



# The Death Of The Comfort Zone?

Unwrapping Psychological  
Safety In The Workplace

**behave**

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# 01

## Introduction

*We intend this report to serve as a compass, guiding HR leaders toward the creation of workplaces where growth flourishes and success is a collective journey by enabling employees to take well-calibrated risks.*







By **Dr Alexandra Dobra-Kiel**, behavioural scientist and corporate strategist, and Innovation & Strategy Director at Behave, part of Total Media, the behavioural planning agency

**In the dynamic landscape of today's professional world, the significance of fostering a psychologically safe workplace cannot be overstated. This whitepaper delves into a pivotal topic that holds the key to not only employee well-being but also organisational success.**

As organisations strive to navigate an increasingly complex and interconnected global marketplace, they are recognising that cultivating an environment of psychological safety is not just a noble pursuit, but a strategic imperative. This report explores the multifaceted dimensions of psychological safety, equipping HR leaders with the insights, tools and benchmarks needed to spearhead transformational change.

It's troubling to see that psychological safety is a widely misunderstood concept that is often equated with having a comfortable and risk-free environment. But true psychological safety is as much about comfort as it is about discomfort and only **16%** of respondents in our exclusive research understood this.

It is within this delicate balance between comfort and discomfort that engagement and productivity can be boosted. When employees operate solely within their comfort zones, they miss out on opportunities for growth and improvement.

Discomfort serves as a catalyst for employees to develop new skills, embrace fresh perspectives and overcome obstacles that may have otherwise hindered their progress.

This whitepaper draws from a rich dataset of primary research and unfolds in a strategic sequence, each section designed to empower HR leaders with actionable insights. We surveyed **206** senior HR leaders across multiple industry sectors from architecture, engineering and building, to retail, catering and leisure, and more. Our respondents work in companies across the entire UK and represent companies with anywhere between 50 and 500-plus employees. It examines the present landscape and identifies the specific obstacles that HR leaders encounter on this journey and how, by recognising these hurdles, organisations can tailor their strategies for maximum impact.

It discusses the need for credible benchmarking against industry standards to understand how organisations fare in the realm of psychological safety and, at the heart of the report, lies guidance on how to foster psychological safety. Backed by data and experience, we unveil strategies to create, cultivate and sustain psychological safety. From leadership practices to inclusive communication, this report will equip HR leaders with a roadmap for change.

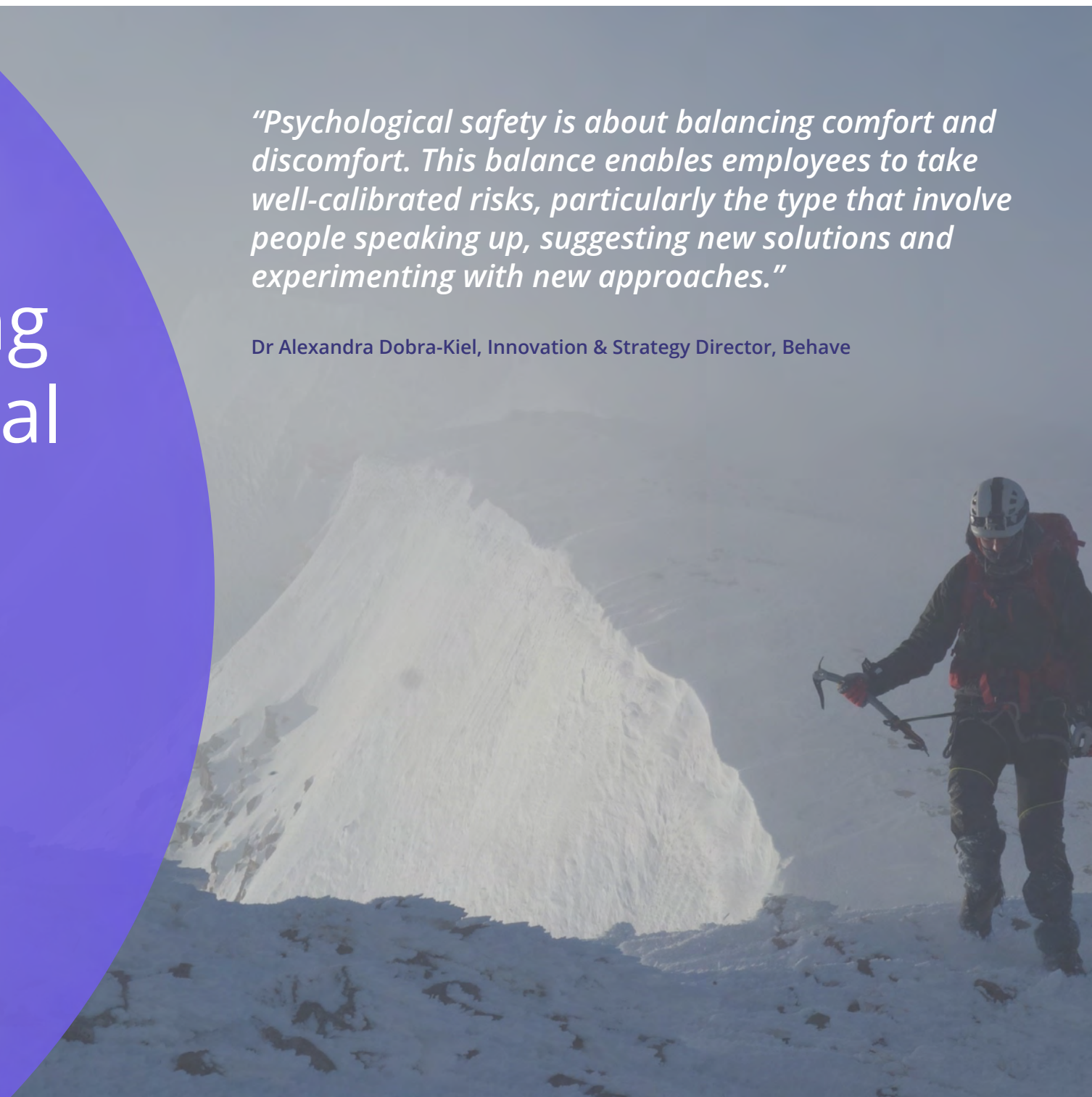
We intend this report to serve as a compass, guiding HR leaders toward the creation of workplaces where growth flourishes and success is a collective journey by enabling employees to take well-calibrated risks. We are confident that the insights within these pages will demystify what psychological safety is to catalyse a wake-up call across organisations and foster a new era of organisational excellence.

# 02

## Demystifying psychological safety

*“Psychological safety is about balancing comfort and discomfort. This balance enables employees to take well-calibrated risks, particularly the type that involve people speaking up, suggesting new solutions and experimenting with new approaches.”*

Dr Alexandra Dobra-Kiel, Innovation & Strategy Director, Behave



Psychological safety is often defined as taking risks without the fear of negative consequences. This is inherently contradictory; an action could hardly be defined as a risk without involving fear of consequences.

The concept of psychological safety has a long history. In his 1954 work, *'Towards a Theory of Creativity'*, psychologist and psychotherapist Carl Rogers used the term in relation to engendering creativity. Psychologist Edgar Schein and leadership scholar Warren Bennis defined the concept as a climate *"which encourages provisional tries and which tolerates failure without retaliation, renunciation, or guilt"*, in 1965.<sup>i</sup>

In 1990, professor of organisational behaviour William Kahn said employees needed to feel safe to express themselves authentically at work.<sup>ii</sup> Nine years later, leadership professor Amy Edmonson described psychological safety as *"a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes"*.<sup>iii</sup>

But psychological safety has come to be a widely misunderstood concept. As such, it is often mistakenly equated to having a comfortable and risk-free environment. Comfort zones might be cosy, but they can be limiting. When employees operate solely within their comfort zones, they can miss out on opportunities to develop new skills, embrace new perspectives and overcome obstacles.

It actually means developing a space within organisations to create discomfort to advance.

Sue Shaw, Chief People Officer at Total Media, explains: *"The term 'safety' has caused confusion in terms of people associating it with creating 'safe spaces'. In truth, it's far more about the combination of factors such as collaboration and participation, but crucially also, examination and the confidence to voice disagreement and bring challenge."*

Employees need to be able to talk about things – if they feel there is a risk to the organisation, or if they feel they are struggling with something.

This discomfort fosters resilience. So, when organisations are faced with challenges and change – making redundancies, improving innovation, and raising productivity – psychological safety can provide an environment of trust, transparency and open communication. For employees, this support and empathy can help reduce anxiety and stress and improve morale.

An example is artificial intelligence, which is redefining how we work and can spark uncertainty. Almost half of respondents to a LinkedIn survey say that AI unsettles them about their job security. "We have to build work cultures underpinned by psychological safety so that employees use AI to their advantage, instead of worrying that AI will replace them,"

Dr Dobra-Kiel says. *"That's why employees should be humble and vulnerable about their weaknesses and strengths so that businesses can train and upskill them; showing employees how to use AI to support productivity by freeing them to focus on the work that matters most."*

To explore attitudes towards psychological safety and how well companies are creating the right environment, we commissioned an independent survey of UK senior HR professionals for their views on the issue and why it is so crucial for their organisations.<sup>iv</sup> We found that many are approaching psychological safety in the wrong way.



Almost half of respondents to a LinkedIn survey say that AI unsettles them about their job security



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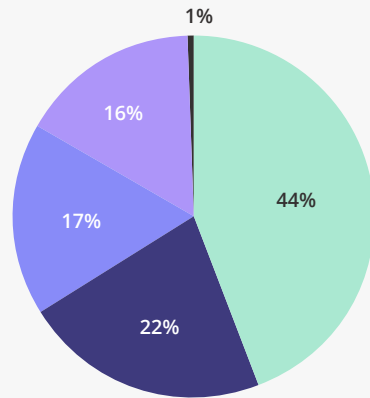
A misunderstood  
concept



Just 16% of respondents have an accurate understanding of what psychological safety means – as “an environment where employees balance comfort and discomfort to take well-calibrated risks”. Instead, HR professionals tend to think psychological safety is about employees feeling secure and protected or bringing their whole selves to work.

Q1

In your opinion, what is the primary definition of psychological safety in the workplace? (Tick one)

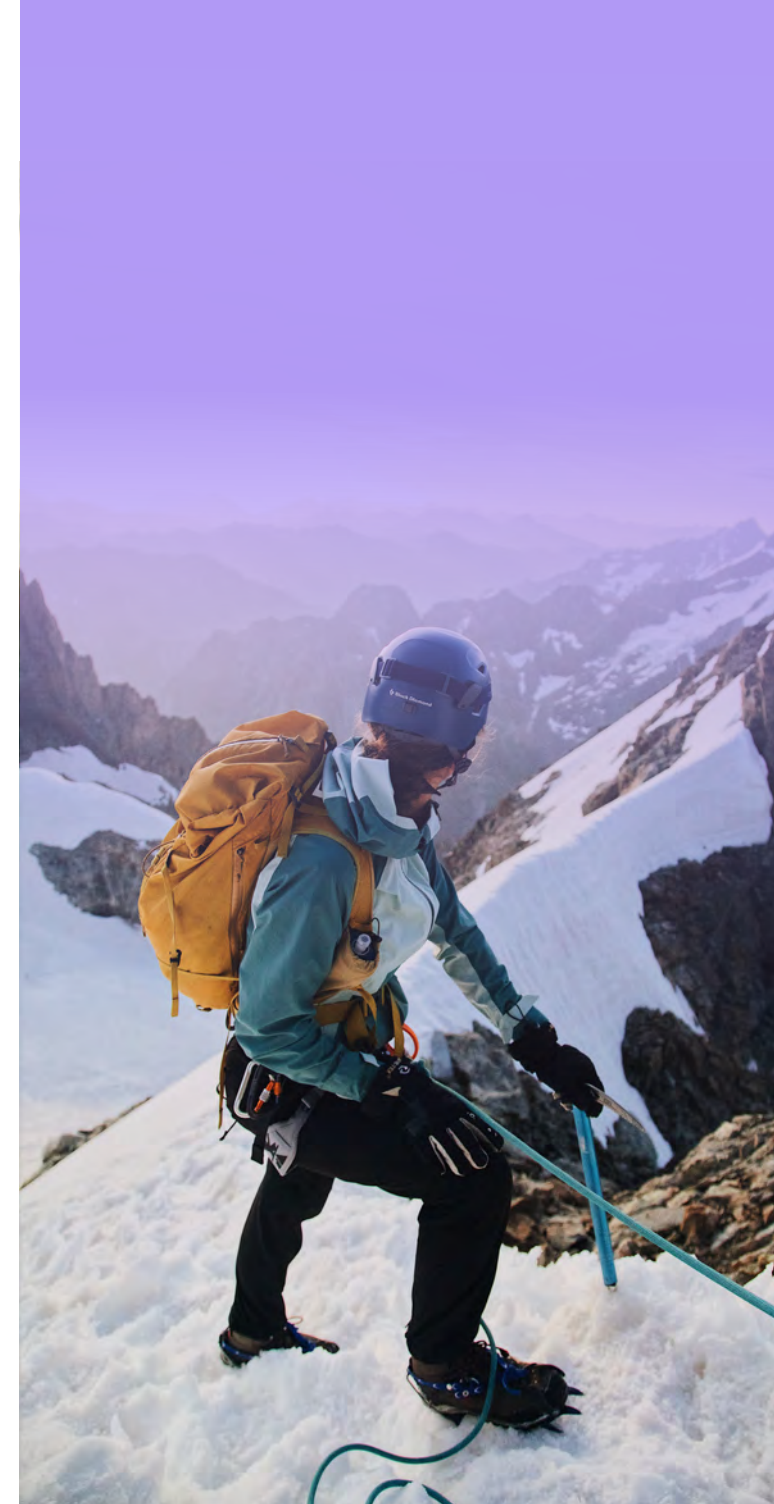


- An environment where employees feel secure and protected.
- An environment where employees can bring their whole selves to work.
- An environment where employees are encouraged to take well-calibrated risks and learn from mistakes.
- An environment where employees balance comfort and discomfort to take well-calibrated risks.
- I don't know

This misunderstanding varies across industry sectors. For example, there is a much greater understanding of what psychological safety is in education – 37.5% of respondents correctly defined it. In finance, however, only 13.3% showed an accurate understanding. Almost a quarter (23%) of HR leaders also say that a limited awareness and understanding is hindering the successful implementation of psychological safety within their organisations.

The term is misleading, Dr Dobra-Kiel says. *“In the past few years there has been an emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion and authenticity,”* she says. *“You cannot be truly authentic because there are elements of our personality that we’d rather not expose at work. Also, I am quite different when I am with family or friends, from how I am at work.”*

Shaw agrees it is critical for HR leaders to get to grips with the underpinnings of the true levers of psychological safety in order to maximise progress.





## i) Short-termism and the simpler path

Another issue is the emphasis on short-termism within many organisations and the way managers are often evaluated on short-term results and performance metrics. It is much easier – and far less time-consuming – from a management viewpoint to focus on comfort rather than discomfort. But the last half-decade has been characterised by discomfort, including the pandemic, cost of living, rising inflation and climate change.

*“We’re all just experiencing endless crises, and in that context, to ask HR directors to stimulate discomfort is quite difficult to do. But that is how we are really going to get people to be honest about addressing things like diversity, equity and inclusion, for example.”*

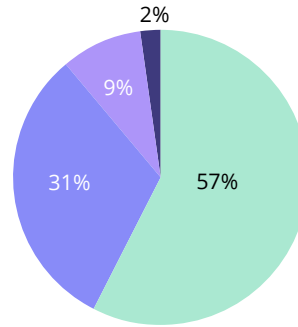
Tom Laranjo, CEO, Total Media

The good news is that when HR professionals understand what psychological safety really means, they are very clear that it is critical for their organisation’s success. According to **85%** of our respondents, psychological safety is important for diversity, inclusion and belonging. A similar proportion – **85.9%** – say psychological safety is important for positive consumer outcomes, services and experiences.

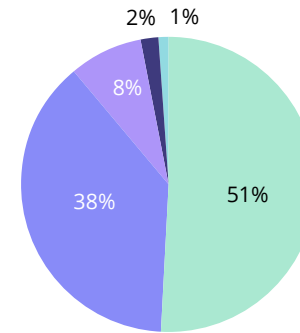
Q2

In your opinion, how important, if at all, is psychological safety for achieving the following?

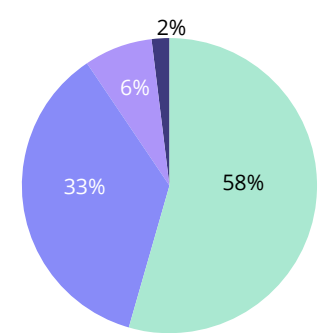
Engagement and productivity.



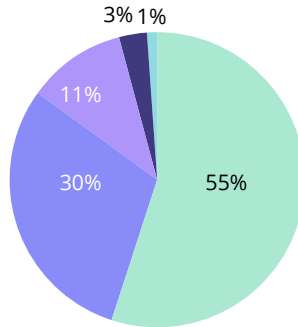
Creativity and innovation.



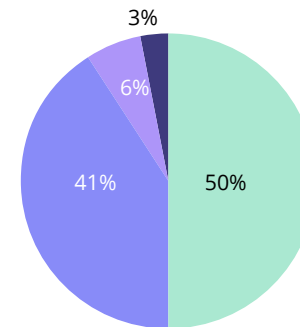
Collaboration and teamwork.



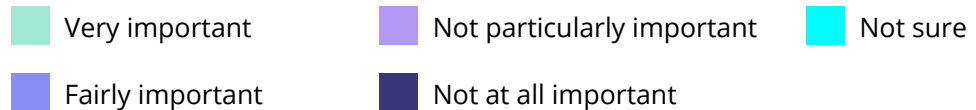
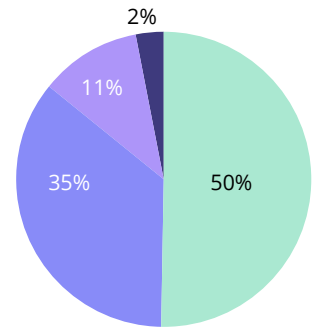
Diversity, inclusion, and belonging.



Retention and attraction rates of employees.



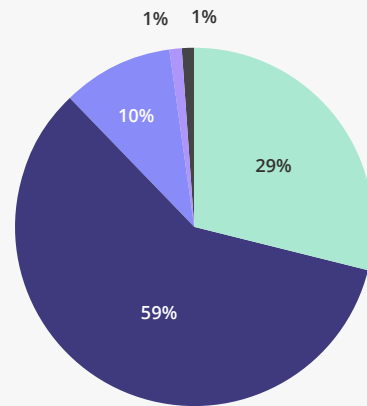
Positive consumer outcomes/services/experience.



Note: As the percentages have been rounded, their sum might not add up to 100%.

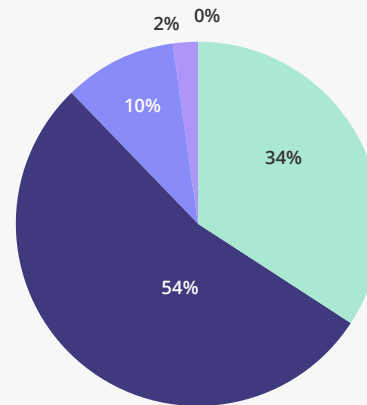
Psychological safety is considered important for achieving engagement and productivity (88%), collaboration and teamwork (91%) and retention and attraction (91%). And, overall, a larger proportion of HR professionals than not say that their organisations understand psychological safety and its significance. Almost a third (29%) say their employer has a deep understanding of the term and its impact on the bottom line and 59% say there is some understanding but also room for improvement in understanding the full significance of psychological safety.

**Q4** Which of the below statements best relates to how you would rate your organisations UNDERSTANDING of Psychological Safety? (Select best fit)



- Our organisation has a deep understanding of psychological safety and its impact on the bottom-line.
- Our organisation has some knowledge of psychological safety, but there is room for improvement in understanding its full significance.
- Our organisation has made initial efforts to grasp the concept of psychological safety, but further understanding is needed.
- Our organisation has limited awareness and understanding of psychological safety and its relevance.
- None of the above

**Q5** Which of the below statements best portrays how you would rate your organisations approach to NURTURING psychological safety? (Select best fit)



- Psychological safety is deeply ingrained in our organisation's culture and values, influencing decision-making and actions at all levels.
- Our organisation has taken some steps towards promoting psychological safety, but further efforts are needed to fully embed it into the culture.
- Psychological safety has been discussed as a concept, but practical implementation is still in the early stages.
- Our organisation has not yet taken concrete steps to embed psychological safety, and it is not prioritised in our workplace culture.
- None of the above

*ii) The discomfort gap*

Despite most organisations and HR leaders understanding why psychological safety is so important – once the term is fully and accurately understood – there is still a lag on full implementation. Almost two-thirds (65.5%) say that psychological safety is not deeply ingrained into their organisation's culture.



There are several reasons for this. A lack of leadership support and commitment, a shortage of measurement and problems nurturing a culture of psychological safety put organisations at risk.

*“Comfort often stifles innovation,”* says Dr Dobra-Kiel. *“New ideas and breakthroughs frequently emerge when individuals are willing to step into discomfort and challenge existing norms.”*

She adds that employees confined to their comfort zones may become disengaged or bored with their work too, resulting in reduced motivation, creativity and overall job satisfaction and says:

*“Psychological safety is about keeping people and businesses stretching their comfort zones to drive both personal and company growth. There’s a huge opportunity to lean into this untapped area of discomfort and reap the benefits of psychological safety.”*

This is their opportunity to do so.

*“New ideas and breakthroughs frequently emerge when individuals are willing to step into discomfort and challenge existing norms.”*

Dr Alexandra Dobra-Kiel





04

# Challenges in measuring psychological safety



*“Often, organisations rely on one method to audit psychological safety. It’s not the right way; psychological safety is a very nuanced concept and you need to use a layered methodology to measure it.”*

Dr Alexandra Dobra-Kiel, Innovation & Strategy Director, Behave

According to Shaw, the first step a HR professional should make in understanding psychological safety is describing what it looks like in their organisation.

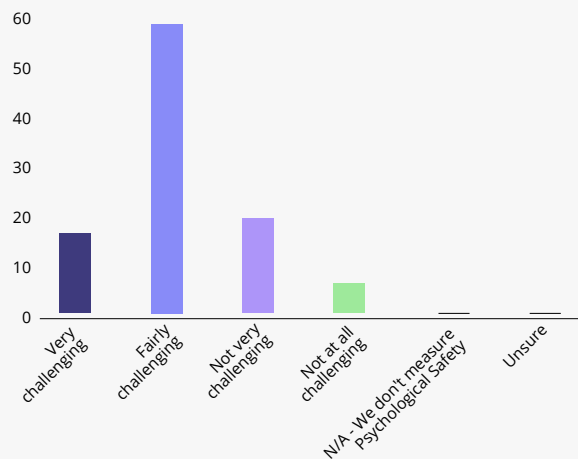


The most used method for measuring psychological safety is observation and feedback (37%)

*“If you are starting from scratch you need to start with an assessment of the state of play,” she says. “You need to engage people in understanding how employees are feeling about the business they are working in.”*

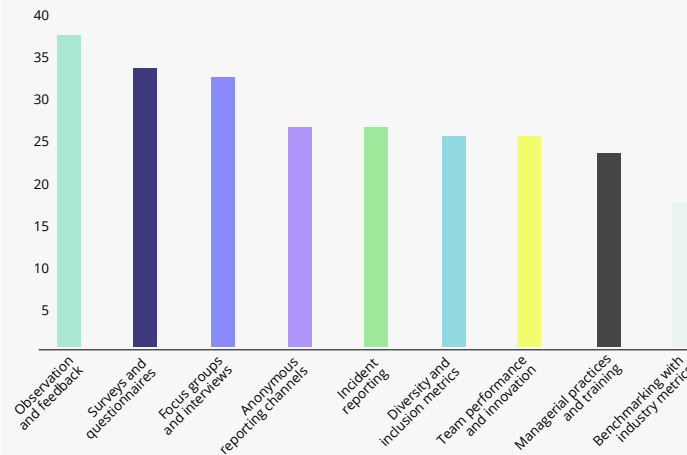
However most of our respondents (73.8%) find measuring psychological safety in their organisations a challenge. More than a quarter (27%) say that difficulty measuring the impact of initiatives is one of the main obstacles to implementing psychological safety in their organisation.

**Q6.** How challenging, if at all, is it to measure Psychological Safety in your organisation?



**Q6b.** How do you mainly measure Psychological Safety in your organisation?

[Choose up to three]



The most used method for measuring psychological safety is observation and feedback (37%), followed by surveys and questionnaires (33%) and focus groups and interviews (32%). Slightly lower proportions use incident reporting and anonymous channels and managerial practices and training.

But only 17% actually benchmark against industry metrics.

The fact that there is a high rate of observation within companies and a low rate of benchmarking could indicate that HR professionals are relying more on anecdotal evidence to measure psychological safety. Given that more than 90% agree it is important for retention and 86% agree it's important for customer outcomes, this is a concern.

Dr Dobra-Kiel recommends surveys, combined with ethnography – observing the behaviour of employees at work – and methods like digital diaries of employees. These come with their own challenges and she warns: *“It starts with being fully transparent about what the survey is there to measure. Organisations can overcome this by providing a clear definition of what psychological safety is.”*

They can use random sampling when selecting respondents, to ensure that a diverse and representative group of employees participates in the survey. This can help mitigate selection bias too. Organisations can also use different scales, not just the Likert scale – in which respondents answer questions on a symmetric scale. *“And repeating the survey is crucial,”* Dr Dobra-Kiel adds.



Sue Shaw says organisations should aim for an 80% response rate on surveys.

*"If you're achieving a 50% fill rate, you're only getting half of the story. You've got to be mindful of the integrity of your data. But then surveys only go so far – if you're just getting data, you're missing the storytelling."*

It's important to ensure that the survey results are not linked in any way to incentives or performance metrics and note that over time the score may go down, simply because employees have a much better understanding about what is being surveyed.

When it comes to ethnography, the challenge is that an observer's presence will affect the behaviour of the employee being observed. Using a third party can help avoid this. Organisations would also need to create a non-judgemental environment in which they emphasise that the purpose is to gather honest feedback to improve the work environment and not to evaluate individual performance. And they must make it clear that there will be no negative consequences for expressing concerns or criticism.

*"It's critical to go beyond basic job satisfaction scores and standard engagement questions in order to truly delve into the specific areas that unwrap psychological safety. Ask questions about whether employees feel safe to show vulnerability, challenge without repercussions and flag concerns. Then put in place targeted nudges that shift behaviour, measure quarterly and tweak accordingly. Finally, measure the output – productivity, retention, and any shifts in equity, diversity and inclusion relating to a sense of belonging."*

Sue Shaw, Chief People Officer, Total Media



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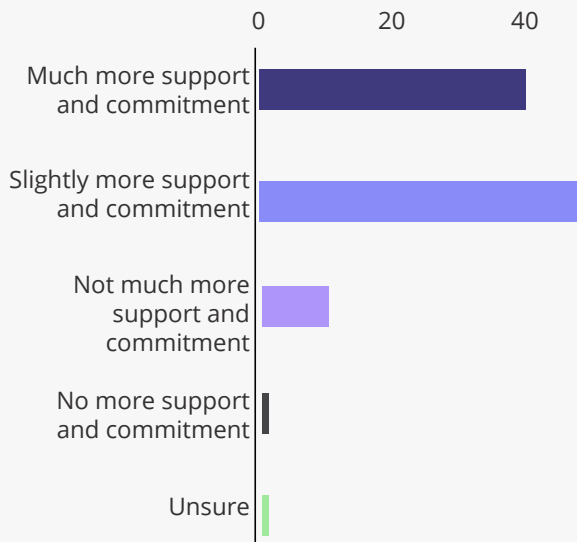
# Challenges in nurturing psychological safety





Leadership buy-in and communications are critical for psychological safety but 88% of respondents believe more support and commitment is needed from the leadership within their organisations. Again, the finance sector appears to have a particular issue, with 46.7% of HR leaders surveyed saying that much more support is needed.

**Q3** How much more support and commitment, if any, is needed from leadership in promoting psychological safety in your organisation?

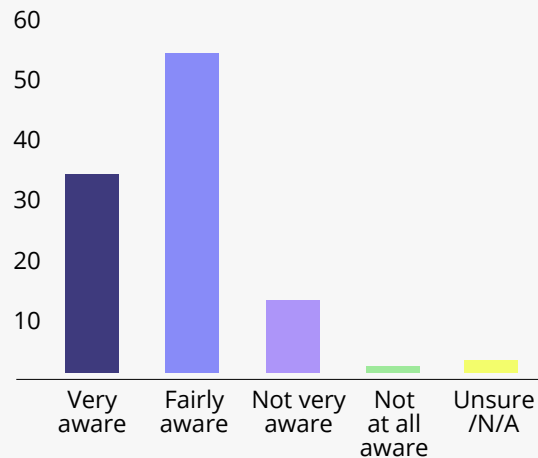


The Financial Conduct Authority brought in the Consumer Duty for financial services customers in July 2023, which means firms should be **“open and honest, avoid causing foreseeable harm and support [consumers] to pursue [their] financial goals”**. HR professionals recognise that positive consumer outcomes are linked to psychological safety for employees. **“The fact that the financial services industry is lagging can no longer be an option,”** Dr Dobra-Kiel adds.

### i) Creating better communication

Another issue is that organisations are not necessarily very good at communicating aspects of their cultures that demonstrate psychological safety. Employees are aware of resources and support systems for fostering psychological safety, but just a third (32.5%) of HR leaders commit to their employees being very aware.

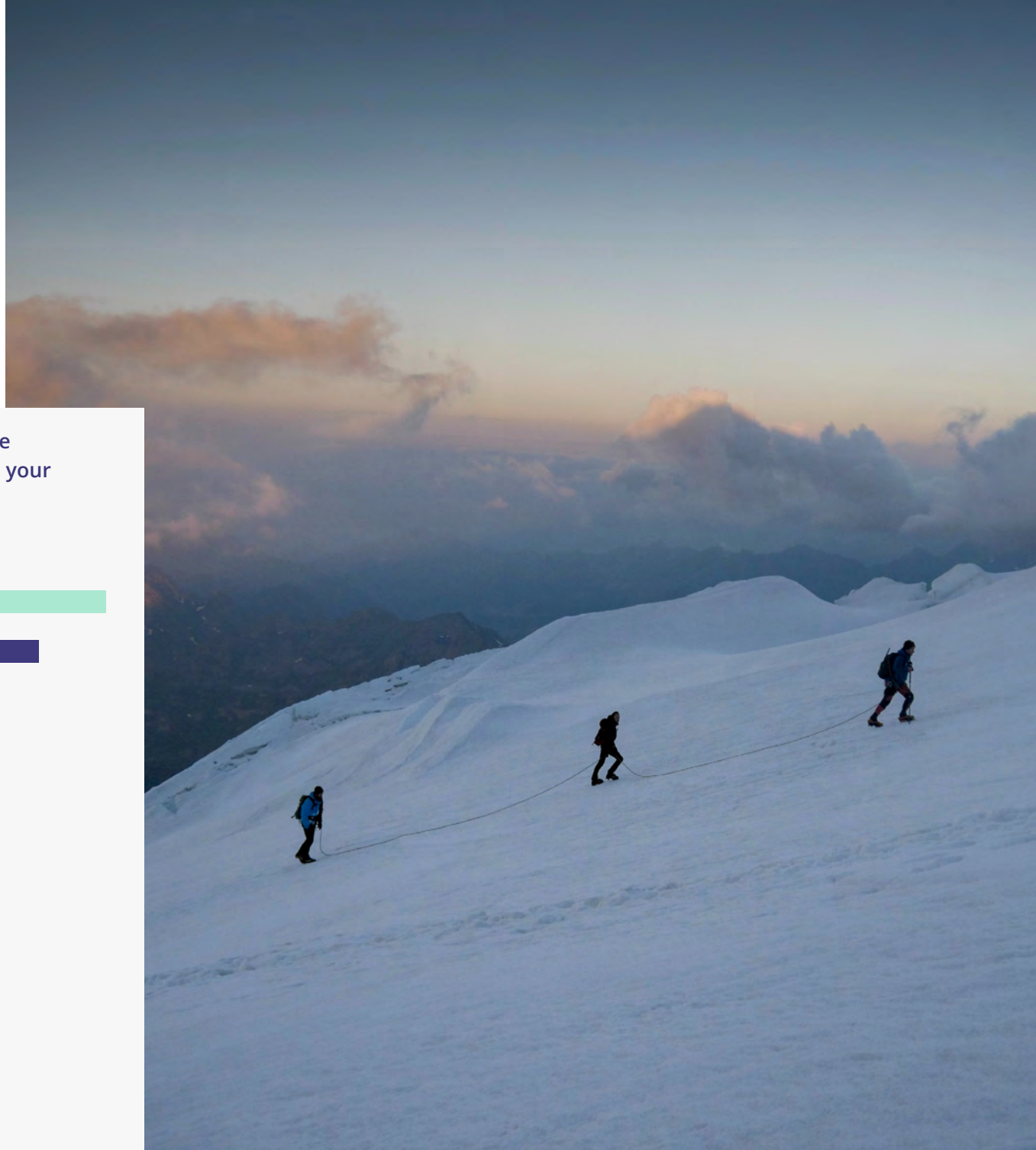
**Q7** To what extent do you think employees are aware of the available resources and support systems for fostering psychological safety, if at all?



If an organisation has identified a gap in communications, for example, junior staff say they don't feel safe to articulate a problem, this can be addressed through workshops, training, coaching and mentoring of managers and employees. This is the easier part to implement, as Shaw points out.

**“The other side of it is to be brave about dealing with toxic behaviour. So, if you see behaviour that butts up against psychological safety pillars, like the people who create an environment of fear, shy away from feedback, are gossipers or quick to blame others, for example, you need to tackle that head on.”**

Our respondents perceive a broad range of obstacles in their organisations which hinder the successful implementation of psychological safety. Nearly a quarter (23%) of HR managers say resistance to change from employees and management and 21% say fear of reprisal or retaliation for speaking up are problems. An absence of clear guidelines for providing constructive feedback is an issue for 19% of respondents, and legal and compliance concerns influencing communication is a problem for 17% of respondents.



Q8

What do you perceive as the main obstacles hindering the successful implementation of psychological safety within your organisation, if any? (Select up to three)





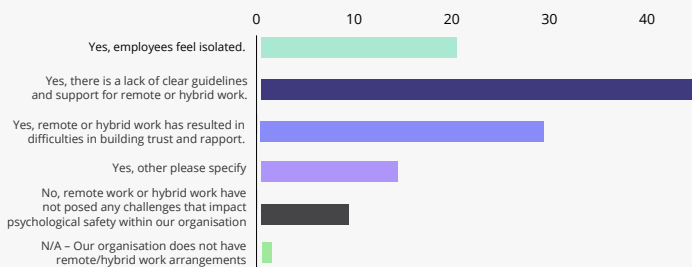
## ii) The WFH challenge

Another issue is remote working, which most organisations have been forced to embrace very quickly during the pandemic. HR leaders say remote working is the biggest barrier to psychological safety in the workplace – nearly a third (31.6%) believe it is a key barrier. And nearly half (44.7%) say that there is a lack of clear guidelines and support for remote or hybrid work, suggesting the problem may be support, rather than remote working itself.



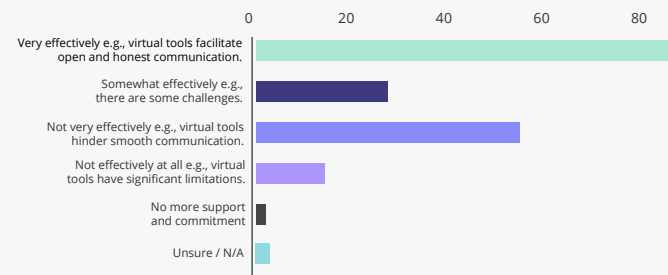
(44.7%) say that there is a lack of clear guidelines and support for remote or hybrid work, suggesting the problem may be support, rather than remote working itself.

**Q10** Are there any challenges related to remote work or hybrid work arrangements that impact psychological safety within your organisation? (Tick all that apply)



Three-quarters (76.7%) agree there are clear issues related to remote work and hybrid working that have an impact on psychological safety in their organisation. However, virtual communication and collaboration tools help tackle this, with 81.1% saying they are effective in helping facilitate open and honest communication.

**Q9** How effectively, if at all, do virtual communication and collaboration tools support psychological safety within your team?



*“It’s important to acknowledge that organisations have moved to hybrid working at record pace with huge enthusiasm, but actually with limited organisational capability to support it, so we’re all learning on the job,”* Laranjo says. *“And it’s important to recognise that the challenges of psychological safety are probably amplified with an online context.”*

One example is mixed meetings where attendees online are ignored at the expense of those physically in the meeting room. *“Body language is a really big thing as well. It’s important that we are inviting equal participation,”* he adds.

Communication tools that have grown in use as hybrid working has grown bring their own challenges too. Laranjo highlights how tools like Slack and WhatsApp have blurred boundaries. *“A lot of the behaviours people adopt mimic their personal communication style and they bring substantive risks. They can come off as very abrupt, casual or engage in banter that’s inappropriate,”* he says. *“It’s about creating policies that set clear boundaries. For example, imagine you’re emailing a client or external company, rather than chatting to a colleague – that way you won’t go too far wrong.”*

At a more basic level, HR leaders will struggle to nurture psychological safety if they fail to prioritise what needs addressing in their organisations. They also need to link psychological safety back to the organisation’s constraints and objectives; it’s not an aim on its own.

06

# Embracing the death of the comfort zone

*"People tend to resist change and pushing them out of their comfort zones can lead to resistance and conflict. Managers may prefer to avoid this by sticking to what's familiar and comfortable."*

Dr Alexandra Dobra-Kiel, Innovation & Strategy Director, Behave



It's clear that now, more than ever, true psychological safety needs to be understood and embedded in companies' cultural DNA. Comfort is necessary for employees at work and comfort zones offer a lot of perceived advantages for employees and managers.

*"Comfort zones represent a familiar and predictable space where individuals feel safe because they know what to expect,"* says Dr Dobra-Kiel. *"Reducing the fear of judgement is particularly important given that humans are social animals. Deviating from the norms established by the social group could have meant reduced chances of survival."*

Comfort zones are inherently predictable and stable, which gives managers the consistency and reliability they prioritise in their operations. When things are comfortable, it's easier to plan and execute tasks without unexpected disruptions.

And when employees are working within their comfort zones, they tend to be more efficient because they are skilled in their tasks and processes. This efficiency can be reassuring for managers who want to meet deadlines and achieve targets with minimal friction.

But psychological safety is as much about discomfort as it is about comfort and when individuals are willing to embrace the former, a true culture of psychological safety emerges. Discomfort serves as a catalyst for organisations, allowing employees to develop new skills, embrace fresh perspectives – including by questioning certainties – and overcome obstacles.

Ultimately, organisations with strong cultures of psychological safety possess three key elements: clear organisational values and expectations (including transparency and accountability); leadership commitment; and training and education.



CLEAR  
ORGANISATIONAL  
VALUES AND  
EXPECTATIONS

LEADERSHIP  
COMMITMENT

TRAINING AND  
EDUCATION



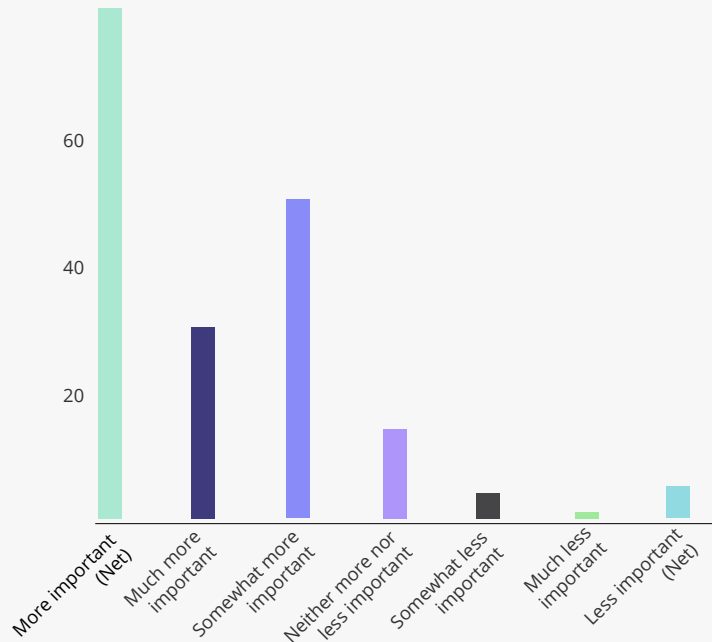
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# Next steps for HR leaders

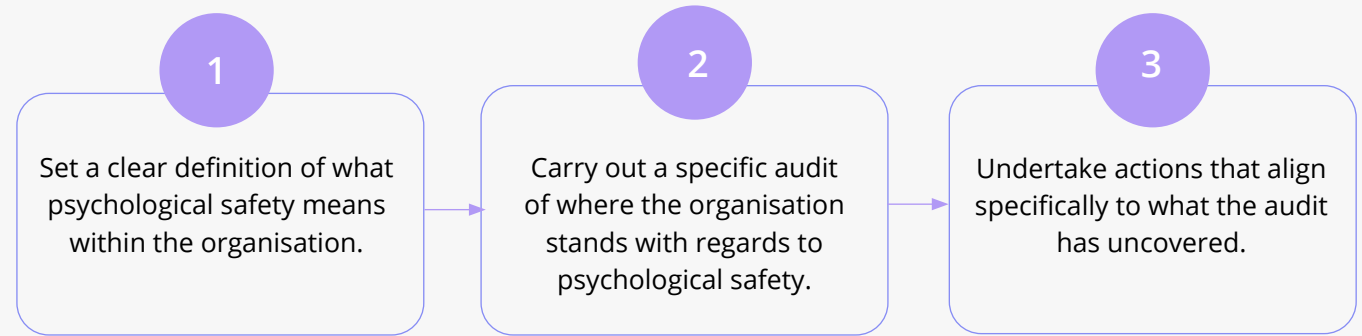


More than 80% of HR leaders believe that psychological safety is going to become more important for organisations. This rises to 88.9% in organisations with more than 500 employees, suggesting that the bigger brands will lead the change on psychological safety.

**Q11** Over the coming years, do you see psychological safety becoming more or less important for organisations?



For the HR leader looking to embed psychological safety in their organisation, there are three crucial steps:



*“It’s about education, auditing and change,”* says Laranjo. Behave’s behavioural science solution Reveal-EX™ is a clear way of identifying the component parts of psychological safety and why they are important to organisations. It describes how comfort and discomfort are balanced within organisations to help them take well-calibrated risks.

*“Reveal-EX™ shows HR leaders what psychological safety is and why it is important across a variety of areas, from improving engagement and productivity, collaboration, teamwork and culture, to addressing diversity, inclusion and belonging and improving recruitment and retention,”* Laranjo adds. *“If an organisation is better at taking risks, then it’s better able to address each of those things.”*

*“For example, one of the areas that you often see on the discomfort side is that companies need more vulnerability, both within teams and within leaders,”*

Laranjo says. *“Where you see low vulnerability is where you see leaders operating with continual confirmation bias, either at an organisational or individual level. And it starts with them constantly reinforcing their own opinions.”*

Tactical interventions to address this would include things like neutral factfinding – where a leader poses a question and their team finds the answers. This allows the leader to demonstrate their own vulnerability, by showing their team that they don’t know everything.

It’s also crucial for HR leaders to benchmark their organisations. Selecting peer organisations and identifying and exchanging best practice can help HR teams to understand how embedded psychological safety is in their organisation. Looking to those organisations that are similar in size, industry and structure, for talent retention, productivity, innovation levels and other metrics will help.



Dr Dobra-Kiel adds that engaging with different HR professionals across the peer group to exchange insights and ideas can help. ***“For example, if one financial services organisation has an issue with its culture, that often means that it needs regulatory attention and, like a snowball, the whole sector comes under more attention.”***

She suggests organisations align their short, medium and long-term objectives to create psychological safety. ***“In the short term, this means devising practical solutions specifically tailored for the teams, addressing critical aspects of psychological safety,”*** she says. ***“Medium term, organisations should facilitate alignment on a shared definition of psychological safety, to establish desired outcomes that resonate with their organisational values and aspirations.”***

***“For the longer term, they must design a robust framework that paves the way for sustained psychological safety across the entire organisation.”*** Ultimately, this will create a fertile ground for continuous growth and purposeful transformation within organisations.

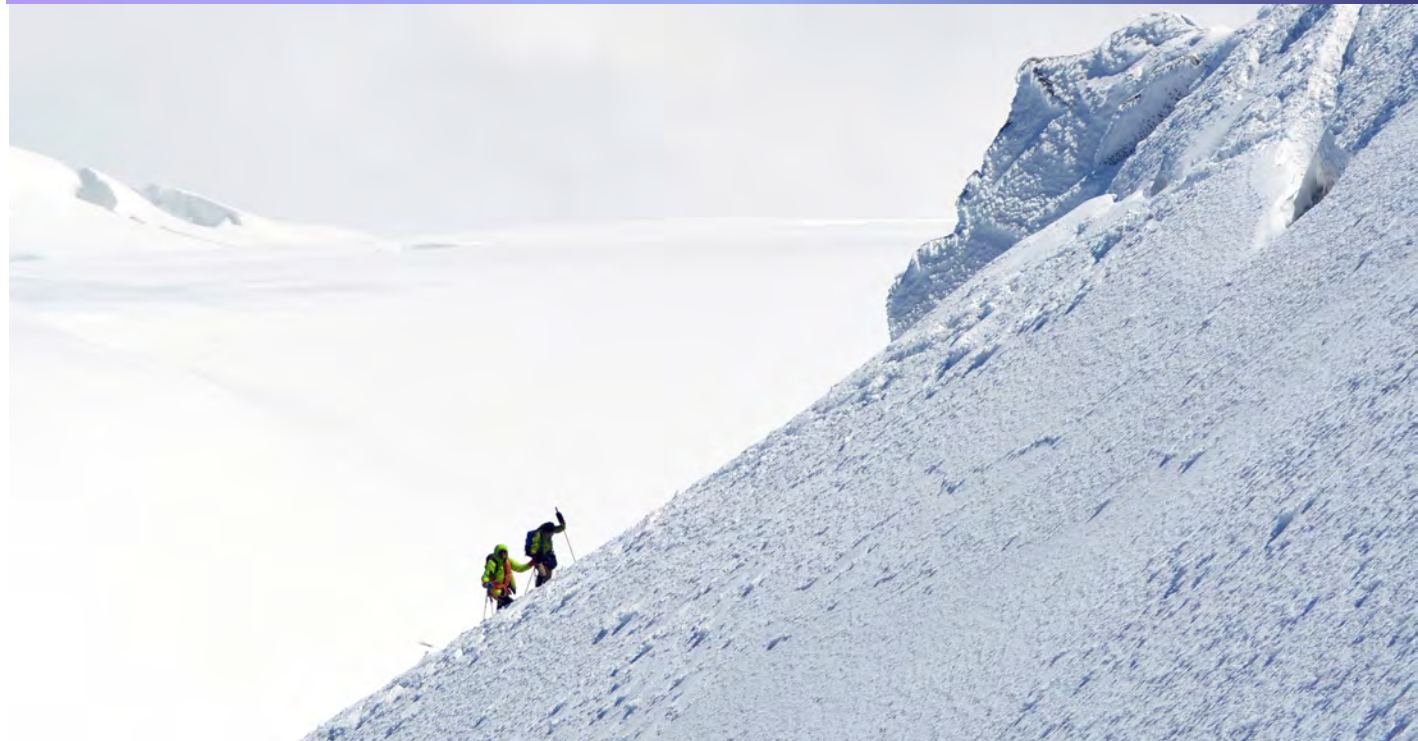
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- i Personal and Organizational Change Through Group Methods: The Laboratory Approach
  - ii Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work
  - iii Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams
  - iv CensusWide polled 206 Senior HR decision-makers in companies with more than 50 employees August 16th - 21st 2023
  - v <https://www.simplypsychology.org/likert-scale.html>

## Reveal-EX™

### A solution to help you nurture and embed psychological safety

Reveal-EX™ uses a range of proprietary variables, and covert and overt research methods, including questionnaires and ethnography to audit an organisation's psychological safety. This then delivers a focused set of interventions to improve psychological safety for that organisation. They might be tactical, short-term enablers or longer-term, organisational, structural and procedural change.

***“Reveal-EX™ aims to look at interventions that can be embraced by individuals and pass cost impact thresholds,”*** Dr Dobra-Kiel says. ***“It's based on delivering real-world results. Expecting to embed psychological safety in companies' DNA through training and codes is never going to work. Instead, we build and embed through a combination of easy to implement tailored behavioural change solutions.”***





**If you would like to discuss  
the findings in this report,  
please contact:**

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**020 7361 0371**

**[www.behave.co.uk](http://www.behave.co.uk)**



## About Behave

Based in London with global operations, Behave is a behavioural consultancy that helps companies achieve sustainable growth by truly understanding people. Spurring the creation of a new kind of consultancy, one that delivers real impact at high speed by blending behavioural science, strategy, and advanced technology, spanning across consumer, employee and purpose areas.

Behave is B. Corp certified and MRS accredited.



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