

PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IN CONSTRUCTION:

A Multifaceted Approach to **Building** Better Workplaces



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While traditionally associated with office-based corporate cultures, psychological safety is increasingly recognized as an asset in the construction industry. This article explores how psychological safety integrates into construction companies through three key areas: job site safety programs, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, and the development of high-performing teams.

Psychological safety is emerging as a crucial factor in creating more effective, inclusive, and safer work environments. While the term “psychological safety” might initially sound like a mental health concept, it is, in fact, distinct from individual mental health in the workplace. Psychological safety at work refers to an environment where employees feel comfortable taking interpersonal risks, such as speaking up with ideas, asking questions, or admitting mistakes, without fear of negative consequences. It’s primarily about the social climate created by team dynamics, leadership behaviors, and organizational culture. Mental health at work, on the other hand, is an individual employee’s overall psychological well-being, including their emotional and social state, which affects how they think, feel, and act in various work situations.

“There was a time when safety in the construction industry primarily meant being aware of and addressing the hazards at the jobsite that could cause physical injury. This is no longer the standard. Not only do we need to be acutely aware of those hazards that can cause physical injury, we need to be trained and aware of, and know how to properly address, those hazards at our workplaces that can cause emotional and mental injury. The Health and Safety umbrella is expanding, and it will have an influence on our ability to effectively address the Workforce Shortage.”

– Bill Aalerud, former Chairman, AGC-MA

Psychological safety in the construction industry specifically refers to creating an environment where workers feel safe to speak up about concerns, mistakes, and ideas without fear of negative consequences. This concept has gained traction due to its potential to improve safety, productivity, and overall workplace culture.





Enhancing Job Site Safety Programs

Construction sites are inherently hazardous environments where safety is paramount. While physical safety measures are well-established, the incorporation of psychological safety into these programs represents a significant advancement. It's important to note that the construction industry has well-established training programs to create awareness of the jobsite hazards that can cause physical injury. However, just in the last few years, the industry has been working on programs and initiatives that enable workers to be aware of the hazards that can cause mental or emotional injury. An example of a hazard that can cause mental or emotional injury is racial or biased motivated graffiti. Some 15 years ago or more, this type of graffiti was not too uncommon on jobsites.

By fostering an atmosphere where workers feel comfortable voicing concerns, reporting hazards, near-misses, or suggesting improvements without fear of retribution, companies can significantly enhance their overall safety culture.

Developing psychological safety has become an additional tool in the safety toolkit. By fostering a psychologically safe environment, employees are more willing to share information about potential hazards or mistakes. This proactive

approach can lead to earlier identification and mitigation of risks, potentially preventing accidents before they occur. Moreover, when workers feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to engage in safety briefings, contribute to risk assessments, and take ownership of their role in maintaining a safe work environment.



Construction Company Doing this Work: Skanska

- Developed “Injury-Free Environment” (IFE) program
- Conducts regular “Time Out for Safety” sessions to discuss concerns openly
- Implements a “Stretch and Flex” program to build team communication

Tips for Implementation:

- Introduce “safety moment” discussions at the start of each shift, encouraging workers to share observations or concerns
- Implement a no-blame policy for reporting safety issues or near-misses
- Recognize and reward employees who speak up about safety concerns or suggest improvements
- Provide training to supervisors on how to create a psychologically safe environment and respond constructively to reported issues



Strengthening Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Programs

The construction industry has long grappled with challenges related to diversity and inclusion. Psychological safety plays a crucial role in building truly inclusive work environments where all employees, regardless of their background, feel valued and heard. By creating a psychologically safe workplace, construction companies can more effectively implement and benefit from their DEI initiatives.

In a psychologically safe environment, employees are more likely to voice their unique perspectives, share experiences, and contribute innovative ideas. This not only enhances the overall work culture but also leads to more inclusive and creative problem-solving and improved decision-making. Furthermore, psychological safety can help break down barriers between different teams or hierarchical levels, fostering a more collaborative and inclusive workplace.

Construction Companies Doing this Work: Turner

- Participates in partnerships like the Time for Change Consortium, collaborating with peer general contractors to make jobsites both physically and psychologically safe.
- Freely shares anti-harassment and anti-bias resources with trade partners and unions to encourage wider participation in creating psychologically safe environments.
- This collaborative approach demonstrates Turner’s commitment to extending psychological safety beyond their own workforce, recognizing the interconnected nature of the construction industry.

“In construction, teams work closely on a daily basis to meet deadlines and build with accuracy and skill. Psychological safety supports a work environment that removes fear, allowing for communication, transparency, trust, and honesty. The result is safer and more efficient work; all team members feeling a sense of contribution and belonging; and a culture that supports difficult and sensitive conversations where teams genuinely have each other’s backs.”

– Jamie Evans, Turner Construction

Construction Companies Doing this Work: Columbia

- Created a 3-year strategic plan focused on DEI where the first goal is to create and foster a psychologically safe workplace with the intent of building a supportive and inclusive workplace where employees feel they belong.
- Introduced the concept of psychological safety to the entire Columbia workforce
- Have trained and certified a cohort of employees to assess the level of psychological safety in a project team or department

Quote from Shaun Lover,
President, Columbia Construction

“Safety isn’t just about PPE and OSHA compliance. It’s about creating an environment where every worker feels comfortable speaking up, sharing concerns, and contributing ideas. By fostering psychological safety, we’re building a culture where innovation thrives, mistakes are learning opportunities, and our employees and trade partners become stewards of our company’s safety culture. This commitment goes hand-in-hand with our commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion. When we embrace diverse perspectives and ensure equitable opportunities, we improve the performance of our teams and our jobsites are a safer place to work”.



Tips for Implementation:

- Meet employees where they are. Conduct surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions to ascertain what DEI means to your staff and how they see change happening.
- Engage the senior leadership team in the development and implementation of the DEI initiatives. It’s imperative they are fully aligned and supportive.
- Conduct assessments to determine the level of psychological safety in project teams and departments, then facilitate a conversation where the members of the team or department identify actions and behaviors to improve the level of psychological safety.
- Consider partnering with other companies or industry organizations to share best practices and resources, amplifying the impact of your DEI and psychological safety initiatives.

Extend your psychological safety and DEI efforts to include subcontractors, trade partners, and other stakeholders to create a more inclusive and safe industry ecosystem.



Cultivating High Performing Teams

The pursuit of excellence in construction projects demands high-performing teams capable of navigating complex challenges and delivering quality results. Psychological safety has been proven to be a key ingredient in fostering the conditions necessary for such high performance. When team members feel safe to take risks, ask questions, and challenge the status quo, it leads to increased innovation, better problem-solving, and more effective collaboration.

In the context of construction, where projects often involve multiple stakeholders and interdisciplinary teams, psychological safety can significantly improve communication and coordination. It allows for more honest feedback, faster learning from mistakes, and a greater willingness to share knowledge across the organization. These factors contribute to increased productivity, improved project outcomes, and higher job satisfaction among employees.

Construction Company Doing this Work: Limbach Holdings

- Developed the “Limbach Learning Teams” program to enhance project performance by fostering psychological safety within their project teams
- “No blame” post-project reviews
- Cross-functional team building with activities designed to build trust between different disciplines (e.g., engineers, project managers, field workers)

Tips for Implementation:

- Introduce regular team-building exercises that encourage vulnerability and trust-building among team members
- Establish a “learning from failures” practice where teams openly discuss project challenges and brainstorm solutions without fear of blame
- Train project managers in active listening and creating psychologically safe environments during team meetings and one-on-ones
- Implement a “no stupid questions” policy to encourage curiosity and learning across all levels of the organization

Building Psychological Safety into Construction

As the construction industry continues to evolve, the integration of psychological safety into various aspects of company operations represents a forward-thinking approach to addressing longstanding challenges. By incorporating psychological safety into job site safety programs, DEI initiatives, and team-building strategies, construction companies can create work environments that are not only safer and more inclusive but also more innovative and productive.

The implementation of psychological safety requires commitment from leadership and a cultural shift within organizations. However, the potential benefits—ranging from reduced accident rates and improved employee retention to enhanced project performance—make it a worthwhile investment for construction companies aiming to build a more resilient and successful future.

Authors

Culture Coach International (CCI)

Culture Coach International (CCI) is a strategy, consulting, and training firm specializing in leveraging psychological safety, diversity and culture for organizational growth and innovation. With over 25 years in business, CCI recognizes employees' diverse thoughts and backgrounds as a company's most valuable asset and competitive advantage. The firm offers tailored services including curriculum development, strategic consulting, training, and business support tools on the topics of psychological safety, diversity and cross-cultural issues. These services are customized to meet each client's specific goals. CCI's expert team boasts over 100 years of combined experience, helping organizations harness the power of diversity in today's competitive global economy.

More than 8 in 10 employees consider psychological safety one of the most valued aspects of the workplace

-Oyster HR, 2023



Kari Heistad, CEO

Kari Heistad, founder and CEO of Culture Coach International (CCI), brings over 25 years of experience in psychological safety, diversity, and cross-cultural issues to

help companies achieve their strategic goals. A key focus of Kari's work is psychological safety, which she has studied extensively - developing training programs and tools to help organizations and teams foster greater psychological safety.

As a certified psychological safety facilitator through Amy Edmondson's Fearless Organization, Kari applies this expertise across industries, including construction. Her construction industry experience includes serving as the CFO for Nordic Construction and collaborating closely with Columbia Construction to design and implement their diversity, equity and inclusion program, emphasizing psychological safety. CCI's practical diversity tools have been implemented globally, with Kari has presented to over 20,000 people, translating foundational ideas into actionable strategies.

Bill Aalerud, Consultant

Bill is a 43-year construction industry veteran, and a champion for psychological safety as well as a certified psychological safety facilitator. As Columbia's DEI working group chairman, he recognized the power of how psychological safety could create a culture where employees could voice concerns without fear. The working group created a DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) strategic plan. This plan resulted in the hiring of a full time Director of Diversity. Bill has implemented Lean practices, including the Last Planner System focusing on improving communication and trust among trade partners. He created Columbia Thrives, a corporate wellness program focusing on physical, mental, emotional, and financial well-being, further supporting psychological safety in the workplace. As the Chairman of AGCMA, he prioritized workforce development, diversity, expanding the safety umbrella and wellness.

