

# Literature Review

## Meeting Safety Committee

*Prepared by Trustee Appel*  
February 2026

**Psychological Safety: The Board's Ultimate Risk-Management Asset.** Elizabeth King. n.p., 2025.

**To Change Your Company's Culture, Don't Start by Trying to Change the Culture.** Beer, Michael. *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge*, December 14, 2021.

**When Psychological Safety Has a Seat on the Board.** Stanislav Shekshnia. *INSEAD Knowledge*, 19 March 2025.

**Debunking Misconceptions About Workplace Psychological Safety.** Jay Lau. *Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health News*, June 26, 2025. Based on research by Amy C. Edmondson and Michaela J. Kerrissey, originally published in *Harvard Business Review*.

**When Psychological Safety Gets Weaponized.** Elizabeth Eldridge. *Arpeggio Health Services Blog*, January 22, 2025.

**The Dark Side of Psychological Safety.** Elmore, Tim. *Psychology Today*, October 9, 2025.

**Psychological Safety: The Board's Ultimate Risk-Management Asset.** Elizabeth King. n.p., 2025.

Web Link

This article makes a pretty clear point: silence is one of the biggest risks a board can have. It starts with a story about a failed merger where several directors had real concerns but didn't speak up. The problem wasn't that the board lacked intelligence or information. It was that the environment didn't feel safe enough for people to say what they were actually thinking. When boards aren't safe places for honest conversation, important information stays buried and governance starts to fail. The author says that "honest dialogue must be embedded in the DNA" of the organization.

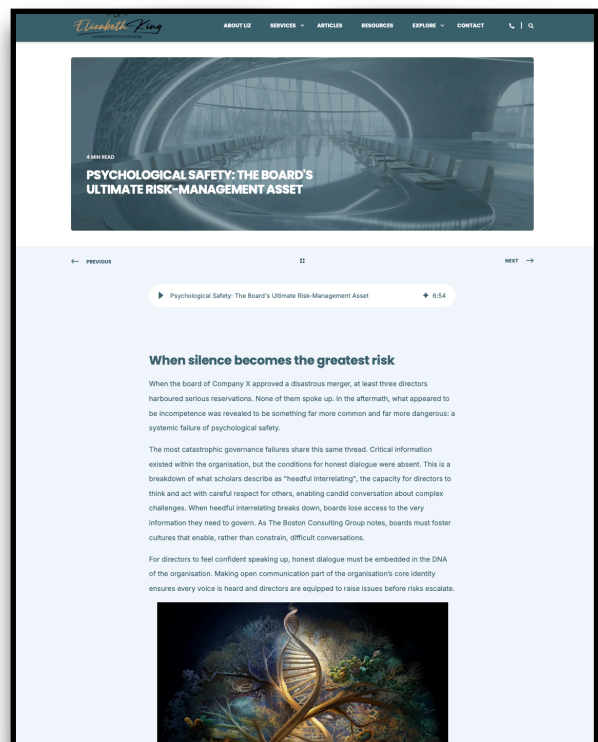
When people are worried about looking foolish, being criticized, or being shut down, the brain goes into threat mode. That makes it harder to think clearly, spot patterns, or work through complex issues. In other words, in unsafe environments, directors are literally less able to do the kind of thinking governance requires. When people feel safe, though, curiosity kicks in, collaboration improves, and those uncomfortable but important minority views are much more likely to surface. The article makes the case that real learning and good judgement only happen when people feel safe enough to be wrong sometimes.

For our Board, this article implies that silence isn't about people being shy or difficult. It's a governance risk. If trustees are holding back concerns, gut feelings, or unpopular views, then the Board is making decisions with only part of the picture. That directly affects decision quality, financial oversight, safety, and public trust. Meetings that feel calm and efficient can actually be a red flag if that calm comes from people staying quiet instead of genuinely agreeing.

It also has clear implications for not only how we run meetings, but what happens *after*. In the Code of Conduct (being revised), under "Leadership and Collaboration" (item 2), it states that trustees will:

"Consider the issues before them and make decisions as a collective body. As such, trustees will actively participate in debate about the merits of a decision, but once a decision has been made, all trustees will recognize the democratic majority, ideally acknowledging its rationale when articulating their opinions on a decision."

The Code of Conduct explicitly expects trustees to actively participate in debate, recognize debate as essential to democratic governance, and encourage others, including staff, to share their perspectives. King's emphasis on honest dialogue and psychological safety is reflected in



the Code's focus on leadership, collaboration, and collective decision-making. By requiring trustees to listen, influence positively, and empower others to contribute, the Code helps create the conditions where people are less likely to withhold concerns or minority views.

The expectation that trustees support decisions once made further reinforces safety by signalling that disagreement during debate will not carry personal or political consequences *afterward*, which supports the open exchange the article identifies as essential to good judgement and effective governance.

*See Appendix A for a sample "Safety Assessment" for Boards.*

**To Change Your Company's Culture, Don't Start by Trying to Change the Culture.** Beer, Michael. *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge*, December 14, 2021.

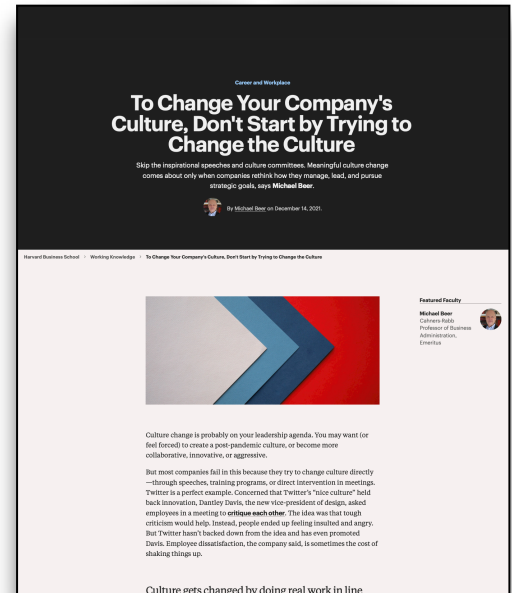
## Web Link

Michael Beer's article basically says that culture and psychological safety do not change because leaders tell people to behave differently or roll out new values. They change when the actual way work is organized. When interactions are poorly designed, people tend to get defensive or go quiet instead of learning. Real psychological safety shows up when roles, decision processes, and expectations are clear, so people can speak honestly without worrying about personal fallout. In short, culture follows structure and process, not speeches or good intentions.

That helps explain why some of our verbal interactions as trustees have created tension. The problem is not that questions were asked, it is *how* and *why* they were asked. When governance processes are unclear or inconsistently applied, questions can land as personal challenges instead of routine procedural checks. For example, a conflict of interest question directed at a staff member without a clearly established process, can feel like an accusation even if that was never the intent. That reaction is human and predictable. Once someone feels personally exposed, psychological safety drops and people are less likely to speak openly going forward.

At the same time, the research also supports the concern that it is bad for governance if trustees feel uncomfortable asking questions. *Silence is not safety*. The balance does not come from telling trustees to stop asking questions or expecting staff to just absorb discomfort. It comes from fixing the process. Clear and predictable structures matter.

When those structures are in place, tough questions could feel routine and procedural rather than personal. That idea aligns directly with the board work currently underway, including the direction to staff to develop a policy that sets out how the "fire protection improvement district will fulfill the requirement that performance problems are identified and addressed in a constructive, objective way that does not humiliate or intimidate". This approach recognizes that board culture is shaped through clear processes and predictable practices. Establishing a policy like this is an example of doing the "real work" the literature describes: clarifying expectations, creating shared understanding, and reducing the risk that accountability conversations become personal or inconsistent.



## When Psychological Safety Has a Seat on the Board. Stanislav Shekshnia. *INSEAD Knowledge*, 19 March 2025.

### Web Link

The article's big point is that effective boards work because people feel safe enough to speak up, disagree, and ask hard questions without worrying they'll be shut down or punished for it.

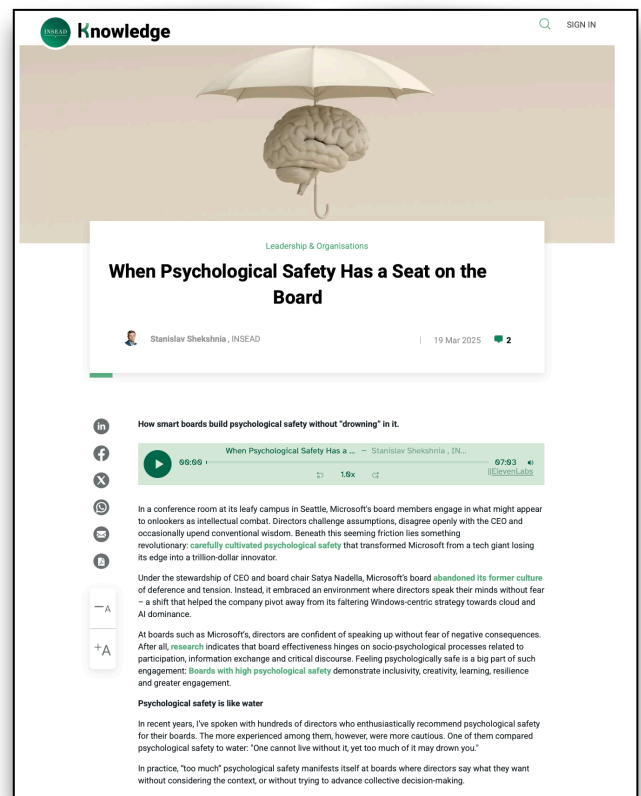
The Microsoft example in the article shows this well. On the surface it looks like constant debate and friction, but underneath that is a lot of trust and care in how people challenge each other. The author makes the case that psychological safety is essential for good governance because it helps boards share information, think clearly, and avoid blind spots. At the same time, he warns that too much "anything goes" safety can backfire if people speak carelessly, don't think about impact, or stop holding each other accountable.

The real skill is *balance*. Chairs matter a lot here. The best ones set clear ground rules, model respectful behaviour, slow things down when needed, and make sure everyone gets heard, while still keeping the focus on results, rigour, and collective responsibility. *Psychological safety isn't about comfort. It's about making better decisions together.*

Placed in the context of our meetings, this helps explain the tension we feel at times. Interactions such as trustees asking a staff member about the delay in sharing electronic copies of a document, or suggesting conflict of interest concerns or using the terms "never" or "always", etc. could sit at that fault line, depending how those concerns are framed. As the research points out, it's bad for governance if trustees feel uncomfortable asking questions at meetings, because silence is far riskier than awkwardness. *At the same time*, how questions are asked, why they're asked, and who is in the room matters a lot for psychological safety.

The balance isn't about stopping questions. It's about creating shared norms so trustees can ask necessary, sometimes uncomfortable questions, while staff don't feel personally targeted or exposed. That's the work of good process, good chairing, and clear expectations, not avoiding tough topics altogether.

The board's "Respectful Workplace Policy" draws an important boundary here, particularly on page 6 under "PSYCHOLOGICAL HARASSMENT OR BULLYING". That section refers to behaviour that, regardless of intent, has the effect of causing offence, humiliation, intimidation, or interfering with someone's ability to do their work. It includes a wide range of actions, from verbal aggression, ridicule, and misuse of authority to persistent unwarranted criticism or exclusion.



The literature reviewed in this article (*When Psychological Safety Has a Seat on the Board*), helps explain why this distinction matters. Tough questions focused on process, timing, or risk support good decision-making. Questions that imply blame, motive, or personal failure risk triggering the very conditions the safety statement is designed to prevent.

Read together, the article and the section of the “Respectful Workplace Policy” (under “PSYCHOLOGICAL HARASSMENT OR BULLYING”), point to the same balance around effective questions. The goal is not to reduce questioning, debate, or accountability. It is to ensure that those conversations are conducted in ways that preserve trust, allow people to think clearly, and keep the focus on collective responsibility rather than personal exposure. That balance is achieved through shared norms, good chairing, and clear processes, not by avoiding difficult topics.

**Debunking Misconceptions About Workplace Psychological Safety.** Jay Lau. *Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health News*, June 26, 2025. Based on research by Amy C. Edmondson and Michaela J. Kerrissey, originally published in *Harvard Business Review*.

## Web Link

This article pushes back on a bunch of common myths about psychological safety, particularly in decision making. The big myth is that it does *not* mean we should avoid conflict. In fact, real psychological safety is what allows people to say hard things, disagree openly, and raise uncomfortable issues without fearing personal blowback. It also does not mean every idea gets accepted, or that accountability disappears. Leaders can still say no, make decisions, and address poor performance.

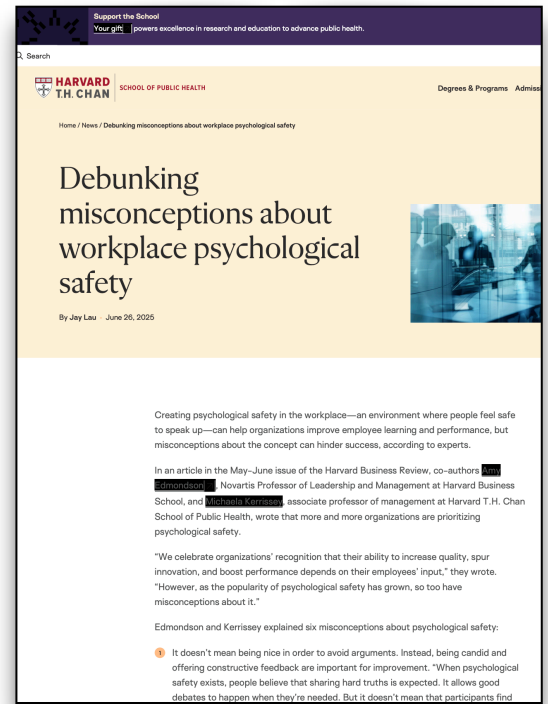
Another key point is that psychological safety cannot be created just by create Policy, Codes of Conduct, Bylaws or by telling people “you must feel safe.” It is built slowly, *interaction by interaction*, through how people talk to each other, how mistakes are handled, and how dissent is treated in real time. Importantly, it does not have to come from the very top. Any committee, at any level, can build it by focusing on shared goals and making it clear that honest input is expected and valued, even when it’s uncomfortable.

This lands squarely on what we are navigating as a board. We are dealing with complexity, public scrutiny, change, and real disagreement. Psychological safety for us does not mean smoother meetings, fewer hard questions, or everyone feeling comfortable. It means trustees, staff, and the chair can raise concerns early, ask clarifying questions, and challenge assumptions without those moments turning personal or punitive.

Bylaw 97 (currently under revision) states in item 52:

“Board members must use respectful language; must not use offensive gestures or signs; must speak only in connection with the matter being debated; may not speak about a vote of the board only for the purpose of making a motion that the vote be rescinded; and must adhere to the rules of procedure established under this bylaw and to the decisions of the Chair and board in connection with the rules and points of order.”

The article directly reinforces the Board’s statement that respectful language, relevance, and adherence to procedure are essential to effective governance. One of the author’s key misconceptions is that psychological safety means every idea must be accepted. Instead, the article is explicit that leaders and boards can listen carefully, consider input, and still say no. Disagreement, voting outcomes, and chair rulings are not failures of psychological safety; they are part of it when handled within clear, predictable rules.



In that way, the Board's statement operationalizes the article's message. It creates a framework where before, during and after the voting proceedings, trustees can raise hard questions, disagree openly, and challenge assumptions, while still trusting that those contributions will be heard, managed fairly, and resolved through established governance processes rather than through escalation or personal conflict.

**When Psychological Safety Gets Weaponized.** Elizabeth Eldridge. *Arpeggio Health Services Blog*, January 22, 2025.

Web Link

This article makes the case that psychological safety is starting to get misused in some workplaces. The author says that “psychological safety” is sometimes “weaponized”, and she argues that feeling *uncomfortable* is not the same thing as being *unsafe*. As we know, our work involves challenge, feedback, disagreement, and sometimes embarrassment, and none of that automatically means harm. In fact, some discomfort is often part of learning and growth.

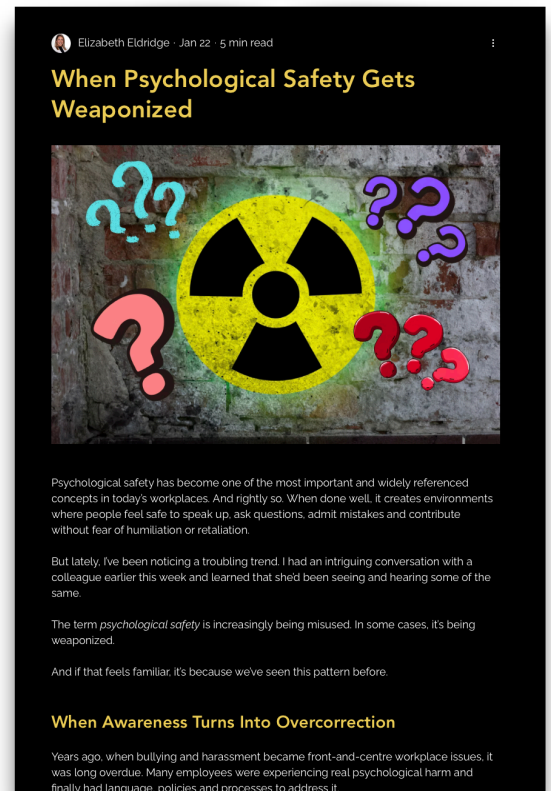
The problem, Eldridge says, starts when the language of psychological safety is used as a shield to avoid accountability or shut down necessary conversations. She gives examples where respectful performance management or clear expectations are labelled “unsafe” simply because someone didn’t like hearing them. When that happens, leaders become hesitant to lead, feedback dries up, expectations get fuzzy, and ironically real psychological safety gets weaker, not stronger.

This feels very relevant to where our board is right now. We are operating in a small, visible governance environment with real stakes, strong opinions, and a lot of history in the room. Discomfort at the table is not a sign that something has gone wrong. It could mean that the board is continuing to deal with the issues that matter.

We need a balance. For our board, the most useful takeaway here is the line between *tough* questions and *threatening* ones. Asking hard questions is part of our job. Avoiding them actually increases risk. But how those questions are framed matters a lot in a governance setting like ours. Questions that focus on process, timing, data, or decision pathways invite clarity and learning. Questions that imply motive, blame, or personal failure tend to shut people down, even if that wasn’t the intent. If it isn’t dealt with, it’s not conducive to real long term psychological safety.

Eldridge writes that psychological safety means “You can speak up without fear of ridicule or retaliation, you can ask questions without being made to feel small, you can make a mistake without being shamed, you can disagree respectfully and you can receive feedback without it becoming personal or punitive”.

The quote defines psychological safety in practical, behavioural terms. That is exactly what the board’s Respectful Workplace Policy and meeting conduct rules are designed to protect. For example, in Bylaw 97 (currently under review), the Chair’s authority during voting and the requirement that trustees not interrupt, disrupt, or undermine the process reinforce



psychological safety by making decision points clear and contained. When everyone knows when debate happens, when questions are appropriate, and when a decision is being taken, people can speak openly beforehand without fear that the process will devolve into conflict or theatre.

In this sense, procedural discipline supports the conditions described in the quote above about what psychological safety means. It keeps disagreement respectful, feedback impersonal, and participation safe right up to the point where the Board must make and accept a decision by vote.

## The Dark Side of Psychological Safety. Elmore, Tim. *Psychology Today*, October 9, 2025.

### Web Link

One of the useful provocations in this article is the reminder that psychological safety was never meant to mean comfort at all costs. It was meant to mean that people can speak honestly without fear of humiliation or retaliation. Somewhere along the way, those two ideas got blurred. Discomfort started being treated as harm. The author is blunt about this. If a workplace or a team can't tolerate tension, correction, or challenge, it doesn't actually become safer. It becomes quieter, more political, and less honest. People stop learning and start protecting themselves. Ironically, that's when trust erodes, not when it grows.

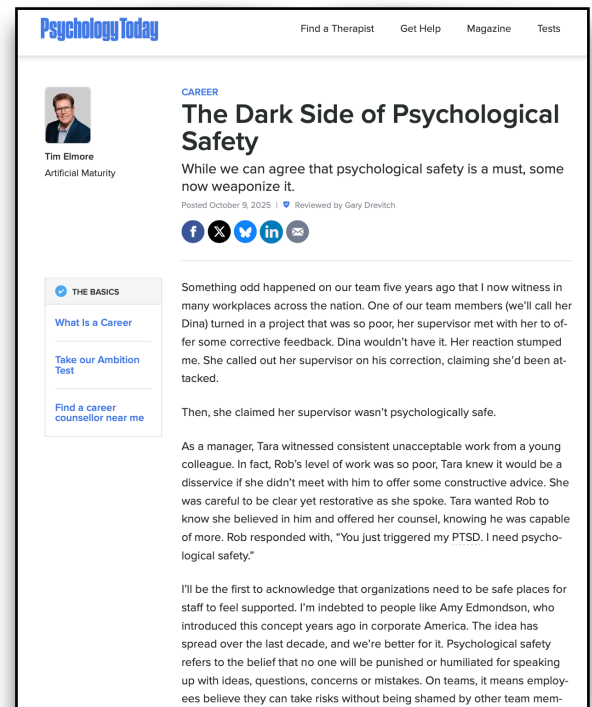
The article also makes a subtle but important distinction that applies really well to boards. Psychological safety is not about protecting people from hard conversations. It's about making those conversations *survivable*. A healthy group can say "this isn't good enough," or "I'm concerned about this decision," without turning that into a judgment about someone's character, competence, or intent. When safety is high, people don't confuse critique of the work with an attack on the person. When safety is low, even neutral questions can feel threatening, and people brace themselves instead of thinking clearly.

Elmore says,

"Educate your team on what psychological safety is and isn't. Many people have never enjoyed a psychologically safe work environment. Toxic workplaces are everywhere. People may bring distorted definitions with them. Consequently, leaders must teach and model what safety looks like. Convince the team that growth won't happen by accident, but rather by healthy nudges from everyone at all levels. Practice "show and tell" on this issue..."

The Board has already taken concrete steps that reflect this article's guidance. Through our Code of Conduct, Respectful Workplace Policy, Bylaw 97 and clear meeting procedures, we have defined what acceptable behaviour looks like and set boundaries around how debate, disagreement, and decision-making occur. By explicitly affirming that debate is essential, encouraging participation, and distinguishing between tough questions and harmful conduct, the Board is already educating itself on what psychological safety *is and isn't*. The ongoing use of literature reviews, shared language, and reflection on meeting dynamics is also a form of "show and tell," modelling that learning and improvement are expected parts of governance, not signs of failure.

The next step could be to make that learning more visible and more routine. This could mean continuing to name psychological safety explicitly when setting meeting norms, having the



Chair model how to frame hard questions constructively, and periodically revisiting expectations around debate, accountability, and respect. Rather than assuming shared understanding, the Board can treat psychological safety as a skill that improves with practice, using real governance moments to reinforce what healthy challenge looks like. In line with the quote, growth will come not from policies alone, but from consistent, small “nudges” in how we speak, listen, and respond to one another at the table.

## Summation

This literature review really just says that psychological safety is not about making meetings feel nice or avoiding awkward moments. It is about making sure people can say what they think without worrying it will come back to bite them. Over and over, the research points to *silence* as a bigger risk than *disagreement*. When trustees or staff keep questions or concerns to themselves, the board is only working with part of the story.

At the same time, safety does not mean comfort or going easy on each other. Hard questions, debate, and course correction are part of good governance. Trouble starts when questions land as personal or accusatory, or when normal discomfort gets treated like harm, which usually shuts people down fast.

The board is already laying good groundwork through clear meeting procedures, the Code of Conduct, the Respectful Workplace Policy, Bylaw 97 and by being explicit that questioning and debate are part of the role. That is a great start to helping make disagreement feel more routine and less personal.

Where this can go next is possibly being a bit more deliberate around meetings. Beforehand, it helps to name why debate matters and what good, tough questions sound like. In the meeting, it is about steady chairing that slows things down when needed, keeps questions focused on process and risk, and makes space for quieter voices. Afterward, it means reminding everyone that disagreeing during meetings has no personal consequences once a decision is made, and occasionally checking in on how the discussion felt, not just what was decided.

Over time, treating psychological safety as something you practice, not something you assume, is what lets people challenge each other honestly while still pulling in the same direction.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY ASSESSMENT FOR BOARDS

### Anonymous Concern Channel Setup

Implementation Checklist:

- Confidential reporting mechanism established
- Clear process for handling sensitive issues
- Protection protocols for concern raisers
- Regular review and response procedures
- Communication about how concerns are addressed

### Dissent Appreciation Scripts

Use when directors raise challenging questions

*"Thank you for raising that important concern"*

*"I appreciate you bringing a different perspective"*

*"That's exactly the kind of question we need to explore"*

*"Your willingness to challenge our thinking is valuable"*

### SAFETY INDICATOR TRACKING

#### Monthly Observations

- Number of questions asked during meetings
- Frequency of minority viewpoints expressed
- Instances of directors changing their mind
- Quality of debate on controversial topics
- Time spent exploring dissenting views

#### Red Flags for Psychological Unsafety

- Meetings consistently end in unanimous agreement
- Directors rarely ask questions or express uncertainty
- Challenging topics are avoided or quickly dismissed
- Same voices dominate discussions repeatedly
- Bad news or concerns are not surfaced until crises emerge

# PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY ASSESSMENT FOR BOARDS

## INDIVIDUAL DIRECTOR SELF-ASSESSMENT

Rate your comfort level (1-5 scale: 1 = Very Uncomfortable, 5 = Very Comfortable)

### Expressing Uncertainty

- I feel comfortable saying "I don't know" in board meetings \_\_\_\_\_
- I can admit when I've made a mistake without fear of judgment \_\_\_\_\_
- I feel safe asking questions that might seem obvious to others \_\_\_\_\_
- I can express uncertainty about complex issues without losing credibility \_\_\_\_\_

### Challenging Ideas

- I feel comfortable disagreeing with the chair or CEO \_\_\_\_\_
- I can question prevailing assumptions without social consequences \_\_\_\_\_
- I feel safe raising concerns about popular initiatives \_\_\_\_\_
- I can express minority viewpoints without feeling excluded \_\_\_\_\_

### Sharing Concerns

- I feel comfortable raising sensitive issues \_\_\_\_\_
- I can discuss potential failures or risks openly \_\_\_\_\_
- I feel safe reporting information that contradicts optimistic projections \_\_\_\_\_
- I can express concerns about fellow directors' behaviour if needed \_\_\_\_\_

### Learning Orientation

- I feel comfortable admitting when I've changed my mind \_\_\_\_\_
- I can acknowledge gaps in my knowledge or expertise \_\_\_\_\_
- I feel safe experimenting with new approaches \_\_\_\_\_
- I can learn from failures without shame or blame \_\_\_\_\_

Individual Score: \_\_\_\_/80

## COLLECTIVE BOARD ASSESSMENT

*Rate your board's culture(1-5 scale:1 = Never, 5 = Always)*

### Leader Modeling

- Chair/CEO acknowledge their own uncertainties and limitations \_\_\_\_\_
- Leaders actively seek perspectives that challenge their views \_\_\_\_\_
- Authority figures demonstrate vulnerability appropriately \_\_\_\_\_
- Leadership responds constructively to dissent and challenge \_\_\_\_\_

### Inquiry Culture

- Questions are welcomed and explored thoroughly \_\_\_\_\_
- Curiosity is valued over quick consensus \_\_\_\_\_
- Minority perspectives are actively sought and heard \_\_\_\_\_
- Debate and discussion are encouraged, not avoided \_\_\_\_\_

### Failure Learning

- Near-misses and small failures are examined constructively \_\_\_\_\_
- Learning from mistakes is prioritised over blame assignment \_\_\_\_\_
- Past decisions are reviewed for improvement opportunities \_\_\_\_\_
- Failures are treated as data rather than judgement occasions \_\_\_\_\_

### Dissent Protocols

- Systematic processes exist for surfacing disagreement \_\_\_\_\_
- Devil's advocate roles are formally assigned when needed \_\_\_\_\_
- Structured debate formats are used for complex decisions \_\_\_\_\_
- Minority reports or dissenting views are documented \_\_\_\_\_

### Truth-Telling Rewards

- Directors who raise difficult issues are thanked and supported \_\_\_\_\_
- Uncomfortable realities are addressed rather than avoided \_\_\_\_\_
- Messengers of bad news are protected, not punished \_\_\_\_\_
- Honesty is explicitly valued over harmony \_\_\_\_\_

Board Culture Score: \_\_\_\_/100



# SCORING INTERPRETATION

## Individual Scores(out of 80)

- 65-80: High psychological safety
- 50-64: Moderate safety with room for improvement
- 35-49: Low safety requiring attention
- Below 35: Critical safety deficit

## Board Culture Scores (out of 100)

- 80-100: Excellent psychological safety culture
- 60-79: Good culture with enhancement opportunities
- 40-59: Developing culture requiring systematic improvement
- Below 40: Poor culture requiring immediate intervention

## NEXT STEPS

- If scores are high: Maintain current practices and model for other boards
- If scores are moderate: Implement 2-3 building practices consistently for 6 months
- If scores are low: Engage external facilitation and commit to systematic culture change

*Based on research from King & Badham (2019), Edmondson (2019), and the Mindful Board Assessment Survey. Download additional resources at: [www.drlizking.com](http://www.drlizking.com)*