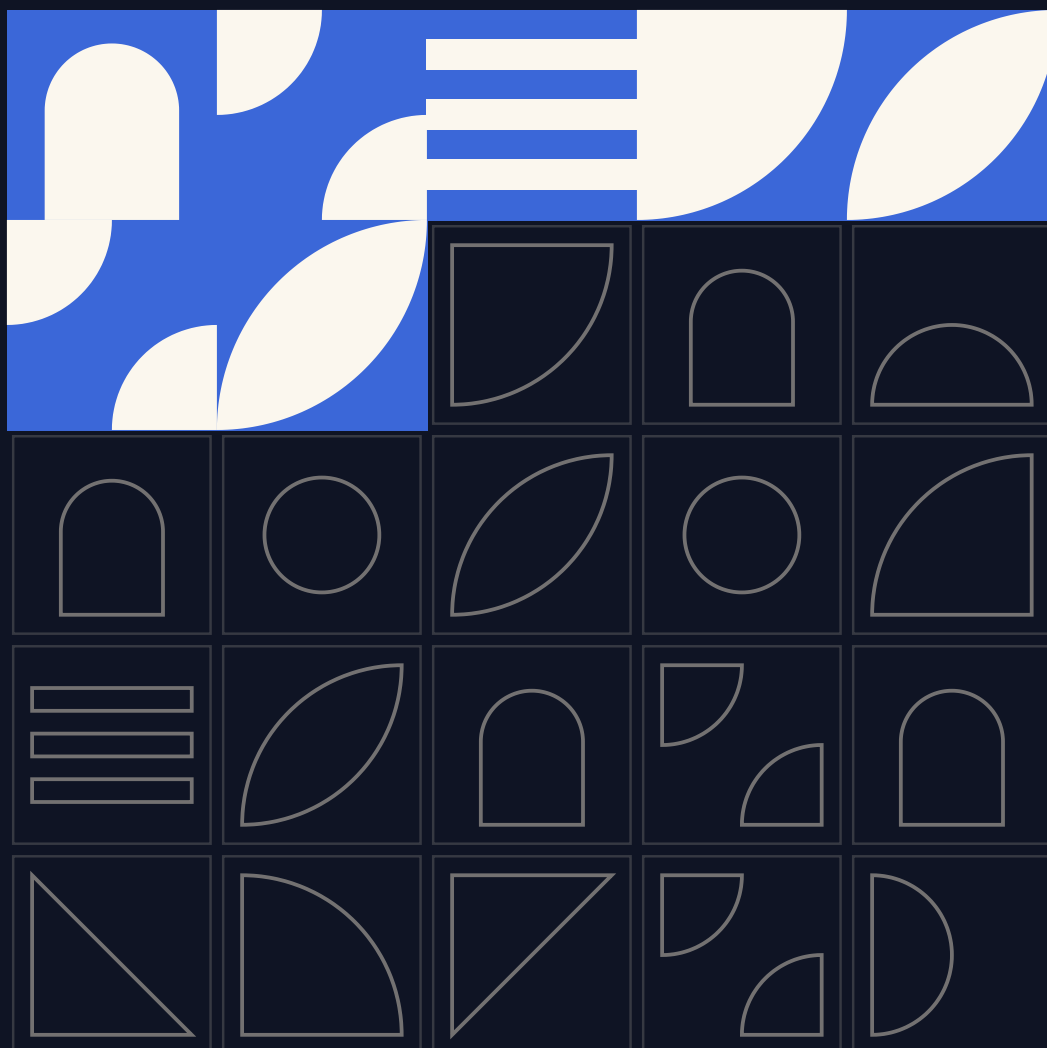


Psychological Safety Is a Team Sport With Individual Reps

Edmondson's construct is team-level; the behaviours that build it are individual. A rep map linking connection and reframe techniques to team-level safety.

Dr Atul Aswani; Mumbai Psychiatrist and trained as a Results Coach
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01

Executive summary

A meta-analysis of 136 samples and more than 22,000 people found psychological safety has a corrected correlation of .62 with learning behaviour. In a Pune stand-up, a new analyst spots a duplicate row in the client file and says nothing. Indian teams still lack a Monday-morning way to raise the score. Safety reps — individual behaviours that raise team psychological safety — turn that number into a weekly practice.

Amy Edmondson defined psychological safety as a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk taking. The construct lives at team level; the behaviours that build it happen in one conversation. Google's Project Aristotle put psychological safety first among five team dynamics across 180 teams. Gallup's 2025 India reading shows 23 per cent of employees engaged. In Naukri's 19,650-person survey, only 28 per cent would name the real reason they needed a day off.

This paper gives CHROs and team leads a practice. Four techniques — Match the Firecracker; Assume the Best-Case Human; Ask Well, Thank Well; Aim the Spotlight Outward — turn the team construct into countable interpersonal acts. The team indicator counts only reps that touched another person. The dashboard holds counts, streaks, vocabulary breadth and participation. It holds no clinical data. For psychological safety at work, and for psychological safety India teams, how to build psychological safety is one interaction at a time.

02

The problem of psychological safety India teams

Indian organisations have learned the phrase. They have not yet learned the practice. Psychological safety at work is discussed in leadership offsites and written into engagement decks. On a Tuesday morning in Pune or Bengaluru, the same teams still decide, quietly, that speaking up is expensive.

Gallup's State of the Global Workplace 2026 report, using 2025 data, puts India employee engagement at 23 per cent — a seven-point fall from the prior three-year average, and the lowest reading in four years. Fifty-nine per cent are not engaged. Eighteen per cent are actively disengaged. Only 17 per cent of Indian employees evaluate their lives as thriving, against 34 per cent globally. Daily

sadness sits at 36 per cent against a global 23 per cent. Daily anger sits at 31 per cent against 22 per cent. Gallup estimates the present level of disengagement costs India about \$351 billion, or ₹32.7 trillion, in lost workplace productivity a year — roughly 9 per cent of GDP. Manager engagement is 30 per cent against 19 per cent for individual contributors, and manager engagement itself has fallen nine points from 39 per cent in 2024.

That is the climate in which psychological safety India teams must operate. Great Place To Work India notes that millennials are 63 per cent of the Indian workforce in 2025, and that 65 per cent of those millennials already sit in supervisory or managerial roles. Twenty-three per cent of millennial managers do not feel involved in decision-making. At organisations recognised as India’s Best Workplaces for Millennials, 86 per cent of millennial managers do feel involved. Involvement is not the same construct as psychological safety. It is a close cousin: people who cannot shape the work rarely feel safe naming what is going wrong in the work.

The speaking-up data is sharper still. Naukri’s Pulse 2025 survey of 19,650 jobseekers across 80 industries found that nearly three in four Indian professionals hesitate to be transparent about taking time off for mental-health reasons. Forty-five per cent would mark the day as ordinary sick leave. Only 28 per cent would name the reason. Nineteen per cent would skip the leave. Nine per cent would invent another excuse. The top fear is being viewed as incapable (31 per cent), then judgement from colleagues (27 per cent). Poor work-life balance is the most-cited strain at work (39 per cent), then micromanaging bosses (30 per cent), lack of recognition (22 per cent) and fear of making mistakes (10 per cent). Among professionals with zero to three years’ experience, one in three name fear of mistakes as a strain. That is a psychological-safety problem wearing an early-career badge.

Deloitte’s 2025 Gen Z and Millennial Survey, India country report (505 Gen Z respondents, 304 millennials), finds that 36 per cent of Indian Gen Z and 39 per cent of Indian millennials say their job contributes a lot to their anxiety or stress. Thirty-three per cent of Gen Z and 29 per cent of millennials feel stressed or anxious all or most of the time. A job that generates strain is not, by itself, a safety failure. A job in which people cannot say so, without cost, is.

Think of it as a model that was trained once, on last year’s climate survey, and then frozen. In machine learning that is batch training. Teams do not live in batches. They live in online updates: each meeting, each Slack thread, each silence after a mistake. Safety is not a weight you load in April. It is the running average of how the last interaction went.

India against available comparators. Figures are from the primary documents named. A cell is blank where the source does not publish a clean comparator.

Indicator	India	Comparator	Source
Employee engagement, 2025	23%	Global 20%; South Asia 21%	Gallup State of the Global Workplace 2026, India page

Indicator	India	Comparator	Source
Life evaluation: thriving	17%	Global 34%	Same
Daily sadness	36%	Global 23%	Same
Daily anger	31%	Global 22%	Same
Daily stress	28%	—	Same
Cost of current disengagement	\$351bn / ₹32.7tn ≈ 9% of GDP	—	Gallup, Quiet Quitting Is on the Rise in India, May 2026
Millennials as share of workforce, 2025	63%	—	Great Place To Work India
Millennial managers not involved in decisions	23%	86% involved at Best Workplaces for Millennials	Same
Transparent about mental-health leave	28% explicit; ~75% hesitate	—	Naukri Pulse 2025, n = 19,650
Early-career fear of making mistakes	1 in 3 (0–3 years)	10% of all respondents name it as a top strain	Same
Job as a major anxiety or stress driver	36% Gen Z / 39% millennials	—	Deloitte 2025 India country report, n = 809

The pattern is not that India “lacks culture”. Deloitte’s Culture Sensing work shows many firms scoring well on belonging language. The pattern is that friendliness and safety are not the same climate. A warm team can still punish a mistake. A polite team can still leave the intern’s question unasked. Psychological safety is the shared belief that interpersonal risk — a half-formed idea, a flag on a defect, an admission that you do not know — will not cost you the room.

03

Why current approaches fail

Most firms measure the climate once a year. A validated team instrument is a good instrument. It is not a practice. Edmondson’s original study sat inside a manufacturing plant and watched how teams actually learned. Newman, Donohue and Eva’s 2017 review of more than 83 papers made the same point from the other direction: the literature is rich on correlates and thin on the mechanism by which safety is built, day to day, across levels. An annual pulse tells you where the team stood in March. It does not change what happens on Monday.

Leadership offsites fail for a different reason. They concentrate good intentions in a room that is not the work. A two-day workshop can produce a shared vocabulary. It cannot produce the hundred small recoveries a team

needs after a missed deadline, a sharp email, a public correction. An offsite teaches the idea. Monday is the practice.

The third failure is quieter. Nothing is specified for Monday. Managers are told to “role-model vulnerability”. No one tells them what to do when a colleague shares a win, or when a message looks colder than it is, or when the quietest person in the stand-up has not spoken.

Entrepreneurs already know this logic. You do not improve a conversion rate by holding an annual conversion retreat. You change the next ten conversations with customers. Psychological safety is the same kind of number. It moves when the next ten interactions move.

Google’s re:Work account of Project Aristotle is often quoted for the rank order — psychological safety, then dependability, then structure and clarity, then meaning, then impact. The more useful line is operational. What mattered was less who sat on the team than how the team worked together. Sales teams that worked together effectively exceeded targets by an average of 17 per cent; teams that did not fell short by up to 19 per cent. That is not a poster. That is a weekly behaviour gap.

04

The emotional-fitness model applied

PULL QUOTE

Only 28 per cent of 19,650 professionals in Naukri’s Pulse 2025 survey would name the real reason they needed the day off.

EmotionApp treats emotional fitness the way a gym treats strength. The unit is a rep: a short, countable act, usually under ninety seconds, practised in the language closest to the person. Delivery is WhatsApp-first. The stack is 23 Indian languages. Data stays in India. The platform is built under ISO 9001 and ISO 13485 and designed to meet DPDP duties. An AI coach can prompt the next rep. A human coach takes over when the person asks for more than a prompt. EmotionApp is not a diagnostic, treatment or therapy service. That boundary is the product, not a footnote.

The line the product repeats is the measurement rule: counts, never confessions. A team can know that twelve firecracker responses were logged this week. It does not need the contents of anyone’s inner life.

Four techniques carry the safety work. Two are connection techniques. Two are reframe techniques. All four are other-touching: they land on another person, not only on a private journal.

Match the Firecracker

When someone shares good news, respond with energy and two genuine follow-up questions before talking about yourself. That is the live EmotionApp rep. It is active-constructive responding in working clothes. Gable and colleagues showed that only active-constructive responses to good news predict the bond. How a person answers a colleague's good news predicts the bond at least as much as how they answer bad news. Matching energy builds the bond. Killing the moment with a shrug, a pivot to your own story, or a warning about what could go wrong spends the bond. In a team, this is not niceness. It is how status stays loose enough for the next person to speak.

Assume the Best-Case Human

Before you answer a short, cool or delayed message, write one generous reading of the other person — tired, busy, unclear — and reply to that human, not to the insult you invented. This is a thought-check aimed at the other person rather than at the self. “She is ignoring me” becomes “she may be in a review” plus “is now a bad time?”. The rep does not require you to believe the kind story. It requires you to test it before you punish. Teams bleed safety when first-pass attribution is hostile. They rebuild it when first-pass attribution is provisional.

Ask Well, Thank Well

Ask one genuine question that helps the other person think, then send one specific thank-you that names what they did and what it changed. “What would break if we shipped this on Thursday?” is a better question than “any thoughts?”. “Thanks for flagging the duplicate row before the client call” is a better thank-you than “great job team”. Felt gratitude fades. Delivered gratitude lands. Specific questions reduce the cost of voice. Specific thanks raise the return on voice. Together they are leader coaching in miniature — the antecedent Edmondson already flagged in 1999.

Aim the Spotlight Outward

In the next meeting or chat, spend your first two speaking turns on someone else's idea, win or blocker — name it, credit it, ask what they need next. At a Thursday review in Hyderabad, the product lead starts with the tester's fix, not her own slide. Later, the quietest engineer flags a risk nobody had logged. A team that aims the spotlight inward turns every meeting into a status auction. A team that aims it outward makes it cheaper for the quiet member to add a fact. Credit the person in the next chair; do not audition. Write the human's name back into the task.

The team indicator is built only from reps that touched another person — a question asked, a thank-you sent, a good-news match, a charitable check, a credit given. Private regulation reps (a breath, a journal line) still matter for the individual. They do not enter the team score. Safety is a team sport. The points are individual. Only the passes count.

05

The rep map: how to build psychological safety

Edmondson’s learning behaviours — asking questions, seeking feedback, talking about errors, experimenting, asking for help — are team-level patterns. They are produced by individual acts. The map below keeps the two layers separate. It does not reprint any validated scale item. CHROs who want a climate score should use a validated team measure of their choosing. CHROs who want the score to move should count the reps.

Four safety reps mapped to the team behaviours and indicators they move.

Safety rep	Safety behaviour it builds	Team indicator it moves
Match the Firecracker	Active-constructive response to good news; curiosity before self-talk; equal airtime	Participation; connection density; willingness to share unfinished work
Assume the Best-Case Human	Charitable attribution before challenge; lower status threat; fewer defensive loops	Error discussion without blame; speed of repair after a sharp exchange
Ask Well, Thank Well	Specific questions that lower the cost of voice; specific thanks that raise the return	Help-seeking; recognition received; leader-coaching climate
Aim the Spotlight Outward	Credit and attention moved off the self; status levelling in the room	Speaking-up by quieter members; idea variety in the same meeting

Frazier and colleagues give the reason to bother. Across 136 independent samples, psychological safety’s reliability-corrected correlation with learning behaviour is .62 (raw $r = .48$; 15 samples, 4,648 people). With information sharing it is .52. With task performance it is .43. With work engagement it is .45. With voice it is .31. Positive leader relations sit at .44. Inclusive leadership and transformational leadership land in a tight band, .36 to .42 — which is a polite way of saying that the leader’s daily manner beats the leader’s personality label. Creativity is the weak link at .13. Safety is not a creativity charm. It is a learning and speaking-up condition.

Newman’s review adds the design warning. Most studies measure the construct at team level with Edmondson-style items or short forms. Safety is not trust. Trust is one person viewing another. Safety is a perceived group norm. A dashboard that tracks only individual mood will miss the thing Edmondson named. A dashboard that tracks only an annual team mean will miss the thing that builds the mean.

Across 136 samples, psychological safety’s corrected correlation with learning behaviour is .62. The Monday work is the interaction that feeds that number.

06

Measurement

The employer dashboard holds no clinical data. That is a design choice and a legal one. EmotionApp is not a diagnostic, treatment or therapy service. India-resident data. DPDP-compliant. Counts, never confessions.

What the employer sees, at team level, with no names attached to acts:

- Interpersonal safety-rep count — only reps that touched another person.
- Streak days for the team, not a public leaderboard of individuals.
- Participation rate — the share of the team who logged at least one other-touching rep that week.
- Emotional-vocabulary breadth — a count of distinct emotion words used, not the words themselves, and not a clinical label.
- An optional pre/post pulse using a validated team psychological-safety measure. Reference the instrument. Do not reprint its items. Do not store item-level answers against a name if a team mean will do.

What the employer never sees:

- Journal text.
- Message content.
- Who thanked whom.
- Coach transcripts.
- Mood scores treated as clinical data.
- Identity-linked emotion labels.
- Any field that could reconstruct a conversation.

The team indicator in one sentence: team safety-rep score equals the week's interpersonal reps divided by team size, with a participation floor so one enthusiastic person cannot mask silence. A team of ten that logs thirty firecracker-and-thanks reps from two people is not safer than a team of ten that logs twelve reps from eight people. Volume without participation is theatre.

Frazier's homology finding is the measurement caution worth keeping. Antecedents and outcomes of psychological safety do not always have the same strength at individual and group level. Do not treat a personal streak as a team climate. Do not treat a team mean as a person's inner state. Keep the layers apart on the dashboard the way the research keeps them apart on the page.

07

Implementation

Ninety days is long enough to change a habit and short enough to keep a CHRO's attention. Pick one intact team. Do not start with the whole company. Edmondson's original field study was 51 teams in one plant, not a corporate broadcast.

Ninety-day pilot. The owner column names a human, not "HR".

Week	Owner	Action	Metric
1–2	CHRO and named team lead	Choose one pilot team. Run a baseline pulse with a validated team measure. State the legal boundary in one paragraph. Confirm India-resident data handling.	Baseline completion rate; team size locked
3–4	Team lead	Teach the four safety reps in one 30-minute huddle. Start a WhatsApp daily prompt. The lead does the first three reps in public.	Share of team who have logged a first interpersonal rep
5–8	Each team member	One other-touching safety rep on working days. Target a five-day streak. Leads review volume, not content.	Weekly interpersonal-rep count; participation rate
9–10	Team lead	Open the dashboard with the team. Discuss counts, streaks, vocabulary breadth and participation. No journal text. Adjust which rep the team is under-using.	Share of team with at least three interpersonal reps that week
11–12	CHRO and team lead	Repeat the validated pulse. Compare the delta to interpersonal-rep volume and participation, not to whoever spoke most in the readout.	Pulse change versus baseline; participation versus week 4
13	CHRO	Decide: stop, persist with the same team, or add a second team. Write the decision in one page. Do not scale a theatre score.	Go / no-go recorded

Two implementation rules save the pilot. First, the owner column names a human, not "HR". Second, the lead's own reps are visible as counts. Teams watch the lead, not the kick-off slide. A teammate lands a tough client: does the lead ask how, or change the subject? A release slips: does the lead ask what broke, or who broke it?

08

One-page checklist the reader can run this week

1. Name one intact team of eight to twelve, not a department of eighty.
2. Write the legal boundary in the invite: this is coaching and practice, not a diagnostic, treatment or therapy service. Crisis route is Tele-MANAS 14416.
3. Pick a validated team psychological-safety measure. Do not invent items. Do not reprint the items in Slack.
4. Run the baseline pulse. Lock the team list before anyone starts counting reps.
5. Teach Match the Firecracker on day one. It is the easiest other-touching rep and it is already specified: energy plus two genuine follow-up questions before you talk about yourself.
6. Add Assume the Best-Case Human for the next cold email or late reply. One charitable explanation. One clarifying question. Then send.
7. Replace “any thoughts?” in the next meeting with one specific, answerable question. Thank the first person who answers by naming the behaviour.
8. In the same meeting, credit one piece of work to the person who did it before you describe your own.
9. Count only reps that touched another person. Do not award points for private journaling.
10. Set a participation floor. If two people produce most of the count, the team is not safer. It is louder.
11. Tell the team what the employer will see (counts, streaks, breadth, participation) and what it will never see (content, names on thanks, transcripts).
12. Book the 90-day pulse now, not after the pilot “feels ready”.

09

FAQ

Q1 Is psychological safety a personality trait I should hire for?

No. Edmondson defined it as a shared team belief, tested across 51 work teams. Frazier's meta-analysis found personality effects modest (corrected correlations: proactive personality .35, emotional stability .17) against leader relations at .44. Hire for skill. Practise the climate.

Q2 We already run an engagement survey. Why add safety reps?

Engagement and safety are related, not identical. Frazier reports a .45 link with engagement and a .62 link with learning behaviour. India's Gallup reading is 23 per cent engaged. An annual survey describes the stock. Safety reps change the weekly flow.

Q3 Will this turn my team soft and slow?

Google's 180-team study put psychological safety first among five dynamics, then dependability. Effective sales teams beat targets by 17 per cent; weaker teams missed by up to 19 per cent. Safety is the condition for naming a defect early, not the excuse for missing the defect.

Q4 What does the company actually see on the dashboard?

Team-level interpersonal-rep counts, streaks, vocabulary-breadth scores and participation. In a team of ten, a healthy week is most people logging at least one other-touching rep, not thirty reps from two enthusiasts. No journal text. No clinical fields.

Q5 How is this different from a wellness day or an offsite?

Naukri's 19,650-person survey found only 28 per cent of professionals would name a mental-health day as such. An offsite changes the calendar. A safety rep changes the next conversation. How to build psychological safety is the conversation, repeated.

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EmotionApp is a non-clinical emotional-fitness coaching platform. It does not diagnose, treat or offer therapy. If you or a colleague is in crisis, contact Tele-MANAS 14416.



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NOTE

EmotionApp is a non-clinical emotional-fitness coaching platform. This paper describes practices, techniques and coaching. It is not therapy, treatment, diagnosis or medical advice.

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