



Psychological safety in design: The role of leadership in creating optimal climates for innovation

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Abstract

It is widely accepted that design and innovation require ‘outside-the-box’ thinking, risk-taking, radical collaboration, the questioning of assumptions and a ‘fail-fast-learn-fast’ mentality (Brown, 2009; Cross, 2011; Dyer et al, 2011). However, while considerable literature currently investigates the elements of an innovation culture, relatively few studies explore the critical role that leaders of design teams play in creating a culture that empowers designers to best exhibit design skills. In particular, there is a gap in research that explores how leaders’ development of psychological safety within design contexts has a crucial impact on the outputs and outcomes of that team.

Our research argues that (a) psychological safety is vital to developing a thriving design team and (b) leaders of design teams play a pivotal role in developing this safety within their teams. We define psychological safety as when individuals feel secure to take interpersonal risks without fear of negative consequence (Edmondson, 1999) and argue that, for designers, it enables them to pose questions, challenge assumptions and provide feedback without fear of blame, judgement or risk to personal reputation. It also promotes vulnerability and creates a learning culture that views ‘failure’ as a necessary ingredient (Carmeli et al, 2009).

The authors will leverage the strengths of a multidisciplinary approach to bring a diversity of perspectives and understanding to the complexities of leadership in service design. This presentation draws upon design and

positive psychology disciplines to redefine the role of service design leaders to show:

- how leaders can reinforce (or undermine) team psychological safety
- how psychological safety can impact designers to authentically engage with teammates within the innovation process
- how the freedom to be one's 'authentic self' within a design context can ultimately lead to better design outcomes.

Keywords: design leadership, psychological safety, team culture, positive psychology

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