuinely caring about people: Recognizing individual challenges and supporting the team's growth.

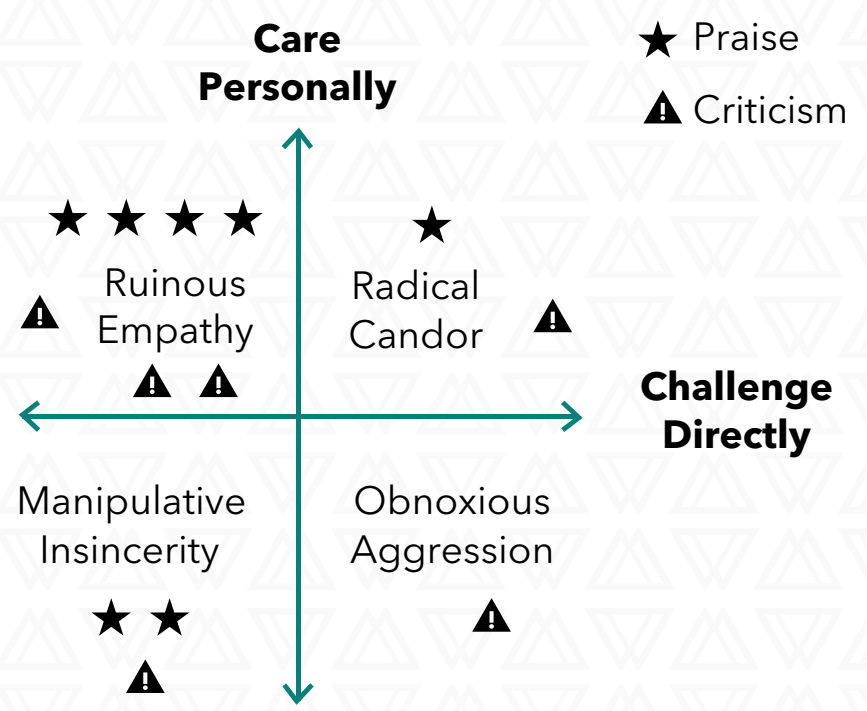
Communicating clearly and objectively: Avoiding vague or indirect messages so that everyone knows exactly what is expected.

Creating an environment of trust: Encouraging the team to communicate openly and transparently, without fear of raising questions or expressing concerns.

In practice, a leader who applies assertive empathy communicates respectfully without withholding important truths. They provide constructive feedback, offer sincere praise, and address issues when necessary, always maintaining a balance between firmness and consideration.

Have you ever considered where your team places you within the assertive empathy quadrants?

We recommend this exercise as an opportunity to practice active listening and foster open dialogue, allowing your team to share how they perceive your communication style and how it could be improved without fear.



How can this exercise work?

Meet individually with each member of your team and ask them to share where they would place your communication style within these quadrants, based on their interactions with you.

Ask for examples and use open-ended questions such as: “Are there times when you feel I do not challenge you enough? What are they?” “Are there situations in which you do not understand why I seem impatient?” or “Do you feel that I sometimes take a firm position that is not positive from your perspective?”

If your team feels very uncomfortable or is unwilling to place you in any of the quadrants, this may be a warning sign. In this situation, reflect on how well psychological safety has been established in the workplace and consider what actions could strengthen it. This brings us to another fundamental pillar of human-centered leadership—one that increases the likelihood of building an engaged, results-oriented team.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

What is psychological safety?

It is the belief that the environment is safe for people to speak up, share ideas, and even admit mistakes. It is a space where everyone’s voice is heard and valued, without fear of judgment or retaliation.

REFLECTION: Do I allow my team members to be themselves?

> “The reality is that this is a complex and confusing area because a fearless organization is an aspiration, not a reality. When people are quick to take offense, it becomes difficult to have high-quality conversations without causing unnecessary harm or falling into traps you did not know existed.”
>
> Amy Edmondson

How does a lack of psychological safety affect

No one wants to appear	Então agimos dessas formas
Ignorant	So we do not ask questions.
Incompetent	So we do not admit weaknesses or mistakes.
Intrusive	So we do not offer ideas.
Negative	So we do not challenge the established way of doing things.

Workplaces with low psychological safety may appear normal, but silence directly affects results and limits people's ability to contribute when facing challenges and responsibilities.

For example, imagine a meeting in which an employee notices a flaw in a process but chooses not to speak up for fear of judgment or retaliation. The problem remains unresolved, leading to rework and additional costs—something that could have been avoided with a simple comment if the environment had felt safe enough.

What Psychological Safety Is Not:

- Being nice while failing to develop people or solve problems.
- The absence of conflict or being praised all the time.
- An end goal. Psychological safety is an essential part of the journey: it is not a result you simply "achieve," but something you build every day.
- Job security. Psychological safety is about reducing fear in the workplace, not avoiding difficult decisions.
- Feeling free to complain or resort to workplace gossip instead of having courageous conversations with the leader.
- Permission to avoid responsibility.

> "Once you create psychological safety, things become much less comfortable because people start making observations about your work that you may not like."
>
> Scott Chambers, Partner at Caerus Change

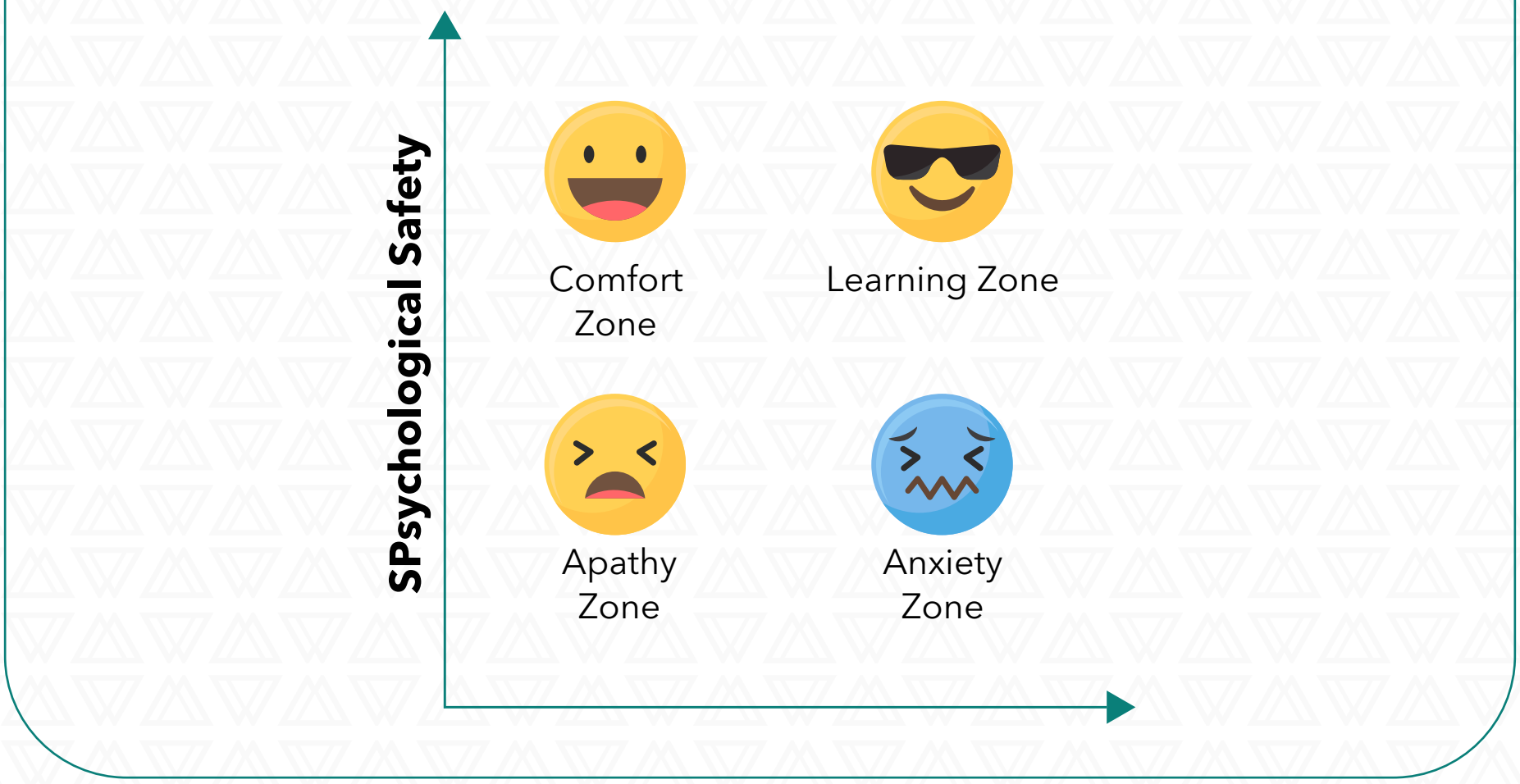
When we work in a psychologically safe environment, we focus on addressing what needs to be resolved with transparency and openness, while giving everyone space to contribute.

How can we assess the level of psychological safety and its impact on employees, results, and the workplace climate?



Amy explains that **leaders have two responsibilities**: one is to maintain high standards, and the other is to create a learning environment–a psychologically safe environment in which learning can take place. She mapped this dynamic along two axes:

- The perceived level of psychological safety; and
- The level of performance–that is, expectations regarding results, productivity, and commitment.



The Four Zones of Team Culture



Apathy Zone
(Low psychological safety + low performance)

An environment with no meaningful incentives. People do not feel safe speaking up, but they are not held to high standards either. The result? People work on autopilot, with no learning, growth, or engagement.



Comfort Zone
(High psychological safety + low performance)

The workplace climate is friendly, and people feel safe expressing themselves and providing feedback, but there is no high-performance culture. The result? A pleasant company with an agreeable work environment, but serious performance issues.



Anxiety Zone
(Low psychological safety + high performance)

A focus on results sustained by fear and pressure. Mistakes are punished, questions are avoided, and work is driven by the effort to avoid criticism. This reduces creativity and learning, lowers motivation, and negatively affects the team's work environment, health, and well-being.



Learning Zone
(High psychological safety + high performance)

The ideal balance. The team has the freedom to make mistakes, learn, and grow while continuing to pursue excellence. There is trust, challenge, and support. The result? People challenge themselves, remain engaged in their work, have the courage to speak up and be vulnerable, and contribute to better results and processes.

+

Where do you think your team is today? And where do you see yourself? What can be done to bring about change?

Why does psychological safety have such a significant impact on organizations?

In addition to influencing workplace climate, talent retention, and employee development, psychological safety has a substantial financial and performance impact.
Research, including a Gallup study, shows that employees who feel psychologically safe are 27% more likely to be engaged in their work.

A Crucial Learning study also found that more than 43% of respondents delayed raising complex or difficult issues for up to two weeks because they were afraid to discuss them with someone.

But what kinds of situations do people avoid raising? Many different ones!

Here is an example from Amy's book of how psychological safety can affect results:
(Chapter: "Dangerous Silence – Excessive Trust in Authority")
In one case, a 39-year-old woman was admitted to a leading hospital in 1994 for chemotherapy treatment.
It was later discovered that the prescribed dosage was excessively high: medication intended to be administered over four days had been scheduled as a single dose on one day. Several people saw the prescription, but no one spoke up to question, correct, or flag the error.
In an environment without psychological safety, fear overrides the desire to do what is right.
In a safe environment, someone speaks up and communicates effectively that the dosage should be adjusted, helping ensure a better outcome for both the patient and the treatment.
In addition to this case, Amy presents scenarios involving rocket launches, aviation incidents, and several other examples that demonstrate the impact of silence.

Have you noticed any situations that could have been avoided if there had been more idea-sharing or greater opportunities for people to contribute?

As a leader, how can you encourage this within your team and among your peers?

What drives high performance in a team?

Google's Project Aristotle examined what truly enables a team to perform at a high level. After studying hundreds of teams, the conclusion was clear: what matters most is not the intelligence or experience of individual team members, but how they work together.
The key finding was that psychological safety is the most important factor in a team's success. In other words, people need to feel comfortable speaking up, making mistakes, learning, and asking questions without fear of punishment or embarrassment.
The Five Essential Elements of a High-Performing Team
(Google's Project Aristotle):

- **Psychological safety:** People feel that they can speak up without fear.
- **Dependability:** Everyone does their part, and the team can rely on each person to follow through.
- **Structure and clarity:** Everyone knows what they need to do and why.
- **Meaning of work:** People feel that the work they do has personal value.
- **Impact of work:** The team can see that its efforts produce meaningful results.

What does this have to do with human-centered leadership?

Everything. A human-centered leader creates a safe environment where the team can speak up, innovate, and learn without fear. They provide clarity, distribute responsibilities fairly, and connect the team to the company's purpose.

If you lead a team, consider this: do the people around you feel that they can make mistakes, test ideas, and learn without fear? If the answer is not a clear "yes," it may be time to reassess how communication and team culture are being shaped.

More important than the present is the willingness to co-create the future with your team and organization.

Human-centered leadership is not about inspiring speeches—it is about consistent action.

What can you change today to become a more human-centered leader?

LEARN MORE

Website:

atlasofemotions.org
Atlas of Emotions – explore the timeline of each emotion and the reactions it can trigger, helping you better understand and manage your emotions.

Google re:Work - Google's Project Aristotle on Team Effectiveness
An overview of Google's Project Aristotle, offering insights into psychological safety and high-performing teams.

Podcasts:

izabellacamargo.com.br
A podcast about mental health, leadership, and self-awareness.

ResumoCast
This podcast features audio summaries of a wide range of books, sometimes presented with the authors themselves, helping listeners gain a deeper understanding of the content.

Books

A Organização Sem Medo – Amy C. Edmondson
Empatia Assertiva – Kim Scott

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