Psychological safety: A top priority for in-person and virtual workplaces

By Mohsin Nishat

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I grew up listening to the phrase, "You have two ears and one tongue," meaning you should listen more than you talk. And when I look around in organizations, institutions, and even homes, it certainly seems that the ones that thrive are those that listen more often to their members. But many organizations either do not listen, or their employees have stopped speaking altogether, having learned that they won't be heard.

If employees feel unsafe speaking up, the organization is on the verge of facing multiple risks, including preventable failures and the lack of overall contribution from these employees. Therefore, it is imperative that employees feel safe and respected in sharing their ideas, raising their voices against violations, and asking questions. For example, we found out far too late that Boeing employees throughout the organization had serious concerns about the Boeing 737 MAX, but no one felt safe speaking up. In fact, some employees were quoted in the news saying they thought they would lose their job if they spoke up about problems.[1] This is, of course, just one example of far too many when the fear of retaliation has devastating consequences.

Leaders have always been searching to find out what makes some teams perform at their best while some teams perform inadequately. Multiple studies have been done in this regard, and in my view, the key element that is missing from the Boeing example and so many others is psychological safety, which is demonstrated when people who are part of an organization do not hesitate in their actions since they do not fear retaliation. Psychological safety helps create a high level of trust among individuals working together and ultimately a high level of performance, engagement, and compliance.

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