Team Coaching Studio

The Cycle of Safer Spaces

Challenging Conceptions of Psychological Safety in Teams

Authors: L.Chiu & S.Fox (2023)

CONTENTS

It is a well-accepted principle that psychological safety is a crucial part of allowing a team to function effectively and creating an effective container for team coaching.

Much has been written about it based on the work of Amy Edmondson (1999) and Tim Clark (2020), among others. Edmondson (1999, pp. 354-5) defines team psychological safety as "a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking. [...] For team psychological safety to be a group-level construct, it must characterize the team rather than individual members." We argue there is a paradox here. Whilst Edmondson considers psychological safety a shared construct, we suggest that different individuals within a team will each feel distinct levels of un/safety at any given moment. This is dependent on the socio-historical context, their lived experiences and beliefs, and their current mental and emotional state. We propose "safer space" as a more appropriate concept.

Further, many existing models do not adequately consider the role of power dynamics and systems of oppression in our work with teams. Whilst we agree with Edmondson (2019) that hierarchical power can be a driver of fear in teams, leading to reduced ability to learn, she did not address other forms of non-hierarchical power, such as systemic or epistemic oppression, which can have a significant impact on the individuals' ability to function to their full potential.

In this paper, we argue that the dichotomy between group and individual means we cannot treat psychological safety as a monolithic entity that either is or is not present within a team and, further, safety in teams must address the extant power dynamics. We believe safety is experienced through distinct stages and to varying degrees and lengths of time by team members. When the coach has considered and can facilitate somatic, emotional, epistemic, and factional safety components, they create safer team coaching spaces. Only when each team member has reached a certain stage can the team be considered sufficiently safe to function to its highest potential. We aim to challenge and support team coaches in how they think about safety in teams and produce a model of safer spaces that helps team coaches consider the implications for their practice.

Content Warning

Because of the nature of this topic, there will be references to a range of subjects that the reader may find challenging. 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.

We see similarities between "psychological safety" and concepts of safe spaces originating from the 1970s women's and LGBTQIA+* liberation movements, though psychological safety does not explicitly address systemic or epistemic oppression. Flensner & Von de Lippe (2019, p.275) describe safe spaces as "physical meeting places where like-minded people could meet and share their experiences in a safe environment". Within education, safe spaces can mean both spaces for individuals from marginalised communities to come together, free from the weight of representation or masking that goes with being a minority in majority spaces, and spaces where a diverse group can find comfort that leads to valuable dialogue and learning (Freire, 1994; Ali, 2017). We believe "safe spaces" more accurately describe the work of the team coaches. These definitions are relevant in team coaching, where collective understanding and solutions are being co-created.

> 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.

In this paper, systems of oppression describe ideologies created and maintained to institutionalise the advantage of one group over another. 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. Similarly, epistemic oppression describes the exclusion of marginalised communities from producing, accessing, and distributing resources for meaning-making, "such as language, concepts, and criteria" (Pohlhaus, 2012, p. 718). Systemic and epistemic oppression are the manifestations of these profoundly and historically embedded cultural belief systems. Each system of oppression intersects with one another and is concurrently present. From this lens, we can appreciate the different and complex layers of power dynamics, beliefs, and expectations in any given space.

Research has shown that people from marginalised communities are more likely to take longer to feel they are in a safer coaching space (Warren, 2013; le Seuer and Tapela, 2018; Vaccaro and Camba-Kelsay, 2018). 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". In team coaching, this may present in several ways: the number of times each participant contributes to the session, the internal self-censorship, how a team member presents themselves behaviourally or physically, and where the coach focuses their attention.

*LGBTQIA+ is short for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual/Aromantic, and beyond)

DEFINITIONS & CONTEXT

THE CYCLE OF SAFER SPACES MODEL

Following Edmondson's (1999) work, other authors have also proposed distinct levels of psychological safety. Clark (2020), for example, describes four levels of inclusion, learner, contributor, and challenger safety.

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 are needed.

Here, we propose four components in creating a safe space that explicitly recognises how power and systems of oppression can affect team members' perceptions of how safe they feel at any given moment. These are somatic, emotional, epistemic, and factional safety, and we describe each stage below.
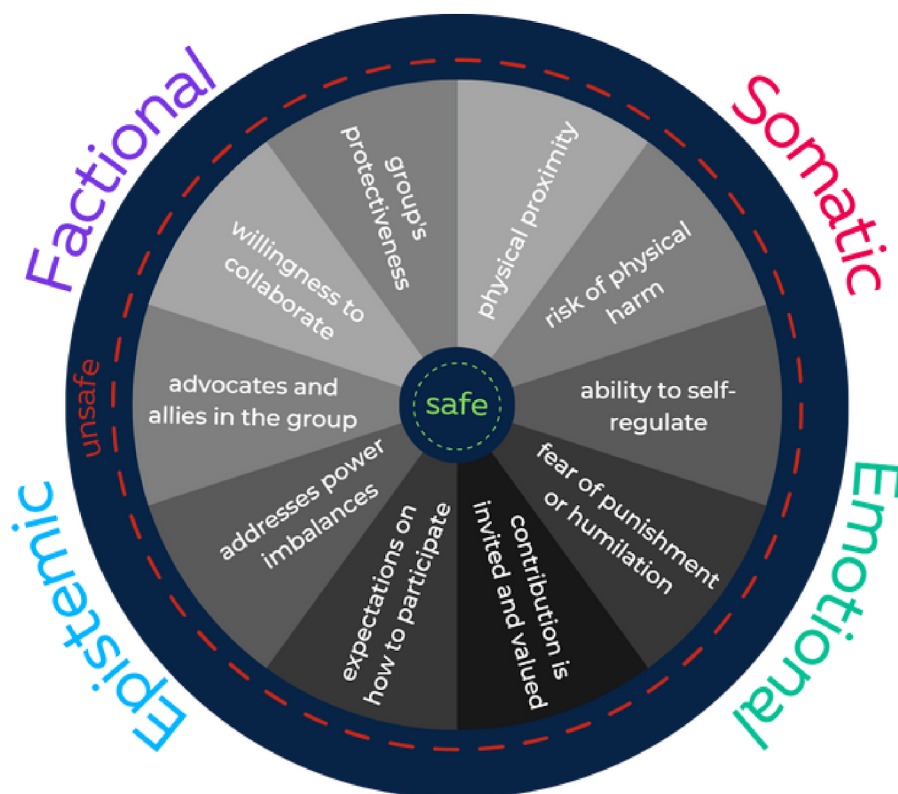

Figure 1: The Cycle of Safer Spaces

In Figure 1, we have outlined the somatic, emotional, epistemic, and factional conditions contributing to how safe or unsafe the coaching space feels. We acknowledge that some of these conditions do not neatly fit under one or two factors, which we discuss throughout the paper.

SOMATIC SAFETY

Within team coaching and other professional environments, the chances of physical threat and violence are unlikely, which is why we believe that literature on psychological safety does not consider physical or somatic factors. However, we think that it is a core component of safer spaces. At a basic level, when we feel unsafe, it can be a very visceral experience. 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 (Kuhfuß et al., 2021). These significantly heightened reactions can be manifested in someone whose experience of the world 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.

As Jacobs (2016 p. 157) observes, "[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.

EMOTIONAL SAFETY

While we share many of the tenets of psychological safety, for Clark (2020), psychological safety is a requirement in cultures that reward vulnerability. We argue that for team members who have experienced marginalisation, oppression, or harm due to their bodies, brains, appearances, beliefs, or behaviours, they may be hesitant or resistant to share 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 requires disclosure. 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 young Black man may not stand as tall or speak in a higher register, if at all, to not seem as intimidating. Someone from the LGBTQIA+ community may refrain from talking about their family or holiday plans so as not to out themselves to colleagues.

Whilst a team coach may reward vulnerability and offer safer spaces for teams, individuals must also consider the impact of their disclosures and openness in the wider organisation. Therefore, whilst Clark's suggestion is aspirational, in practice, team coaches can supply ample emotional safety by acknowledging how forced vulnerability or authenticity can be harmful and, instead, offering a space where everyone feels able to show up how they choose.

EPISTEMIC SAFETY

Epistemic safety addresses how meaning-making is shared and enables everyone to feel their contributions are valued. It originates from the concept of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), where access to knowledge and sense-making, such as language, concepts, and labels, are not equally distributed (hermeneutical injustice) and that not all forms of knowledge or speakers are considered equal (testimonial injustice). Think about who has been able to access university-level education and since when. Consider when you made a snap, subconscious judgement about someone based on their accent, word choice, utterances, or appearance. Think back to when you had an immediate, adverse reaction to a point of view, belief, or experience that contradicted your own.

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 own 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. They facilitate a space where multiple truths can be held, and differences are curiously and compassionately explored. Unlike psychological safety, epistemically safer spaces also 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, therefore without consent, 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.

FACTIONAL SAFETY

Factional safety presents a keen sense of belonging, camaraderie, and loyalty. This strong team identity can also present complications in promoting safer spaces. 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.

Similarly, in teams with a high sense of factional safety, team members may be willing to defend the team's interests from actual or perceived threats from other team members and other parts of the system. 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, feeling somatically, emotionally, and epistemically unsafe, may prevent team members from presenting ideas or contributions that might be perceived to have contravened the team's norms.

WHAT LEADS TO SAFER SPACES?

Creating safer spaces can allow people's best selves to emerge and contribute more fully by providing encouragement, permission, and safety to as much of themselves as they wish. We suggest the Cycle of Safety model offers coaches a way to understand how power is experienced and some conditions that may help an individual feel safer.

A core assumption of this model is that safety and comfort, whilst linked, are not the same. While both can impair or affect a person's contribution, they do so on various levels and to different degrees. One key difference between discomfort and lack of safety is transience. Discomfort, however tricky, will pass. Feeling unsafe stays with someone, perhaps adding to existing experiences or trauma biographies, such as experiencing direct or indirect aggression, collective or intergenerational trauma, or how their bodies and brains process and respond to rejection or fear.

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 rather than unsafe. Next, we will explore the contributing factors and experiences used to evaluate how un/safe spaces are.

Considerations when using the mapping exercise

We reflected on the relevant factors to identify conditions that might affect team members and their contribution. We mapped these conditions based on how much safety and comfort they offer on a horizontal and vertical axis. We acknowledge that the placement is solely based on our perspectives and biographies at this moment in time. This will vary from person to person, from time to time. We also acknowledge that this list is illustrative rather than exhaustive. The purpose is to offer a framework in which the team coach can consider the different factors and conditions of safety.

SOMATIC CONDITIONS

When considering somatic conditions in team coaching, we understand that the likelihood of physical violence in team coaching in organisations is low. We want to draw attention to the physical aspects of the space and self, including the physical environment and the ability to regulate the physical symptoms of stress.

Somatic

comfortable

	One's body is able to self-regulating Able to regulate aspects of the environment that affects their participation	Proximity to others is within one's own boundaries Able to participate without fear of physical violence or harm Environmental obstructions or obstacles are removed

unsafe ... **safe**

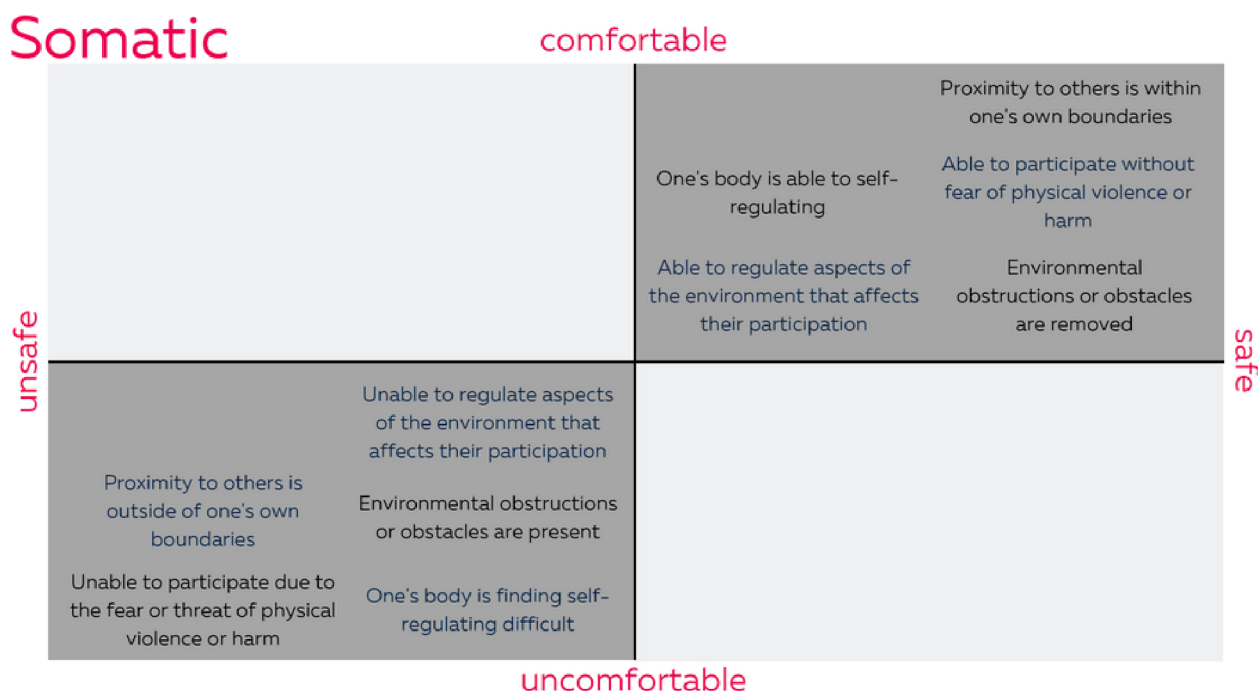|	
Proximity to others is outside of one's own boundaries Unable to participate due to the fear or threat of physical violence or harm	Unable to regulate aspects of the environment that affects their participation Environmental obstructions or obstacles are present One's body is finding self-regulating difficult	

uncomfortable

Figure 2: Somatic Conditions for Safer Spaces

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.

For team coaches to promote safer somatic spaces, consider accessibility requirements, allow the team to use stimming* tools, and adjust the physical environment (where possible), such as brightness, ambient noise, and temperature. Think about how closely people sit together, whether and how they move and navigate 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.

*Stimming refers to the self-stimulating and self-soothing behaviours, usually involving repetitive movements or sound)

EMOTIONAL CONDITIONS

This factor focuses on the emotional and mental well-being of team members through how each team member's expectations and needs are un/met during coaching. 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. Figure 3 illustrates how to introduce unexpected behaviours and topics in safe conditions organically.
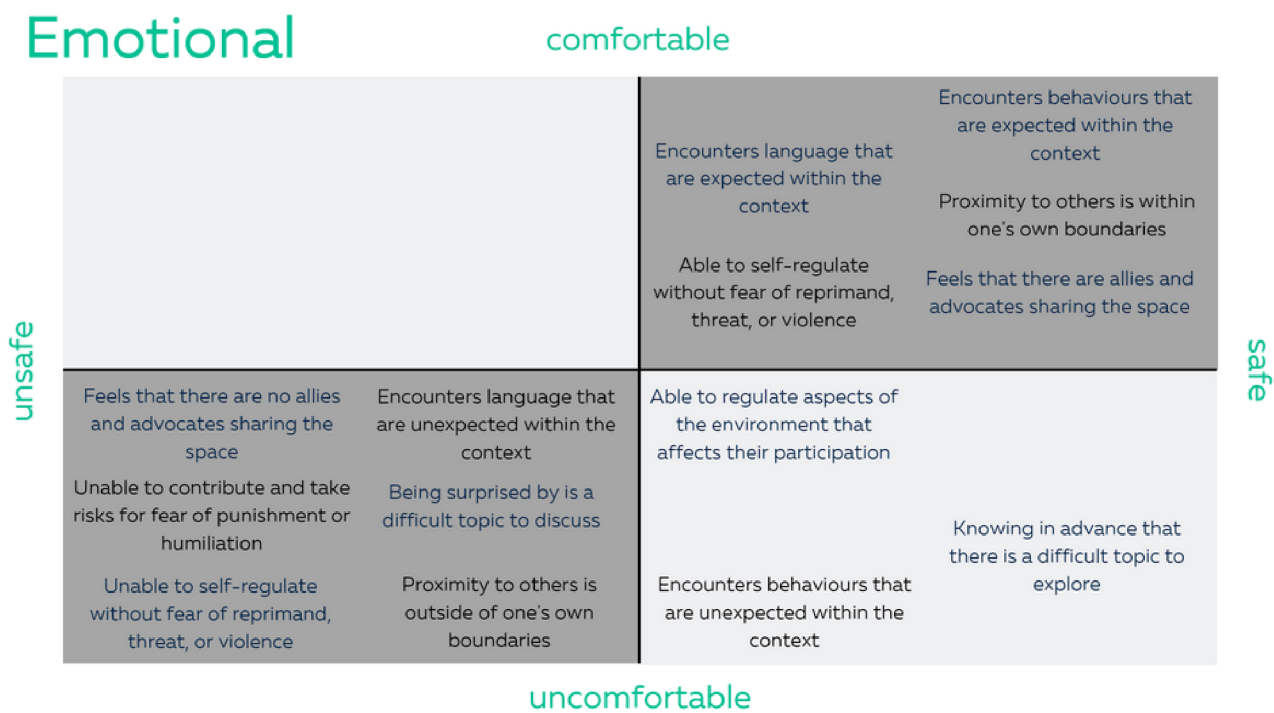
Emotional

comfortable

	Encounters behaviours that are expected within the context
Encounters language that are expected within the context	Proximity to others is within one's own boundaries
Able to self-regulate without fear of reprimand, threat, or violence	Feels that there are allies and advocates sharing the space

unsafe / **safe**

Feels that there are no allies and advocates sharing the space	Encounters language that are unexpected within the context	Able to regulate aspects of the environment that affects their participation	
Unable to contribute and take risks for fear of punishment or humiliation	Being surprised by is a difficult topic to discuss		Knowing in advance that there is a difficult topic to explore
Unable to self-regulate without fear of reprimand, threat, or violence	Proximity to others is outside of one's own boundaries	Encounters behaviours that are unexpected within the context	

uncomfortable

Figure 3: Emotional Conditions for Safer Spaces

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/or safety. 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 members who do not extensively use the organisational jargon.

EPISTEMIC CONDITIONS

Here, we consider language, meaning-making and contributing to the session. Epistemic conditions incorporate what we know, how we know, and how willing we might be to share. This might be the language we use, the beliefs or philosophies we credit, or the behaviours we deem acceptable.

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 involving how team members can contribute. For people experiencing Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria*, for speakers whose English is not their first or primary language, for people who have experienced emotional neglect or abuse, and for people whose career path differs from most of the team, these considerations can enable different forms of interaction, perspectives, and, ultimately, ideas and solutions. To do so, team coaches could consider factors during contracting, provide different ways to engage before, during, and after the session, and create space, opportunity, and validation for all speakers.

*Extreme sensitivity and vulnerability to rejection or the threat of rejection (Berenson et al., 2009). Predominantly presents in, but not exclusive to, the neurodivergent community.

FACTIONAL CONDITIONS

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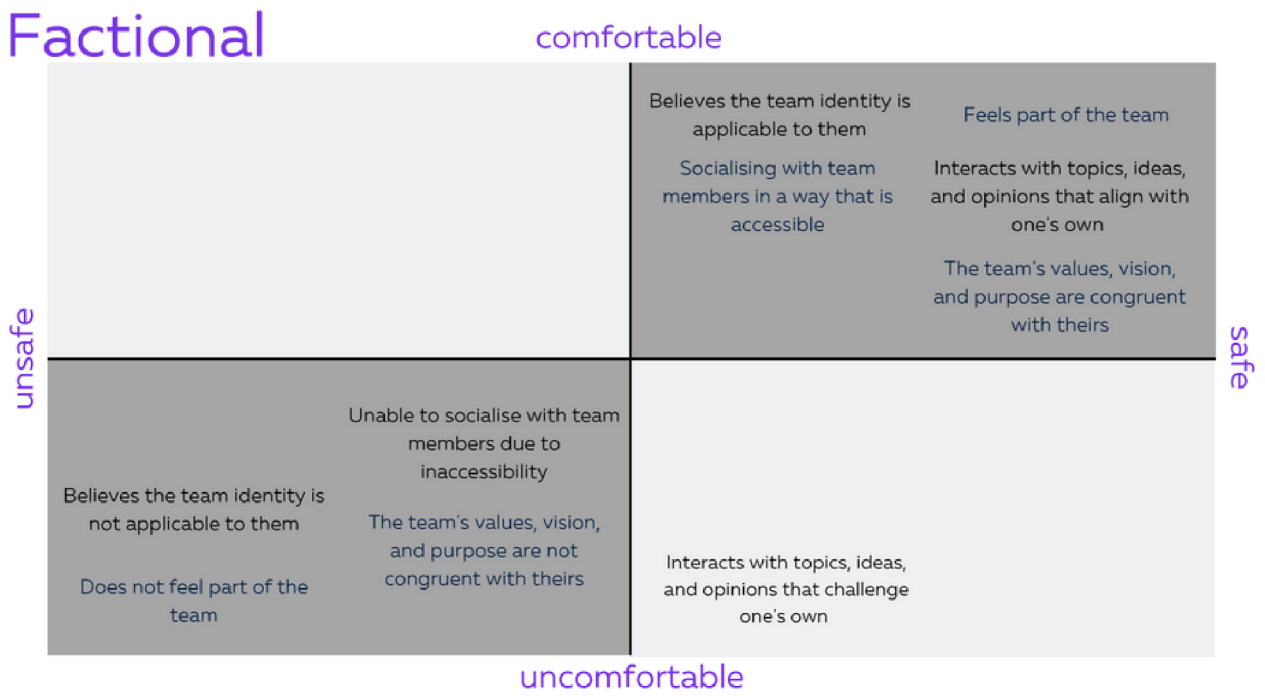
Factional

Figure 5: Factional Conditions of Safer Spaces

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, a team's factional safety can exacerbate existing power dynamics and cultural currency without careful consideration. It could continue perpetuating alienating ideas around otherness, villainy, and pack mentality.

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 make the team 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.

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

As with Cedeño and Schwarzer (2022), we assert that if, as team coaches, we aim to create the safest space possible for all team members, then we must ensure we are taking our cues from those team members who may feel least safe. To promote team safety, team coaches must understand the contributing factors to individual safety. This model may enable you 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. Only when each team member feels safe will the team have safety.

This raises the question of whether there is an optimal level of safer space that the coach could facilitate. Whilst we have discussed when factional safety could be helpful in some teams, the construct of a safer space is individual. Further, individuals will experience the four stages at different times and in different ways. Therefore, coaches can best 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.

As team coaches, we are acutely aware of the need to co-create safer spaces with our team; the coach's philosophy and stance will affect how they show up and what they naturally pay attention to. Being aware of this and, particularly, what we may miss can help the coach pay attention to what might help the team members move from one stage to the next as they need. Welman and Bachkirova (2010) write about the differences in power "over" someone (or a team) and power to be able to do something (potency). They recommend 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.

To the team coach reading this

We recognise that you may feel there is too much to do and know to promote safer spaces in you coaching. You may be unfamiliar with the terminology or concepts used here and feel overwhelmed. You may be experiencing a fear of getting things wrong, that borders on paralysis. This is normal. You do not have to be an EDI 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.

Ali, D. (2017). Safe spaces and brave spaces. NASPA Research and Policy Institute, 2, pp.1-13. Accessed at: https://www.naspa.org/images/uploads/main/Policy_and_Practice_No_2_Safe_Brave_Spaces_DOWNLOAD.pdf (on 12 April 2023)

Anderson, D. (2021). An epistemological conception of safe spaces. Social epistemology, 35(3), pp.285-311.

Berenson, K. R., Gyurak, A., Ayduk, Ö., Downey, G., Garner, M. J., Mogg, K., Bradley, B. P., & Pine, D. S. (2009). Rejection sensitivity and disruption of attention by social threat cues. Journal of Research in Personality, 43(6), 1064-1072. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2009.07.007

Carr, C. and Seto, L. (2013) 'An Action Research Study on Coaches' Cultural Awareness in the Public Sector', International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching & Mentoring, 11(2), pp. 94-111.

Cedeño, D. and Schwarzer, D. (2022). Latina faculty developing a bilingual family studies class at a newly designated Hispanic serving institution: "these are safe spaces". Race Ethnicity and Education, DOI: 10.1080/13613324.2022.2115090

Clark, T. R. (2020). The 4 stages of psychological safety: Defining the path to inclusion and innovation (1st ed.). Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. Administrative Science Quarterly, 44, 350–383. https://doi.org/10.2307/2666999

Flensner, K. and Von der Lippe, M. (2019). Being safe from what and safe for whom? A critical discussion of the conceptual metaphor of 'safe space', Intercultural Education, 30:3, 275-288, DOI: 10.1080/14675986.2019.1540102

Freire, P. (1994). Pedagogy of the oppressed (3rd ed.). New York: Continuum Publishing Company.

Fricker, M. (2007) 'Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing', Oxford Scholarship Online, pp. 1-35.

Jacobs, L. (2016). Dialogue and Double Consciousness: Lessons in Power and Humility. Gestalt International Study Center Gestalt Review, 20(2), 147–161.

Kuhfuß, M., Maldei, T., Hetmanek, A. and Baumann, N. (2021). Somatic experiencing – effectiveness and key factors of a body-oriented trauma therapy: a scoping literature review, European Journal of Psychotraumatology, 12:1, 1929023, DOI: 10.1080/20008198.2021.1929023

le Sueur, H. M. and Tapela, V. (2018) 'Conditions for coaching to contribute to the adjustment of black African professionals', South African Journal of Human Resource Management, 16(0), pp. e1-e10. DOI: 10.4102/sajhrm.v16i0.946

Newman, A., Donohue, R., and Eva, N. (2017). Psychological safety: A systematic review of the literature. Human Resource Management Review, 27(3), 521-535. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hrmr.2017.01.001

Pohlhaus, G. (2012) 'Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance', Hypatia, 27(4), pp. 715-735. doi: 10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01222.x.

Vaccaro, A. and Camba-Kelsay, M. J. (2018) 'Cultural Competence and Inclusivity in Mentoring, Coaching, and Advising', New Directions for Student Leadership, 2018(158), pp. 87-97. doi: 10.1002/yd.20290.

Warren, S. (2013) 'Coaching Gay and Lesbian Clients', in Passmore, J. (ed.) Diversity in Coaching: Vol. 17. London: Kogan Page, pp. 247 - 260.

Welman, P., & Bachkirova, T. (2010). The issue of power in the coaching relationship. In S. Palmer & A. McDowall (Eds.), The coaching relationship: Putting people first. (pp. 139–158). Routledge.

REFERENCES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper has been produced by Lou Chiu and Sebastian Fox and is copyright of the authors.

CONTACT

Lou Chiu (she/her)
E: hello@louchiu.com
T: +7747 012324

Sebastian Fox (he/him)
E: Sebastian@brownfoxconsultancy.com
M: +44 7930 98 66 77

Team Coaching Studio
E: hello@teamcoachingstudio.com
W: teamcoachingstudio.com

Team Coaching Studio exists to help you, the coach, master the skills of Team Coaching and become the catalyst for change, advancing collaboration in organisations worldwide