

## How to Practice Team-Focused, Psychologically-Safe Leadership and Overcome Challenges

One significant barrier to becoming a below-the-surface leader is that people have come to expect leaders who look and act a certain way. Most leaders are surface or transitional leaders with a specific leadership style that conforms to the dominant leadership standard. Many people with varying experience, perspectives, and knowledge have different leadership styles yet are often not recognized for them nor chosen to be leaders. This is prevalent because several organizations are built by surface leaders who often make instant judgments about team members based on first impressions. Surface leaders, among others, tend to associate only with others like them (Wilkins 2021). Those who are in minority groups face affinity bias, and that bias may cause them to be overlooked for leadership positions. It is tough to overcome the dominant leadership standard by leading with your authentic self and going below-the-surface, because it may cause this bias to be formed against you and for you to be overlooked as a leadership figure. In these cases, leaders must overcome these expectations by practicing daring leadership. Brene Brown expresses daring leadership as rumbling with vulnerability, braving trust, living into our values, and learning to rise (Rise 2021). Although it is not the norm, leaders who are vulnerable with their team build trust among them and help team members to be comfortable being vulnerable. This daring leadership leads to the best long-term performance outcomes due to a cohesive team that trusts each other. People who practice this leadership may face barriers as these actions are not commonly associated with leadership, but I will aim to practice them regardless and convey the value of being a relatable leader. I will let my results speak for themselves to overcome these misconceptions and attribute good team cohesiveness and performance outcomes to the daring leadership that built them.

It is easy to focus on performance goals and outcomes as the primary purpose in an organization and carry this over to leadership by focusing only on team goals and productivity. Leaders do not naturally focus on people and relationships, because organizations do not see the value it brings to their teams in the way of motivation, productivity, and team member retention (Wilkins 2021). This is one of the barriers to below-the-surface leadership. There is no pressing incentive to be a below-the-surface leader by building strong relationships despite the long-term benefits (Wilkins 2021). Organizations reward their managers for the performance-based metrics of their team over a short-term period, but not how they build up their team. This is why few below-the-surface leaders exist and those who do practice this are self-motivated. These leaders genuinely care about their team members, which team members pick up on and eventually become a team strong enough to perform their best work. Despite the barriers, some of the best ways to build these below-the-surface relationships are to ask thoughtful questions that help team members open up and be consistent in following up with them to maintain a strong connection (Bridges 2020). This takes additional time and effort that many organizations do not recognize the value of and is highly underrepresented in the dominant leadership standard. To build an effective team that is motivated to tackle every challenge, I will practice these strategies myself in my leadership roles. Forming strong relationships with colleagues and team members is complex and requires more interpersonal skills than leading on the surface. Therefore I will improve my interpersonal skills and intentionally step out of my comfort zone to get to know my team members and form these relationships. It will force me to confront my weaknesses and biases to truly understand my team members. To relate to them, I will have to overcome the difficulty of being vulnerable with others. Team members must know that they can be human, share their mistakes, and express their full selves around me.

Psychologically safe relationships are critical to an effective organizational environment, because they allow team members to freely speak up, express themselves, and share ideas without fear of consequence. *Leading Below the Surface* attributes this to several outcomes such as mistakes not being held against team members, people accepted despite differences, and peoples' unique skills and talents being used (Wilkins 2021). Amy Edmonson defines this as “a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking” (Duhigg 2016). True psychological safety is uncommon, however, as many organizations try to hide mistakes and are not open to new ideas. These organizations struggle with psychological safety because their foundational talent practices are the antithesis of it (Wilkins 2021). It is easy in a workplace for leaders to try to grasp full control, create a risk-averse environment and panic over small issues brought up (Duhigg 2016). This is the natural consequence of living in a competitive world, so fostering a psychologically safe environment requires intentional work from leaders such as inviting input from team members and practicing P2B listening (Wilkins 2021). Only through a psychologically safe environment can team members share their concerns and organizational problems so that the organization can address them. Personally, I appreciate psychologically safe environments because they show team members that their input is valid and their concerns are worth addressing. I work to create this environment as a leader as well, and moving forward, I will invite team members to speak their minds and respond to them with understanding. When a team member brings up an issue, I will approach it as a team challenge rather than putting the responsibility and blame solely on the team member. It is difficult for organizational leadership to access their organizational culture and make changes to create a psychologically safe culture of belonging (Wilkins 2021). People will not open up if they

interpret the team culture to be unforgiving and competitive, so I will lead by example and be open to my team members along with inviting them to be open.

## Works Cited

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