HERO Winter Think Tank

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Psychological Safety at Work: What happens when more voices are heard?

The benefits of health and well-being initiatives are often captured by showing the relationship between reduced risks and improved performance and productivity. Nevertheless, this HERO Think Tank is designed to show how organizations who encourage risk taking are creating more effective teams. We are not referring, of course, to more closet smoking or drinking. We are, however, intent on examining the benefits of more talking! Given work is a leading source of stress for most of us, second only to our worries about money, what happens when we increasingly risk sharing our ideas about our work and the workplace out in the open? Are there policies and practices such as drug testing or zero tolerance approaches that increase stigma and fear at work? Conversely, are there supervisory and leadership skills that open the door to mental health dialogue and foster honesty and resolution once the door has been opened? Do teams with higher psychological safety produce better results? Might talking more openly also net out better mental health and greater employee retention and performance in the process?

Spoiler alert! The answer is a resounding yes! Why then does psychological safety seem to be in short supply in America? Gallup surveys indicate only 3 in 10 employees agree that their opinion seems to count. This sad finding comes in spite of evidence that when a greater diversity of voices are heard in work teams, there is more productivity, lower turnover and fewer accidents and errors. Could it be that creating psychological safety is the stuff of cultural or organizational complexity or inscrutability? Hardly, according to Amy Edmondson, a leading researcher in this area, who simply defines psychological safety as "a climate in which people are comfortable being (and expressing) themselves." Might the greater challenge than encouraging openness be that of getting comfortable with differences and knowing what to say when differences and vulnerabilities are laid bare?

Edmondson's findings that such a climate improves quality and encourages learning behavior at work were affirmed by a renowned internal research project at Google. Named "Aristotle", in reference to his idea that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts", the project had grand ambitions. Google asked what makes for a perfect team? We will build on this vital question at this HERO Think Tank by also asking how health and well-being initiatives in the workplace can be designed to foster interdependence, problem solving and the diverse ideas needed to improve teaming related to work as well as to workplace health and safety. Just as Edmondson and the Aristotle Project found that psychological safety is core to high performing teams, we will ask how related issues of vulnerability, empathy, companionate love and meaning seeking can be integrated into company approaches to improve well-being for all.

This HERO Think Tank is designed to provide evidence-based updates on the genesis of psychological safety at work with a focus on the role of organizational health and well-being initiatives in fostering the same. We will ask what population-level assessment, policies, advocacy and leadership is needed to create conditions for more voices being heard related to team performance but also regarding whether employees are experiencing a culture and climate that supports their health and well-being. We will ask how all employees, regardless of their socio-economic status and in spite of interpersonal differences, can thrive mentally and emotionally. Our key learning objectives and Think Tank goals are to:

1. Examine key concepts, frameworks and ideas with proven influence in creating a climate where people are comfortable being themselves.
2. Explore measures that matter: What dashboard items relate to psychological safety? What surveillance issues are germane to creating space for more voices being heard?
3. Review exemplary cases: Who is leading in creating high performing work teams where respectful self-expression is expected and challenging the status quo is accepted? What are organizations doing to design health and well-being initiatives that move employees from surviving to thriving?
4. Discuss how to overcome barriers to company and personal leadership in creating psychological safety. Why aren't more organizations embracing concepts of companionate love, gratitude, vulnerability and empathy?
5. Discuss why harassment and bullying are commonplace and the role that health and well-being initiatives can play in reducing incivility.
6. Generate new ideas and new uses for old ideas: What's missing and what ideas, new or old, are essential to leaders intent on building thriving organizations?
7. Outline basic messaging and talking points for how to discuss mental health issues at the workplace and in our communities.

As per usual at HERO Think Tanks, we will enlist leading experts as conversation starters and we will segue early and often to engaging all in attendance in disciplined reflection, expansive ideation and problem solving. Our aim is for all participants return to their organizations energized and motivated to test new ideas and exert renewed leadership for advancing health and well-being for all.