

## DEVELOPING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IN LEADERS AND ORGANISATIONS

Dutch coaches [Jakob van Wielink](#) and [Leo Wilhelm](#) explore the parallel journey of a leader developing new insight through coaching, with the quest to build psychological safety within organisations.

As a director, Jean-François did not care much for coaching. To put it in his own words, he hated ‘people who simply stand on the sidelines and give advice instead of stepping onto the stage, where the action is.’ He had built up a successful company that he managed with an iron fist. He was aware of everything and also had an opinion on everything. He believed this was necessary because ‘What is a boss if not a person who is more knowledgeable than his staff?’ He worked long hours to safeguard his position. When his wife told him she wanted a divorce because his work seemed more important than their relationship and family, his first reaction was to work even harder to get away from the pressure at home.

The easiest way to achieve an organisational culture that naturally embraces coaching would be to recruit only staff with a ‘growth mindset’<sup>1</sup>, that is, people who are convinced that capacities can be developed and are therefore open to learning, even from their own negative experiences. These employees are willing to take on new challenges, despite having been faced with failure, and are capable of dealing with feedback, including critical feedback. They are naturally open to coaching.

That being said, reality is quite different. On the one hand, it is very likely that part of an organisation’s staff already have a fixed mindset. To be more specific, this means staff who are convinced that capacities are fixed, innate even, and that you need a natural talent for the skills you are considered good at. These employees focus more on avoiding the things they are not very good at, steering away from new challenges. On the other hand, employees who do have a growth mindset need an environment that offers opportunities for development, encourages entrepreneurship and risk-taking, and, when it comes down to it, values learning from one’s mistakes.

Since Jean-François did not just want to give up on the relationship, he made an effort and went to watch his daughters' hockey game for the first time. He was surprised to see that the coach had a very different approach to the one he remembered when, as a young boy, he did athletics. At that time, the coaches were tough men who had done better in their sports careers than the boys they were coaching, and did not hold back from letting them know this. They kept comparing the boys with one another and at the end of the day, no one was ever good enough. Things were quite different now for his daughters! The coach complimented them on their effort and skills, regardless of the result. He saw how the girls enjoyed team work, how they all cheered whenever a goal was scored, and how the players cheered each other up whenever their opponents scored.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Psychological safety within teams refers to the conviction, shared by all team members, that the team is a safe place where they can take risks in the interpersonal relationships within the team.<sup>2</sup> This conviction is generally a tacit assumption by the individual team members or the team as a whole. Psychological safety consists, among other things, of the trust that the team and its leader will not ridicule, reject or punish a person for their views. Trust within a team is characterised by the expectation that actions by others within the team will be in the interest of the other team members, thus encouraging the others to become committed to those actions. Psychological safety at team level also includes, and goes beyond, interpersonal trust between the individual team members.

At first, Jean-François thought it was because the hockey coach was a woman and the players were girls. But the club's other teams were coached in the same way. After the game, he approached the coach and shared his astonishment. She told him that she consciously chose to create a safe environment that would leave scope for the girls to make mistakes and learn from them. He understood that feedback based on commitment rather than on results positively contributes to the development of both the individual players and the team as a whole. As it turned out, this positively influences the results too. The Monday after that weekend, he held a management meeting and decided to tackle things differently. The following week, a coach was invited to the meeting and the Director asked for feedback - something that had never been done before.

This is achieved when team members show mutual respect and trust, despite their differences, and feel that they can be themselves. That means there is scope for emotions of all kinds. It also implies a playful atmosphere and the capability to address and jointly tackle conflicts.

Psychological safety at team level is essential for good team performance. Team members need to conquer the fear of rejection within the team if they are to be able to take risks. Only then can they share their input, no matter how divergent, come up with new proposals, and face new challenges.



Cornell professor Kathleen O'Connor

*Image 1: On the right, you can see the upward performance spiral with psychological safety in a team and on the left, you can see the downward spiral when there is a lack of psychological safety (based on Kathleen O'Connor's work)*

## TRANSITION AND DEVELOPMENT

Psychological safety is a must, but more is needed to ensure that organisations naturally embrace coaching. Both management and staff need to look at challenges from a 'growth mindset.' People who already have such a mindset generally owe it to their upbringing. They made this mindset their own in an environment where they were able to develop with a targeted combination of caring and daring, as well as a comfort zone that allowed for emotional involvement and trust. This environment needs to leave scope for dialogue, encouraging people to learn also from their (painful) experiences, to step outside their comfort zone, and not to shy away from taking risks. If we look at personal development themes in our lives, we can see these are linked to relationships with others. It is precisely in those relationships that we learn. On the Transition Cycle<sup>3</sup>, these themes adopt a cyclical pattern, indicating that we do not grow in a straight line, but rather in a repetitive pattern of contact, attachment, bonding and separation. In this process we also develop resilience. After all, it is only when we are capable of grieving for our losses and giving them meaning that we can experience personal growth in the next cycle. This growth, based on a 'safe attachment,' translates into a 'growth mindset'. If we grow up with a predominantly 'unsafe attachment,' we generally end up with a 'fixed mindset' and as a result, we experience setbacks and disappointments as a major threat and rejection. Needless to say, this could scar us for life.

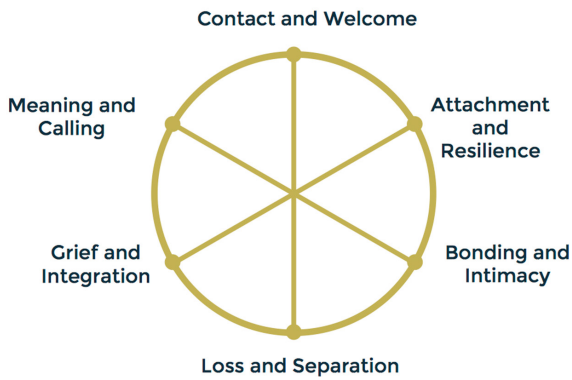


Image 2: Themes on the Transition Cycle

## SECURE BASES

It is primarily our ‘attachment figures’ who act as secure bases<sup>4</sup>, offering us the right combination of caring and daring to allow us to develop our ‘growth mindset’.

**'We define a secure base as a person, place, goal or object that provides a sense of protection, safety and caring, and offers a source of inspiration and energy for daring, exploration, risk taking and seeking challenge.'**<sup>5</sup>

Hopefully, at a later stage, we find these secure bases at school, in our teachers, on the sports pitch, in our coaches, and eventually at work, in our managers and colleagues. Based on a safe attachment, we can also connect to them and tackle challenges with a sense of safety. Luckily, even if we grow up with a predominantly unsafe attachment and a fixed mindset, there is still hope. In fact, that is a core task for coaches and, in a way, for managers in organisations also. Attachment styles can still develop throughout our life – we can rewire our brain – and we can, within the caring environment of psychological safety, make the transition from an unsafe to a safe attachment style, thus also making the shift from a fixed to a growth mindset.

1. Dweck, C.S. (2017). *Mindset. Updated Edition*. Changing The Way You Think To Fulfil Your Potential. London: Little Brown UK.
2. Edmondson, A. (1999). 'Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams'. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44 (2), 350-383.
3. Kohlrieser, G. (2006). *Hostage at the Table. How Leaders Can Overcome Conflict, Influence Others, and Raise Performance*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
4. Kohlrieser, G., S. Goldsworthy & D. Coombe (2012). *Care to Dare. Unleashing Astonishing Potential Through Secure Base Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
5. As reference 4

The initial feedback had been quite bold: Jean-François' managers always felt that they were failing him and that he did not appreciate their input. His coach helped him adapt his leadership style, and as a result, he started asking more questions and giving his staff more space. He told his management team about his relationship crisis and that he felt it was not worth risking his relationship over his work. He started delegating more, giving others more responsibilities and complimenting people when he saw them take initiative and make proposals. He noticed that, for the first time in ages, he managed to relax, make time for his family, and pay more attention to his wife and children at home. His management team proved perfectly capable of leading the organisation and in no time, new product innovations were launched, which had not happened in a long time.

The shift to psychological safety within organisations, and the transition to a leadership style based on 100% caring and 100% daring, results in a higher degree of involvement, a greater willingness to tackle difficult problems, more eagerness to learn, a more open approach to coaching, and better team performance.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Jakob van Wielink is the founder of De School voor Transitie (The School for Transition), as well as an international coach and mentor specialised in (personal) leadership. He is also executive coach of the (Advanced) High Performance Leadership Programme at IMD Business School, Switzerland, and a faculty member of the Portland Institute for Loss and Transition, USA.



Leo Wilhelm is a certified grief counsellor, manager and coach with extensive experience working with businesses and government organisations.

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