BUILDING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY & CONFLICT RESOLUTION CAPACITY TO ENHANCE TEAM COHESION

Overview

Since 2015, the NSF Revolutionizing Engineering Departments (RED) teams have worked to implement significant changes in engineering education by relying on the diverse skills of their interdisciplinary team members who represent various institutional roles. This Tip Sheet presents some of the strategies that RED teams have utilized to ensure psychological safety and build conflict resolution capacity for their team members. We utilize the definition by Edmondson (1999) that psychological safety is a shared belief held by team members that others on the team will not "embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up", and additionally recognize that in the same situation different group members might "perceive the same moment, in the same context, as having different degrees of risk and thus have different needs for psychological safety" (Wanless, 2016). Inclusive and efficient teams are key to generating innovative, cross-cutting, and sustainable changes in higher education, and research suggests that for highest success, high-performing teams must actively foster psychological safety among the team members (Ruiz Ulloa & Adams, 2004). It's important to utilize all three strategies presented in this Tip Sheet to consistently reevaluate and reinforce psychological safety for teams.

Strategy 1: Develop and use an inclusive meeting structure

The data collected with RED teams suggests that teams should consistently place importance on planning and implementing a meeting structure that is governed by clear and agreed-upon meeting norms. Further, these meeting norms should be consistently reinforced by all team members.

TIP: During a meeting, spend time to address all concerns and questions before moving onto another discussion point and before making decisions. When necessary due to a time constraint, the team should collectively prioritize which agenda items to address.

This Tip Sheet uses data from RED conference calls and a group working session with 12 RED teams during the 2024 RED Consortium Meeting. Contact us at redpar@rose-hulman.edu for additional information.

TIP: Consider developing a meeting agenda in a collaborative manner and sharing it with the entire team before the meeting. The agenda should ensure that during the meeting every team member has an opportunity to contribute to discussions (e.g., round-robin style of idea/feedback generation). Consider how you might engage those who cannot be physically present in the meeting, to allow their voices to be heard.

"...I just love that [...] when I'm in the meetings, nobody is begrudging the amount of time it takes to try to work through the issues. Like some of the meetings that I'm in in other contexts, there's this sense of we should do all of this empathy perspective taking, but we should be able to do it in three minutes and move on to the next agenda item." [RED team educational researcher]

Strategy 2: Empower project leaders to actively manage team environments

Project leaders can have an instrumental role in developing and maintaining psychologically safe environments where team members feel valued for their insights, empowered to bring up concerns, and able to constructively discuss potentially opposing views.

TIP: Leaders should be intentional about developing a process for integrating new team members into existing groups. Leaders should provide new team members with the resources and guidance to help them navigate tacitly understood group norms and rules.

TIP: Team leaders should spend time meeting with individual team members outside of regular group meetings to compile diverse perspectives and insights, and, when necessary, schedule separate group meetings to openly discuss prior contentious issues before moving onto new topics.

"So, when I think about what's going on in the team meetings, it's like at the moment it never gets to conflict because there are things like a lot of perspective taking that's going on. So how would so-and-so handle this? How might this be experienced? So, that's when [the group's social scientist] is helping the team see how different people might react. [...] Part of that has been a certain amount of empathy. Trying to appreciate why somebody would be reacting and not quickly saying resistance is bad. But more like, it might be natural for that person to be resistant. And being empathetic and then figuring out how to address it. " [RED team educational researcher]

Strategy 3: Build trust and respect with all team members

Every member of a team has a responsibility to reinforce respectful practices so that everyone can speak up without being punished, embarrassed, or rejected for their opinions. In psychologically safe environments team members tend to speak up and share knowledge more readily, ask for help, provide constructive feedback to others, learn from mistakes, and feel a greater sense of belonging to a group (Wanless, 2016).

TIP: Professional training for team members and/or professional facilitation of meetings by an external facilitator can be critical in a team's ability to manage crucial conversations, and to alleviate power dynamic issues.

TIP: Team members should practice exhibiting a curiosity mindset and asking questions about others' perspectives, establishing commitments to honor agreed upon ways of interacting and collaborating, and learning ways to provide positive and constructive feedback and connect feedback to a team's shared vision.

"So patience, and then a willingness to learn, kind of a curiosity about the different issues. And so all of that, it never seems to get to conflict anymore because some of these other processes are crafting circumstances that then are really constructive." [RED team educational researcher]

References:

Edmondson, A. C. (1999). Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 2, pp. 350-383.

Ruiz Ulloa, B. C. and Adams, S. G. (2004). Attitude Toward Teamwork and Effective Teaming. *Team Performance Management*, Vol. 10, No. 7/8, pp. 145-151.

Wanless, S. B. (2016). The Role of Psychological Safety in Human Development. *Research in Human Development*, 13:1, 6-14.