April 20, 2020

LOL: Good Cultures don't SCARE people

Boo! Scared you. Halloween may have been a favorite holiday for us, dressing up and frightening people. Not so good in the workplace. The now-famous study by Google (250 attributes across 180 teams) found that Psychological Safety was the common team factor in high performance. Google Study Safety provides the following benefits, individuals will

- Speak up
- Challenge
- Ask questions
- Risk
- Experiment

So, if you don't scare employees, you get the benefits of the acronym: SCARE.

Fortunately, there are some safety guidelines for leaders and team members to follow. (In addition to "Stop, drop, and roll"…) The guidelines involve knowing what provokes fear in people. By knowing what triggers fear, you can work on avoiding those behaviors. Basically, people feel fearful when one of the following is threatened:

1. **Security**: physical (cancer diagnosis), financial (job loss, stock market collapse), identity theft, etc.
2. **Approval**: your ideas are rejected, you are rejected, important people disapprove of your behavior, etc.
3. **Control**: constantly interrupted while working, requirements and structure of work continually changing, no voice in major decisions that affect you, etc.

Depending on the severity of the threat, reactions can vary from worried to scared to terrified. The solution involves: 1) be mindful of not creating fear in others by triggering one of these reactions, 2) learn to manage them within yourself so that you are less affected by them. (It's possible to remain calm when any one of the triggers is threatened, but it takes practice.)

What FCG has found with clients is that the new virtual world requires heightened awareness around safety. Specifically, these tips are useful in reassuring team members who are working remotely:

- **Security**: Many people want order and predictability. Reassure them on as many fronts as possible ($, job, benefits…). Provide additional structure, clarity, information. Over-communicate. **Think**: *they want to know as much as possible.*
- **Approval**: Many are relationship oriented, missing contact with people. Safety is knowing people care. Frequent and deeper check-ins. Ask questions you wouldn't normally ask: "Is your family okay? How are you holding up?" Active listening. Appreciate them: show them that they are valued as important members of the team. **Think:** *they want to know you care.*
- **Control**: Many have lost much control, so they may be anxious about that. Empower them and give as much control as possible: agendas, time of meetings, delegation, decision rights. Acknowledge that they have lost control, you "get it." **Think**: *they want as much control as possible.*

In normal times, life triggers us. In these abnormal times, life triggers us even more. Help each other avoid becoming triggered. How? Forewarned is forearmed. For example, if you are a relationship-oriented person (Star Trek: "Bones" or Counselor Troi) and are about to Zoom-meet with a logic-oriented person (Mr. Spock or Data)

then prepare yourself. You probably won't get much "approval," i.e. appreciation, emotional stroking. So set expectations accordingly. On the flip side, if you ARE that logic-oriented person, then use that big brain of yours to figure out which team members probably need some stroking. And give some.

When you or a teammate does get triggered invoke your curiosity and ask, "What got threatened: security, approval, or control?" Frequently people know the answer right away. Research shows that when you can identify the emotion—or in this case the trigger—you can lessen the impact. With practice, you can learn to choose curiosity over defensiveness (fear). Techniques include deep breathing, asking yourself a question: "What just happened? Why did I get defensive?" or allowing the situation to be exactly as it is ("it is what it is") and then letting it dissipate. ("Let it go") Progress is measured by how quickly you can shift from the defensive reaction back to feeling open and curious.

Summarizing, safety takes place on both sides of an interaction. Be aware of the three triggers—security, approval, control—and try not to "step" on your teammates. Conversely, know yourself well enough to understand your triggers so that you can be less reactive. In this virtual world, the need to understand and practice good "safety hygiene" is crucial to high performance. When you don't feel safe, you disengage, drop out, and don't care. Google is right: Psychological Safety underlies effective teaming.

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