

Amanda Clay Powers and Dustin Fife

# Psychological Safety in Libraries

It's a Team Sport

**A**cademic Library Workers in Conversation is a *C&RL News* series focused on elevating the everyday conversations of library professionals. The wisdom of the watercooler has long been heralded, but this series hopes to go further by minimizing barriers to traditional publishing with an accessible format. Each of the topics in the series were proposed by the authors and they were given space to explore. This issue's conversation is about psychological safety in academic libraries. The discussion affirms that psychological safety and culture change are a group effort, even if some team members have a disproportionate influence.—*Dustin Fife, series editor*

**Dustin Fife:** Amanda, there is a question I love to ask at work. I ask it in meetings, during one-on-ones, as part of committees, and just about everywhere else I go. That question is: What do WE control in this situation? I find this to be an empowering practice, and I want to apply it to a topic that I know you and I both appreciate. We have discussed psychological safety many times. We have regularly considered our own experiences on the topic, and especially our failures. However, I want to get specific with you bearing in mind the question above. As supervisors, as deans, associate deans, and directors of libraries, as colleagues and peers, as members of communities, what do we control in regard to psychological safety for ourselves and others?

Also, I readily admit that “control” might be the wrong word and influence is probably better.

**Amanda Clay Powers:** That's a great question. I've come to understand that while psychological safety is essential for teams to grow and thrive, it's a collective effort. No one can legislate safe teams from the top. What's important is for leaders to give teams the opportunity to learn what a psychologically safe team would look like and then give them tools and encouragement to make that happen. Part of this is the hard work of making diverse teams safe. For me, that has meant all library retreats around microaggressions, anti-racism, LGBTQIA+ inclusion, accessibility in libraries, and intersectional identities. We've been programming around what we've learned, leaning into service, and making safe places for our students and community. We did this work for ourselves and our relationships with each other, but also for our patrons and our relationships with them. This discussion is not about that work, but I wanted to start with a caveat that these must go hand in hand.

Each person in a library only has control over their own work. But, if we are lucky, we can collectively create an environment where it is safe to try new things, fail, and try again.

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Trust is essential to make this work, but trust takes time to build, and leaders can facilitate this through transparency and open communication. In fact, these traits can be modeled by leaders at all levels. I know it can be difficult to be transparent as a leader. It creates a vulnerability that is both essential and scary at the same time. I've been working on this, more or less successfully, since I read the 2016 *New York Times Magazine*<sup>1</sup> article about Google's use of Amy Edmondson's<sup>2</sup> work on psychological safety. I've found that being transparent about budgets, decision making, and any gleaned information about campus has helped. We have also invested heavily in wellness since 2020, emphasizing mental and physical health and family as first priorities. I think this combination has helped move the needle in creating a safe place to work. Regarding influence, though, I do think that's the right word. We are all influencing each other with what we bring to the table at work.

Dustin, where do you start when it comes to psychological safety?

**Dustin:** Well, I think I must start with “me,” as I am sure that you start with “you.” I must start with the way that I treat and trust people. I must start with my attitudes and actions. You demonstrate beautifully above that psychological safety is a team sport, that it must go hand-in-hand with antiracist ambitions, and that we often only control our own work. I agree with that—though I still shudder at the word “control”—and want to emphasize that we can be especially intentional about how we do that work in relation to others.

I also can't stop thinking about the concept of the “benefit of the doubt,” or as it is articulated in the incredible parenting book *Good Inside*<sup>3</sup> by Becky Kennedy, the “MGI” or “most generous interpretation.” I would recommend this book to anyone, as I have done a great deal of healing and personal reparenting while studying it. Kennedy implores people to interpret the actions of their family members through the most generous lens possible. I have been thinking about this for months and have concluded that I have never worked with a single “bad” colleague. I have never worked with a colleague who was intentionally trying to hurt an organization or others. I have worked with cantankerous colleagues, unprepared peers, overextended professionals, and folks doing unintentional harm (though harm all the same), but not “bad” people. And this is not to say that there are not people doing poor work in libraries, but it changes how I believe we should think about other library professionals. But for now, I am secure in saying that psychological safety starts with me. However, it certainly does not and cannot end with me.

Amanda, what else have you learned from your experiences so far, especially in regard to culture change?

**Amanda:** I have thought a lot about culture change in relation to academic libraries. It's been a central part of the work I've done over the last twenty years, and understanding psychological safety gave me the traction to move forward in my libraries. I used *The First 90 Days*<sup>4</sup> as a guidebook in my first job as a dean, but I quickly threw it out. I'd been hired to integrate technology into a “traditional library,” but I found a library that had sailed away from the university. Communication was nonexistent and trust was seemingly an impossible goal. I love creative conflict and pushback on my ideas, but without trust that is impossible. I fell back on my experience with psychological safety as a place to get started, and since then I've realized it is always the right place to start. Trust is hard-won, and culture change is impossible without it.

The first thing I do now is sit still and be curious. Once my colleagues understand that I'm not trying to impose a structure, but rather understand the current environment, that

works to move the needle on trust. Practicing that vulnerability and transparency I mentioned continues to foster confidence throughout the library, but it is in developing a genuine interest in understanding the “whys” and the history that allows trust to grow. People need to be heard, and that is one of the central tenets of practicing psychological safety in teams. Everyone gets heard. No one gets shamed. From that fundamental place, the real work of building fearless teams can begin.

Dustin, what are some of the stumbling blocks you have seen for teams trying to become psychologically safe?

**Dustin:** First, I need a daily text from you reminding me to sit still and be curious. I believe this prescription could cure much of what ails our library cultures. Along with the understanding that psychological safety is a team effort. If people are not “bad” people, it should encourage us to begin with curiosity rather than criticism. There will be an opportunity to criticize, there are always opportunities to criticize, and criticism is an essential tool. But start with curiosity. I also believe that curiosity can mitigate one of the main stumbling blocks of culture change. Curiosity can help us abandon the notion that there is a single right way to do most things. How we do things is rarely as important as why we do things together and curiosity will bolster that connectivity.

Amanda, the communal nature of any goal related to culture change or psychological safety is its greatest stumbling block in my experience. Everyone contributes to culture, and too often I see no one taking responsibility for culture, which means that inertia and the status quo will continue to dominate. So, I want to come back to our original question. I believe that every member of the organization must begin to take ownership for culture and ask themselves what they control in their libraries. What they influence on their teams. Ask themselves if they create or remove barriers.

One final admonition from me, though. I want to emphasize that people in leadership roles, and at times others who have amassed influence, need to recognize that they can disproportionately influence psychological safety, even if they cannot change culture on their own. I know we often hope that new leaders will bring new culture, but from my experience, leaders on their own change nothing for the better. However, they can easily make things worse. It is hard to make things systematically better, it is not hard to make things worse. So, be trustworthy to build trust. Be transparent to build transparency. Be inclusive to build inclusion. Be generous and curious to build generosity and curiosity. And then repeat because building psychologically safe teams is a process that never ends.

Amanda, I know there is so much more that we could and should say, but I just want to give you the last word here.

**Amanda:** I also want to emphasize that this is not meant to be a one-and-done solution. The hard work of building safe places is worth it, but it is just that, hard. The people who’ve worked with me hear me say over and over: “Point your feet in a direction, and you will end up there.” This is an opportunity to point your feet in the direction of a fearless organization that embraces failure, encourages curious explorations, offers clarity and transparency around decision-making, supports experimentation, rewards the attempt as well as the win, and breaks down outdated and calcified silos. The potential benefit is huge, and so is the investment. I’ve found that centering DEI work and wellness works best in moving an organization toward fearlessness. Acknowledging and addressing microaggressions in the workplace in an inclusive manner, as well as the real mental health and physical challenges

ever present in any organization, is essential. It is a whole-person philosophy founded in empathetic leadership.

My advice to library leaders considering this path is to start with *The Fearless Organization*. Edmondson has distilled research she's done across organizations into a text for encouraging "learning, innovation, and growth." I've also used *StrengthsFinder 2.0* on my teams to help us understand each other's strengths and find more effective ways to communicate—an essential part of psychological safety. And I know you, Dustin, love to recommend *Lifelong Kindergarten*<sup>5</sup> by Mitchel Resnick.

In closing, psychologically safe teams can happen in discrete parts of a library, but as a leader my goal is to build an organization that is headed in a fearless direction. ✎

## Notes

1. C. Duhigg, "What Google Learned from Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team: New Research Reveals Surprising Truths about Why Some Work Groups Thrive and Others Falter," *The New York Times Magazine*, February 28, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/magazine/what-google-learned-from-its-quest-to-build-the-perfect-team.html>.

2. A. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization* (Wiley Press, 2019).

3. B. Kennedy, *Good Inside: A Practical Guide to Resilient Parenting Prioritizing Connection over Correction* (HarperCollins, 2022).

4. M. D. Watkins, *The First 90 Days: Proven Strategies for Getting Up to Speed Faster and Smarter* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2013).

5. M. Resnick, *Lifelong Kindergarten: Cultivating Creativity through Projects, Passion, Peers, and Play* (MIT Press, 2017).