

Is Psychological Safety Enough?

An argument for safer spaces in team coaching

It is well-accepted within coaching that psychological safety is a crucial part of allowing a team to function effectively and creating effective team coaching. Amy Edmondson (1999), who popularised the term, defines psychology safety as “a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking” (p.354). Whilst we agree, we challenge the idea that “[f]or team psychological safety to be a group-level construct, it must characterize the team rather than individual members” (pp.354-5). Though Edmondson observed that hierarchical power can drive fear in teams, she did not address other forms of non-hierarchical power, particularly the impact of systemic oppression. Further, many existing models do not adequately consider the role of power dynamics and systems of oppression in our work with teams.

We use systems of oppression to describe profoundly and historically embedded cultural belief systems created and maintained to advantage of one group over others.

For example, patriarchy benefits cis-gendered men. Classism benefits those with generational wealth. Heteronormativism benefits romantic and sexual relationships between one cis-gendered man and one cis-gendered female. Systemic oppression is the manifestation of these beliefs, such as ignorance, prejudice, discrimination, and violence. Each system of oppression exists independently but intersects with one another. This lens allows us to appreciate the different and complex layers of power dynamics, beliefs, and expectations in any given space.

We believe that we cannot treat psychological safety as a monolithic entity that is or is not present. Individuals will each feel distinct levels of un/safety at any given moment, to varying degrees and lengths of time, due to the socio-historical context, their lived experiences and beliefs, and their current physical, mental and emotional state. We propose “safer space” as a more appropriate concept.

Content Warning

There will be references to a range of challenging subjects. These include references to trauma, racism, ableism, heteronormativism, sexual violence, ageism, classism, sexism, discrimination, and harassment. Whilst we don't go into any detail, we urge you to take time and space for yourself if these examples affect you.

WHAT IS A SAFER SPACE?

From the 1970s women's and LGBTQIA+ liberation movements, safe spaces were "physical meeting places where like-minded people could meet and share their experiences in a safe environment" (Flensner & Von de Lippe, 2019, p.275). Within education, safe spaces can mean both spaces for marginalised communities to come together, as above, and also learning spaces where a diverse group can manage discomfort, leading to valuable dialogue and learning. We believe both definitions could and should be applied to team coaching spaces.

We adopt the term safer space to represent that safety is multidimensional and subjectively experienced. It is practically impossible for a coach always to facilitate a safe space for everyone. Instead, we, as coaches, can facilitate safer spaces.

Research has shown that people from marginalised communities are more likely to take longer to feel they are in a safer coaching space. Carr and Seto (2013, p.104) found that this is a warranted concern: in their study, "[m]ost of the coaches wrote about successful coaching experiences where they had a similar cultural preference to their client". This may present in several ways in team coaching: how often each participant contributes to the session, the internal self-censorship, team behaviours, and where the coach focuses their attention.

With the growing awareness of social responsibility and justice within a multi-generational and cultural context, we propose a more inclusive model for safer team coaching spaces. Our aim is to challenge and support team coaches in how they think about safety in teams. We propose a model for creating safer spaces that explicitly recognise how power and systems of oppression can affect how safe team members feel at any given moment.

THE CYCLE OF SAFER SPACES MODEL

Creating safer spaces can allow people's best selves to emerge and contribute more fully by providing encouragement, permission, and safety to be as much of themselves as they wish. If we, as team coaches, aim to create the safest space possible for all team members, we must ensure we take our cues from those team members who feel least safe.

The Cycle of Safety model provides coaches a way to understand how power is experienced and some conditions that may help individuals feel safer. It may enable coaches to attend to hitherto unnoticed moments where team members are not experiencing the level of safety that allows them to contribute however they wish to. We explored the somatic, emotional, epistemic, and factional conditions contributing to how un/safe the coaching space feels. We recognise that these factors do not always neatly fit under one or two states, frequently intermingling and influencing one another.

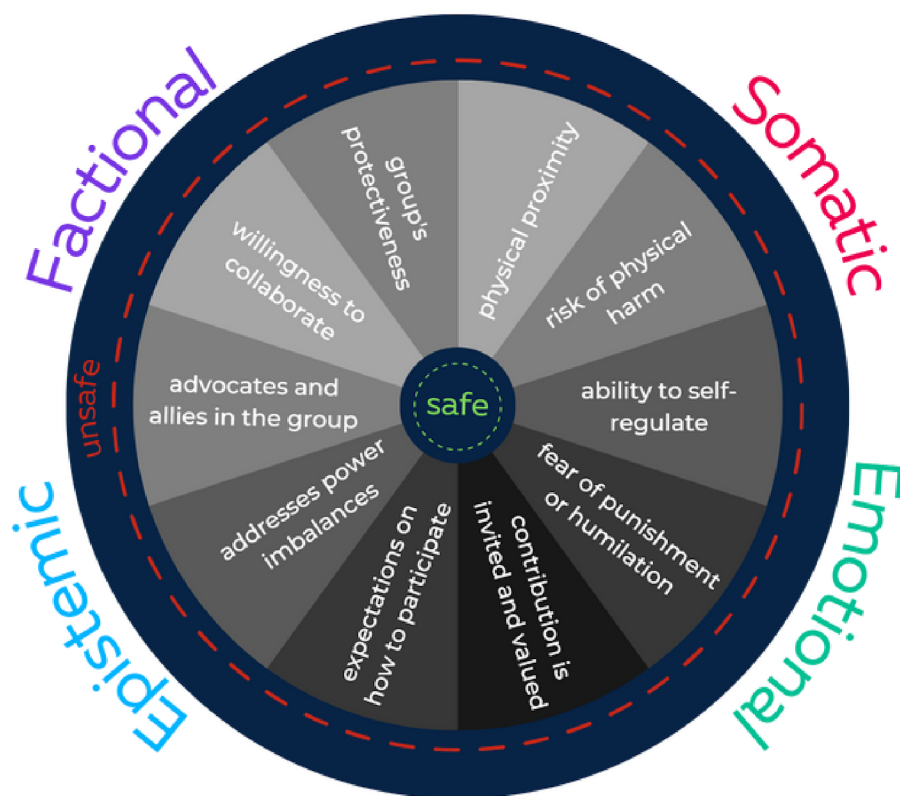


Figure 1: The Cycle of Safer Spaces

A core assumption here is that safety and comfort, whilst linked, are not the same. Both can impair or affect a person's contribution, but they do so on various levels and degrees. Feeling unsafe stays with someone, perhaps adding to existing experiences or trauma biographies, such as experiencing direct or indirect aggression, collective or inter-generational trauma, or how their bodies and brains process and respond to rejection or fear. Discomfort, however tricky, will pass.

Paradoxically, greater levels of safety in spaces can lead to more discomfort. Discomfort or destruction may indicate that change is emerging or occurring.

Discussing alternative solutions and views and addressing personal and political topics are potentially uncomfortable. Bringing in the new can challenge established beliefs; for innovative teams, this is desirable, resulting in resistance. Teams attuned to safer spaces can recognise this feeling as discomfort. To promote team safety, team coaches must understand the contributing factors to individual safety. We offer this Cycles of Safety model to enable team coaches to influence greater levels of safety whilst working with discomfort. Only when each team member feels safe enough to contribute the way they wish will the team be safe. However, even then, this is not a static status; it is not a condition we achieve and can assume is maintained. As new ideas, beliefs, language or actions are introduced, there is a risk of disruption to an individual's sense of safety.

Considerations for using the safer spaces model

As we explored each factor, we identified relevant conditions that might affect team members and their contributions. We identified pertinent conditions that might affect team members and their contributions as we examined each factor.

We have mapped these conditions based on the extent of safety and comfort they enable onto a horizontal and vertical axis. This will vary from person to person, from time to time. We acknowledge that this list is illustrative rather than complete. We also recognise these conditions and their placement is solely based on our perspectives and biographies at this moment in time. The purpose is to offer a framework in which the team coach can consider the different factors and conditions of safety.

SOMATIC SAFETY

Within team coaching and other professional environments, the chances of physical threat and violence are unlikely, so we believe that literature on psychological safety does not consider physical or somatic factors. However, it is a core component of safer spaces. Severe physical stress reactions like racing heartbeat, sweating, and trouble breathing can lead to combative behaviours, disassociation, or persistent physiological hyperarousal, like panic or anxiety attacks.

At a basic level, when we feel unsafe, it can be a very visceral experience.

In Figure 2, we show how fear responses, bodily or emotional dys/regulation, and accessibility to space, materials, and resources contribute to someone’s level of safety and comfort.

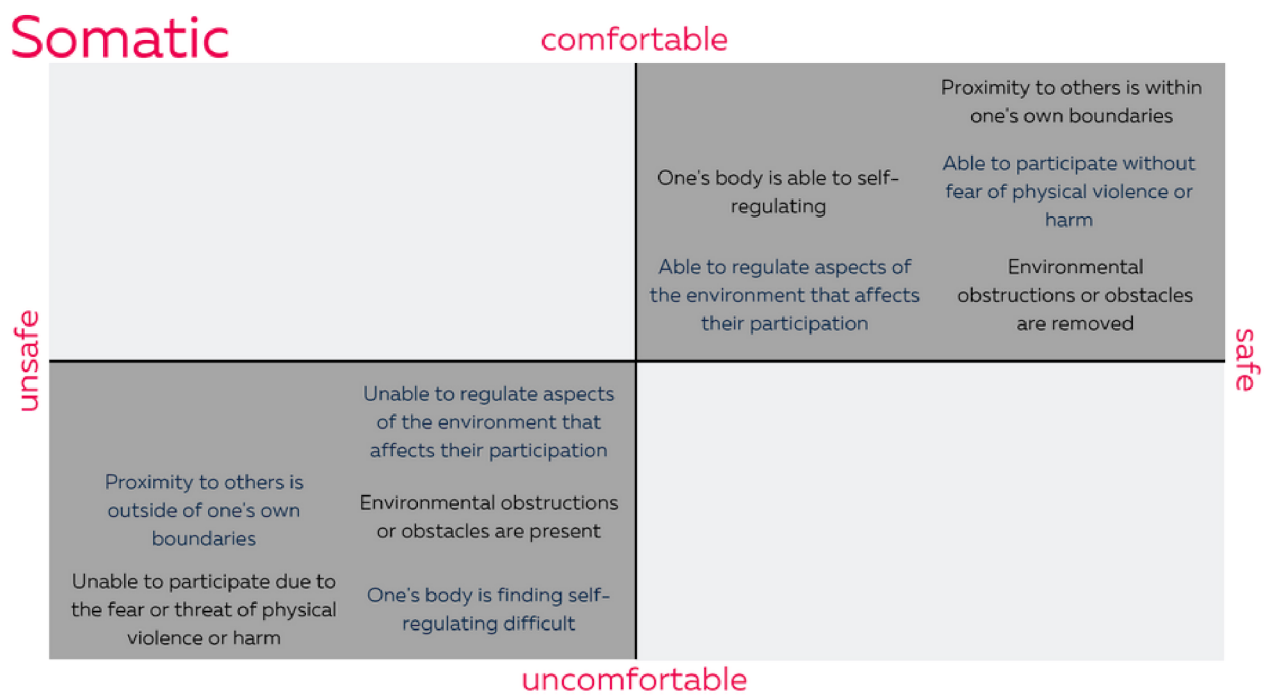


Figure 2: Somatic Conditions for Safer Spaces

These significantly heightened reactions can be experienced by those whose worldview is informed by how other people have negatively responded to their bodies. Examples include wheelchair users whom others have moved without permission, someone who has been violated by unwanted touching, or someone who has been misgendered.

For team coaches looking to promote safer somatic spaces, consider accessibility requirements, allow the team to self-regulate with techniques such as stimming, and, where possible, adjust the physical environment, such as brightness, ambient noise, and temperature. Think about how closely people are sat together, whether and how they move around the space, and how much autonomy team members have in these spaces. By doing so, team members who are experiencing hypervigilance, have a physical disability and are sensitive to light, smell, touch, and sound can take part safely and comfortably.

EMOTIONAL SAFETY

Whilst there are overlapping factors under emotional conditions, such as somatic and epistemic, the distinction in emotional un/safety is how closely the session experience is to each team member's expectations. Discomfort arises when we make space for the new, whether it is a concept or a way of working. However, this can venture into unsafe territory if the challenge concerns someone's sense of self and safety. Figure 3 illustrates how to introduce unexpected behaviours and topics in safe conditions organically.

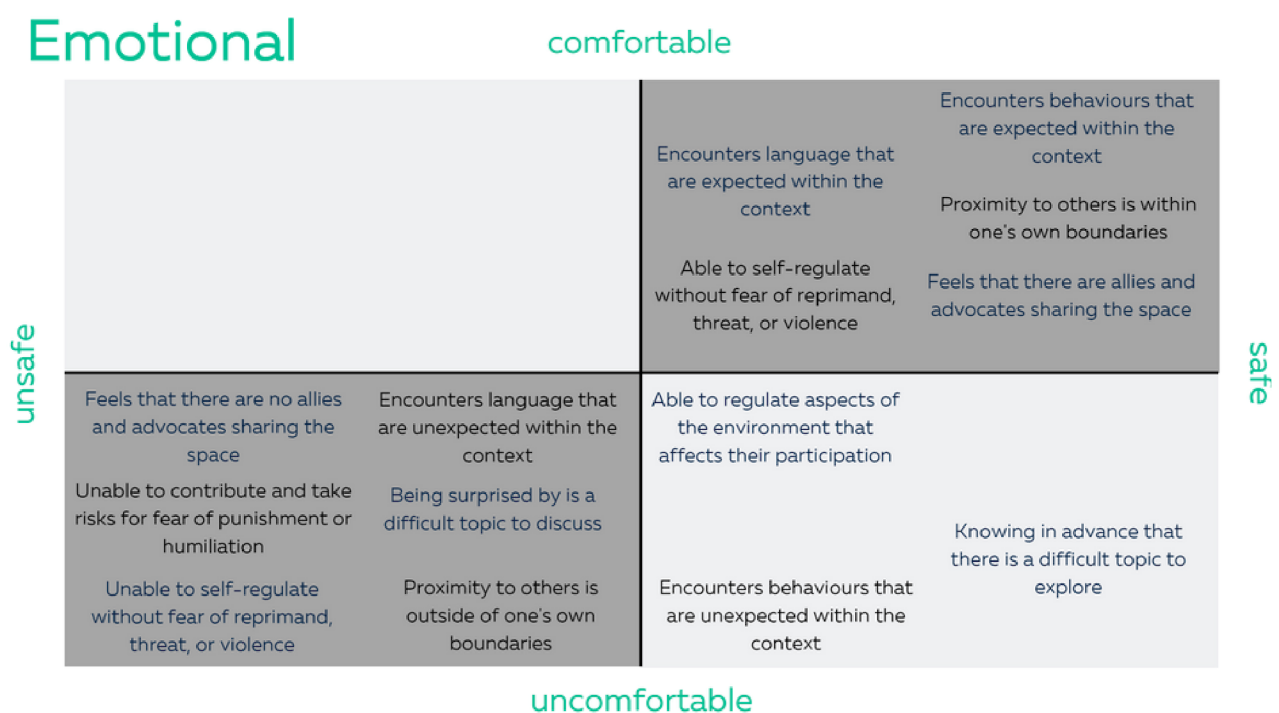


Figure 3: Emotional Conditions for Safer Spaces

Clark (2020) advocates that psychological safety is required in cultures that reward vulnerability. Whilst we agree, this is aspirational at best. Team members who have experienced marginalisation, oppression, or harm may hesitate or resist sharing their vulnerabilities. For invisible or unseen characteristics or identities, such as sexuality, religious beliefs, or non-visible disabilities or conditions, this could be especially pertinent as vulnerability may require disclosure. These perceived risks might include embarrassment, shame, fear of alienation, discrimination, or violence, which may prevent team members from sharing this part of themselves.

These team members may have adopted tools to minimise these risks at work.

Masking and code-switching are physical, verbal, and behavioural alterations an individual adopts to better assimilate or mitigate risks in different situations.

A neurodivergent person may contribute less or expend more energy to appear neurotypical at work. A Black man may not stand as tall or speak in a higher register to not seem intimidating. A person from the LGBTQIA+ community may refrain from talking about their family or holiday plans so as not to out themselves to colleagues. These individuals must also consider the impact of their disclosures and behaviours on the broader organisation.

Team coaches can supply ample emotional safety by acknowledging how forced vulnerability can be harmful and offering a space where everyone can participate however they choose. As team coaches, how we prepare and scope our work with teams can enable more meaningful participation for those who are neurodiverse, who experience heightened social anxiety, whose English is not their first language, and who benefit from accessibility tools and systems. It can also help newer team members, those who work in a hybrid manner, and those unfamiliar with organisational or technical jargon.

EPISTEMIC SAFETY

From epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), epistemic safety addresses how meaning-making is shared and enables everyone to feel their contributions are valued. Consider when you made a snap, subconscious judgement about someone based on their accent, utterances, appearance, or status. As with psychological safety, all contributions are acknowledged and considered valid in epistemically safer spaces.

That is not to say that team members must agree or discount their views and experiences to feel safe. Instead, the team coach is mindful of the different dynamics and systemic beliefs that may prevent someone from contributing.

Unlike psychological safety, epistemically safer spaces enable participants to make an informed choice about whether and how to participate in the discussion (Anderson, 2021). Suppose someone in the team wants to explore a topic following a policy change on parental leave. Without a content warning, other team members may unknowingly enter a conversation on a subject with which they may have had recent or past adverse experiences. This situation could trigger strong emotional and somatic stress responses, hindering their cognitive functioning, sense of physical and psychological safety and ability to participate fully.

In Figure 4, we outline how experiences of epistemic injustice and team dynamics may hinder or help team members' contribution to team coaching. An example includes explicit signals of the lack of safety, such as fear of being humiliated, punished, or ignored or when problematic language and behaviour are not addressed or, worse yet, promoted.

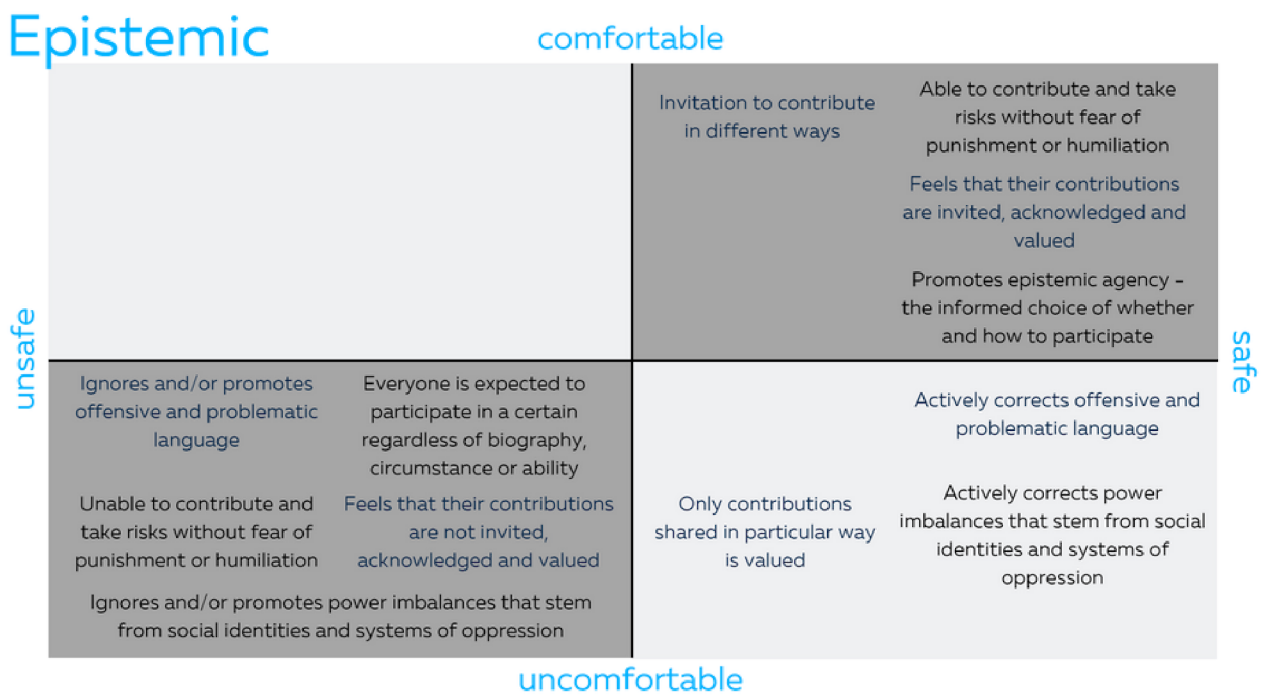


Figure 4: Epistemic Conditions for Safer Spaces

It can also manifest in more subtle ways. Consider people who, for example, experience Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria, English is not their first or primary language, have experienced emotional neglect or abuse, and have a somewhat unconventional career path. Their experiences and participation can produce different forms of interaction, perspectives, ideas, and, ultimately, solutions. Team coaches could consider these conditions during contracting, preparing different ways to engage before, during, and after the session, and creating space, opportunity, and validation for all participants.

FACTIONAL SAFETY

As we build safer spaces in teams, the outcome is that the group may experience a powerful sense of team identity, values, and language, which we characterise as factional conditions. Factional safety presents a keen sense of belonging, camaraderie, and loyalty.

A level of factional safety can be conducive to team learning and coaching when everyone feels valued and the team and personal identity are aligned. However, strong cohesion can lead to adverse consequences if the team feels threatened by outside groups, such as withholding information from others, blaming other teams for performance issues, and having a hostile approach to working with other teams. Gang culture is an extreme example.

A high level of factional team safety can exacerbate existing power dynamics and cultural currency, if not carefully considered. It could continue perpetuating alienating ideas around otherness, villainy, and pack mentality. Similarly, team members may be willing to defend the team's interests from actual or perceived threats from within the team members.

Factional

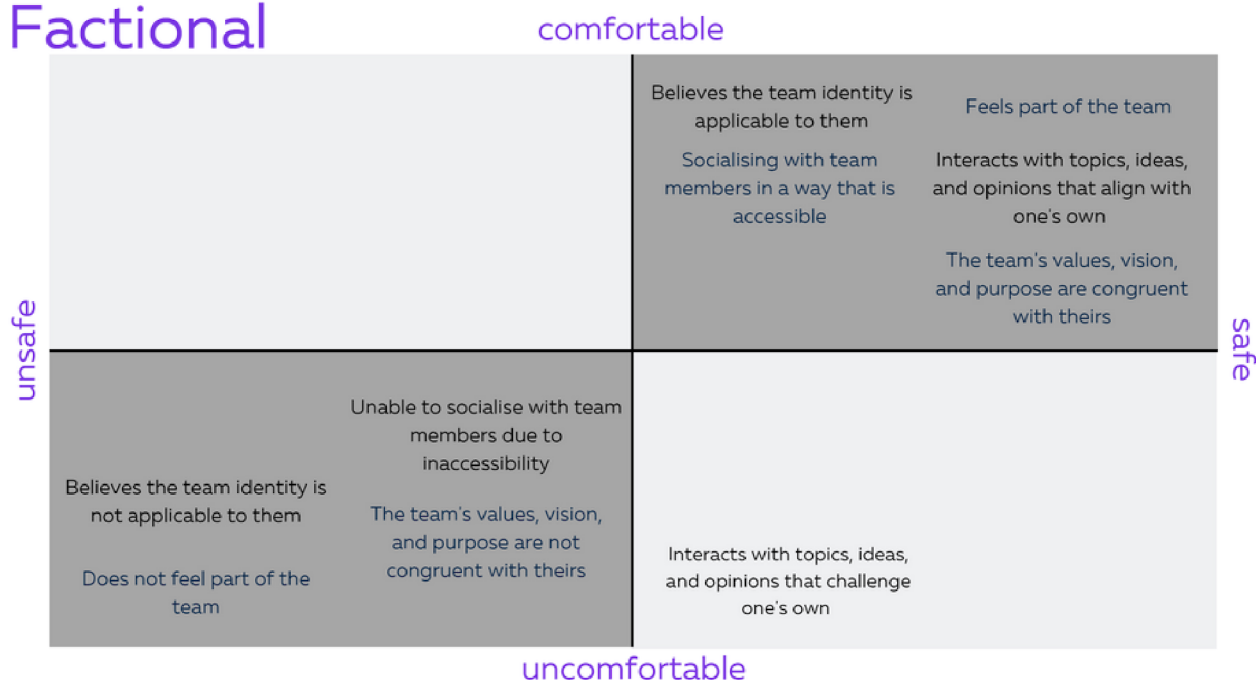


Figure 5: Factional Conditions of Safer Spaces

Behaviours may include isolating, excluding, or harassing members considered troublesome, disruptive, or deviant, whether through behaviour, views, or how they look.

This fear of being an outcast may prevent team members from presenting ideas or contributions that might be perceived to have contravened the team's norms.

Jacobs (2016 p. 157) shares that "[o]ne of the consequences of our embodied habits is that we tend to gravitate towards the company of others who will not disturb the comfort of our body. Our body can remain quietly in the background." This assertion reminds us that there is a powerful somatic driver not to disturb the status quo within a team. As team coaches, we can advocate for teams as evolving entities within their system, not a fixed and final product. A team identity formed on what they do and how they do it, rather than who it consists of, can help the team become more accessible to new members, members who do not look, act or sound like the majority, and to the broader stakeholders, communities and systems they serve, without losing or diminishing their sense of identity or purpose.

IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS

Through the model of safer spaces, we intend to help coaches consider the implications for their practice. As team coaches, our coaching philosophy and social positions will affect how we show up and what we naturally notice. It will also impact how team members perceive us and, as a result, their behaviour. Our awareness of this and, particularly, what we may miss can help us assess what might help team members move from one stage to the next as they need.

Welman and Bachkirova (2010) differentiate between power “over” someone (or a team) and the ability to be able to do something (potency), recommending that coaches do both the reflexive work to become more aware of their own power and to practise raising potential power issues with coachees. We suggest this applies equally to team coaching, dyadic coaching, and other helping relationships.

We have argued that a new model for safer spaces is needed, based on our belief that existing psychological safety definitions and models do not adequately reflect the role of power and systems of oppression and individual nature of the construct

Whilst we have discussed when factional safety could be helpful in some teams, constructing a safer space is individual. Further, individuals will experience the four stages at different times and in different ways. This raises questions of whether there is an optimal level of safer space and the level of responsibility of the team coach, both too large for the scope of this paper. However, coaches have the skills and will to help team members travel through each step individually. The crucial point is that team coaches recognise their part at each stage of creating safer spaces.

To the team coach reading this

We recognise that you may feel there is too much to know and do to promote safer coaching spaces. You may feel overwhelmed by the terminology or concepts. You may feel afraid about getting things wrong. This is normal. You do not have to be an expert, but you do have to be brave. Know that you have time and resources to learn more; this will be an ongoing journey. And, if in doubt, you can always ask: “What would be most helpful for you right now? Is this OK”? Autonomy and consent, like in most situations, are fundamental.

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Cis-gender/ Cis-gendered

People who feel connected to and present as the gender they were assigned at birth.

Epistemic Injustice/ Oppression

The inequalities that happen in the way we make sense of the world, such as education, language, story-telling, and labels.

Hypervigilance

An elevated state of alertness to danger or threat, usually following an accident or assault.

Inter-generational Trauma

Inherited and socialised fear responses within families and communities that have experienced systemic oppression.

Intersectionality

Systems of oppression run simultaneously and overlap. As such, we experience the world based on the combination of identities and systems of oppression intersecting.

LGBTQIA+

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual/Aromantic, and beyond

Marginalised Communities

Communities that do not fit the ideals of a system of oppression and, as a result, experience prejudice, discrimination, and violence because of them.

Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria

Extreme sensitivity and vulnerability to rejection or the threat of rejection

Stimming

Self-stimulating and self-soothing behaviours, usually involving repetitive movements or sound.

Systems of Oppression

Historical, culturally-embedded beliefs that are designed and maintain to benefit one group over others.

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