



# **Using Psychological Safety and Intrinsic Motivation to Establish a New, Hybrid Work Environment that Boosts Employee Wellbeing**

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# 1

## Introduction

**Change can be scary.** The most anxiety-inducing kinds of change are those that are monumental, have no precedent to provide guidance, and—if done incorrectly—could have enormous consequences. This kind of change environment should sound familiar given it is what many companies and employees find themselves navigating today.

The pandemic has been a kind of forced experiment, the results of which have initiated a paradigm shift in our understanding of the structure of work. Within this new paradigm, companies are left with looming questions about the shape of post-pandemic work. Will CEOs and managers take advantage of this unprecedented opportunity to combine knowledge wrought from the pandemic with existing wisdom to design a new and improved work landscape?

This White Paper focuses on two complementary concepts that companies can use to take advantage of this opportunity to sculpt a new work reality: Psychological Safety and Intrinsic Motivation. Building on decades of research, these concepts create the foundations for smooth implementation of innovative work structures that maximize not only employee potential, but also wellbeing.

Within the knowledge and tech industries, the biggest legacy of the pandemic will likely be that it confirmed the advantages of remote work (McKendrick, 2021). Anecdotal evidence highlights benefits such as improved work-life balance, greater inclusivity, and enhanced collaboration between geographically distant contributors (e.g., Perry, 2021; Schiffer, 2021). There is also empirical evidence backing this up: a survey run by Birkinshaw, Cohen, & Stach (2020) saw employees reporting that remote work had given them greater feelings of choice in their jobs, made work less tiresome, and allowed them to devote a greater portion of time to tasks that directly contributed to career and company growth.

There are, of course, advantages of in-person office work, including ease of forming interpersonal connections, access to mentors, and more spontaneous innovation. As such, many companies are now considering how to get the best of both worlds by moving forward with hybrid models. However, “hybrid work” can take many shapes, and which shape is best will be difficult to decide given a lack of evidence and the fact that the answer will differ between companies, teams, and even individual employees. This means that companies should be asking themselves questions like: “How can we craft a hybrid model tailored to our company’s, managers’, and employees’ unique needs?”; and “How can we support managers and employees so that they have the tools and motivation necessary to make the model work?”



# 2

## Characteristics of the Change Environment

**The process of changing** and building a new work reality that many companies are undertaking or considering is occurring in an environment characterized by the following four features:

### **Uncertainty**

The process of shifting to a hybrid work environment is new for everyone. There are no experts or decades of evidence to tell companies which method is best, and there are few existing models from which to build the new structure (Kurjenniemi & Nora, 2020). This means managers and employees alike are traversing uncharted territories. Routines will be upended, unknown stresses and role-conflicts let in the door. And it won't be possible to get reassurance about when, or even if, efforts will lead to a satisfying solution. In other words, this is a process characterized by high levels of uncertainty. Uncertain problems require innovative solutions. Finding those solutions will be quicker and the outcome stronger the more voices that are contributing and the more effectively those voices are leveraged.

### **Complexity**

Hybrid work is more complex than standard in-person work. Variance in location and schedules means no longer being able to count on everyone being in the same place at the same time. New confidentiality issues of conducting business online will have to be considered. Greater reliance on technology means more programs and software to coordinate and integrate. Issues surrounding maintaining fairness for both remote and in-person employees become more complex. The planning of schedules now requires consideration of both work and personal circumstances. All of this leads to an increasingly complex work system, which in turns leads to more opportunities for mistakes and failures (Edmondson, 2019). Thus, now more than ever, companies need to be nimble in their detection of and response to failures in the system.



## Learning

In initiating a new work structure, what companies are doing is asking employees to learn and adjust. Not just to new schedules, communication styles, confidentiality ethics, etc., but also to new forms of technology. The increasing importance of learning is reflected in a survey of company leaders that showed “nearly 80% reported learning and building of capabilities is very or extremely important to their organizations’ long-term growth, compared with 59% who said that this was true before the pandemic” (Capozzi, Dietsch, Pachtod, & Park, 2020). The rising necessity of learning means there is also a rising necessity for companies to provide employees with the kind of tools and environment that they need to optimize their learning process.

## Risk

Designing a new work reality is a process that carries with it a high rate of failure. For example, you may try to use a new video conferencing tool only to find two weeks in that it does not fit your needs. Or you may try a staggered work schedule and discover it makes arranging meetings very difficult for one team. Because failure will be inevitable within the work restructuring process, management and employees will have to become comfortable with risk and learn to treat failure as a source of information rather than a loss.

All of these characteristics should lead to a clear conclusion — companies need to take an employee-centered approach to crafting their new hybrid work environment. An employee-centered approach recognizes that employees are companies’ most effective and valuable assets for addressing the challenges unique to restructuring the work environment. Employees bring ideas, catch mistakes, optimize tech adoption, and turn failures into valuable information. But all of these desirable proactive behaviors (DPB) employees can perform for the benefit of their companies are not low-hanging fruit served on a silver platter. For employee-based assets to be utilized, managers and CEOs need to provide an environment that supports employee engagement in DPB without triggering burnout or motivational depletion. As discussed in Ju, Ma, Ren, & Zhang (2019), providing that kind of environment requires a two-pronged approach which: (1) reduces barriers to DPB, and (2) increases motivation for DPB.



# 3

## Reducing Barriers Through Psychological Safety

**What specifically** are the barriers that employees face when considering whether to engage in DPB that will help the company? The main barriers are risk of experiencing social and behavioral consequences. Social consequences include things like being labeled as troublemakers, complainers, or needy. Examples of behavioral consequences include receiving poor performance evaluations or even being terminated. Fortunately, there is something companies can use to reduce these barriers, and it is uniquely fitted to the current change environment.

This is the point when the superhero emerges, cape billowing, “Psychological Safety” emblazoned on their chest. “Did someone say, ‘complex working environment characterized by high levels of uncertainty and necessitating support for employee innovation, learning, and feedback?!’”

Psychological Safety, as defined by the concept’s leading researcher, Harvard’s Amy Edmondson, is “The belief that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk taking”, which refers to “The experience of feeling able to speak up with relevant ideas, questions, or concerns. Psychological Safety is present when colleagues trust and respect each other and feel able—even obligated—to be candid” (Edmondson, 2019, p. 8). Psychological Safety exists when “new ideas are welcomed and built upon” instead of “picked apart and ridiculed”, and colleagues will not “embarrass or punish you for offering a different point of view” or “think less of you for admitting you don’t understand something” (Edmondson, 2019, p.15). Edmondson goes on to explain that Psychological Safety has been shown to be of most value in contexts characterized by high levels of uncertainty and necessitating innovation, learning, and collaboration—the same contexts many companies find themselves in today.

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The value of Psychological Safety has been summarized as its ability to allow workers to stop focusing on self-protection and blame, and start focusing on achieving shared goals (Edmondson, 2019). Research has shown Psychological Safety to offer a veritable buffet of benefits, such as those reported in a literature review by Newman, Donohue, & Eva (2017). This report detailed evidence of Psychological Safety's ability to enhance performance (e.g., goal achievement, return on assets), creativity and innovation, ability to learn from failures, and implementation of new technology. It was found to improve communication in the form of more knowledge sharing, provision of candid feedback, raising of disagreements, and pointing out of errors. And it was associated with increased levels of organizational commitment, work engagement, positive attitudes towards teamwork, and perceived trustworthiness of new team members. Recent research has even begun to produce evidence that Psychological Safety leads to increased levels of Intrinsic Motivation (e.g., Kim & Kim, 2017).





# Increasing Engagement Through Intrinsic Motivation

**What about motivation** for engaging in DPB? Motivation for DPB is not usually incentivized in the ways other desirable behaviors traditionally are. Specifically, DPB are not required on contracts, so performance evaluations are not dependent on them, and employees will not get paid for them. There is neither punishment nor reward to incentivize. Thus, even in a psychologically safe environment where barriers are low, lack of motivational support may mean employees still fail to engage in DPB.

It may seem like a straightforward response to this knowledge would be to start providing financial or status incentives for performance of DPB. Unfortunately, research tells us that the solution is not that easy. Evidence suggests use of these kinds of extrinsic motivators does not produce greater engagement in DPB (e.g., Lin, 2007). Instead, the most important factor in predicting employee engagement in DPB appears to be Intrinsic Motivation (Lin, 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Intrinsic Motivation is defined as motivation for behaviors that are performed because they are interesting or fun (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The feeling of enjoyment that you get from engaging in the behavior is what motivates you to keep performing it. Furthermore, intrinsically motivated behaviors are, by definition, not externally controlled or forced; that is, they are engaged in purely out of personal choice. The moment a behavior is being performed primarily to get money, avoid shame, etc., even if it is enjoyable, it is no longer considered intrinsic.

Prototypical examples of intrinsically motivated behaviors include listening to music, reading an engrossing novel, solving a challenging puzzle, playing a video game, hanging out with friends, etc. In a work context, this could take the form of the delightful sensation of synapses crackling as you tear through a freshly unearthed batch of research articles that hit just the right spot, or excitement and camaraderie popping with champagne effervescence from the repeated ah-ha moments during a problem-solving session with teammates.



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There are also other high-quality forms of motivation that look much like Intrinsic Motivation and produce similar benefits (Ryan & Deci, 2017). However, rather than being energized by enjoyment and interest, these other forms of motivation are energized by value concordance. That is, the source of motivation pushing people to engage in these kinds of behaviors is the fact that these behaviors are consistent with the individual's personal values and beliefs. For example, working hard to make a presentation, not because making presentations is fun, but because pursuing excellence at work and helping your company grow is something meaningful and important to you.

According to the dominant theory of Intrinsic Motivation, Self-determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), Intrinsic Motivation emerges in environments in which the individual is getting satisfaction of three innate psychological needs: autonomy (the need to feel one's behavior is voluntary [vs forced], and consistent with one's values), competence (the need to feel effective and achieve mastery), and relatedness (the need to feel cared for by others and a sense of belonging to a group, and having opportunities to contribute to others' lives in important ways).

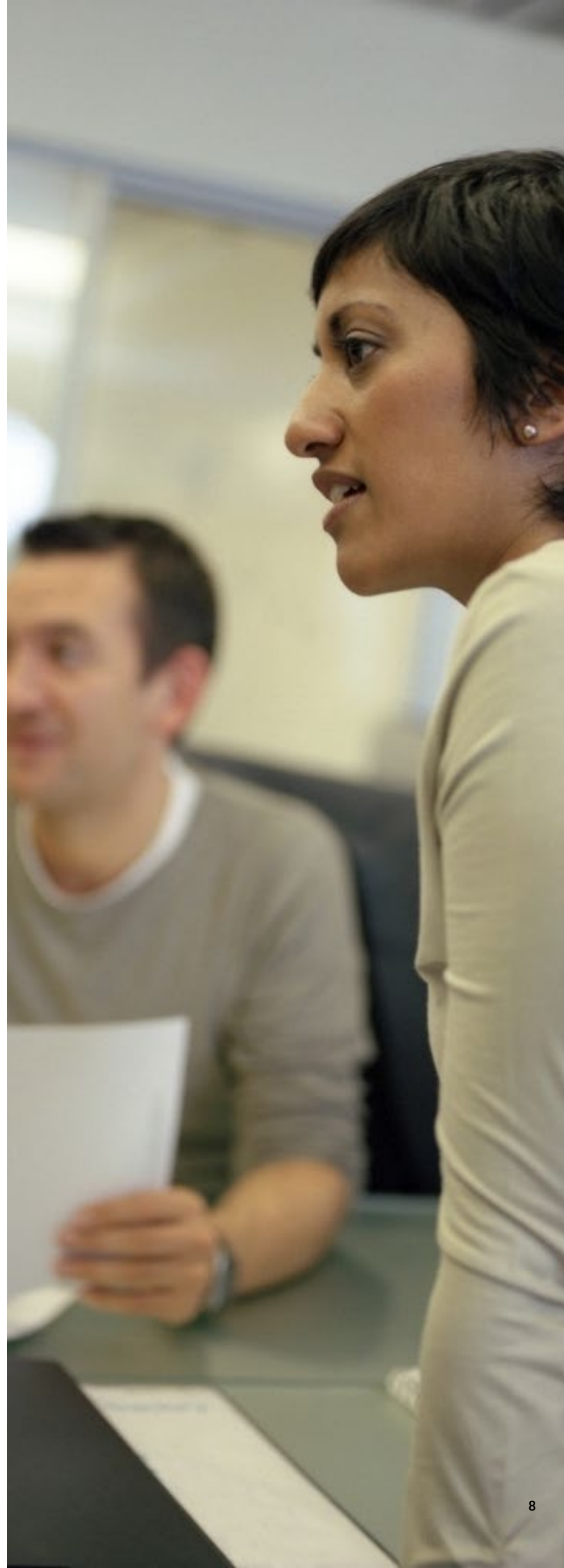


Autonomy, competence, and relatedness can be thought of as nutrients—just like plants need water, soil, and sun to grow and thrive, humans need autonomy, competence, and relatedness to grow, thrive, and experience Intrinsic Motivation. By constructing a work environment that provides employees with feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, management can increase employee Intrinsic Motivation. Conversely, failure to provide support for these three needs will negatively impact Intrinsic Motivation. And it is not just Intrinsic Motivation that is so intimately tied to the three needs. Research has also shown that wellbeing is nourished by satisfaction, and depleted by dissatisfaction, of the three needs.

At Attuned, we have identified 11 principal Intrinsic Motivators which classify the valuable, interesting, and fun aspects of work that lead to satisfaction of the aforementioned three innate psychological needs: Altruism, Autonomy, Competition, Feedback, Financial Needs, Innovation, Progress, Rationality, Security, Social Relationships, and Status. Understanding which of these motivators drive an employee provides an indication of the best ways to support and encourage them.

Intrinsic Motivation has received enormous research support for decades and been linked with a wide range of positive benefits (Ryan & Deci, 2017). A meta-analysis evaluating evidence from hundreds of studies conducted over 40 years returned the unequivocal result: Intrinsic Motivation is a medium to strong predictor of high-quality performance of, and persistence in, the kind of work that is central to the knowledge and tech industries (Cerasoli, Nicklin, & Ford, 2014).

That is, Intrinsic Motivation strongly predicts high-quality performance of work that is complex, draws on personal resources (e.g., critical thinking skills, self-management), requires a broad focus, and lacks pre-defined outcomes. This is contrasted with the kind of work that has been found to be best incentivized by extrinsic motivators (e.g., money, status), which is characterized as non-complex, repetitive, pressured towards achieving a specific pre-defined outcome, and requires highly structured behavior and a narrow focus.



The list of benefits continues (Ryan & Deci, 2017). At the employee level, research shows that Intrinsic Motivation predicts higher levels of work engagement, organizational commitment, trust in management and the company, employee wellbeing, and work satisfaction; greater internalization of company values and adjustment to changes; and enhanced creativity and learning outcomes. At the organizational level, Intrinsic Motivation has been found to predict greater organizational profitability, greater organizational effectiveness, and higher levels of customer satisfaction. And, of particular relevance here, Intrinsic Motivation also predicts engagement in DPB (e.g., Lin, 2007; Ju, et al., 2019).



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# 5

## Creating and Adjusting to New Work Realities

**Now let's get into** the nitty gritty of the role Psychological Safety and Intrinsic Motivation can play in helping companies to craft a new world of work. To do that, let's look at two possible methods for carrying out the restructuring process, as well as the ways in which Psychological Safety and Intrinsic Motivation are involved.

There is no one right answer regarding what structure—remote, in-person, or hybrid —works best for all companies. Even companies within the same industry will have different needs. Even within the same company, there is variation among the needs of teams and individual employees. For example, we know some employees are most motivated when they can set their own schedules and decide their own work styles, while other employees thrive in the presence of externally provided structure and guidance. Some employees are energized by frequent feedback offered from the boss dropping by the desk, while others would prefer keeping those moments limited to weekly Zoom meetings. The point is, the best answer for each company is to find a solution that is highly tailored and customized to the needs of the industry, company, team, all the way down to individual employees.

This sentiment that a tailored approach is the best course of action is backed up by research from the Institute for Employment Studies, which concluded the development of a “best fit” approach to management is more effective than adopting management practices that are considered best practice elsewhere (Hirsch & Tyler, 2017). The researchers went on to recommend the “best fit” should be based on consideration of a variety of factors such as company priorities, employee aspirations, and culture.



## **The Try-Assess-Tweak Approach**

The newness of this process means we are embarking on a journey without a map. It is unlikely we will get it right on the first try. Thus, it has been recommended that companies view all their plans as explicitly tentative, and tweak and update their plans as more information comes in (Vaillancourt, 2021). That is, an iterative method of trying, assessing, and tweaking. Central to this try-assess-tweak method is the frequent collection of information that is then used to make updates and improvements in real time.

This try-assess-tweak method is similar to the emergent discovery approach that allowed for the creation of the Moderna Covid-19 vaccine (Afeyan & Pisano, 2021). The emergent discovery process starts with the proposal of “what if” questions that are often highly speculative. Ideas become plans which are then submitted to an iterative process of testing and critical feedback to identify failures followed by changes in plans to correct for the failures. This process is repeated until a workable solution emerges, such as a breakthrough in medical technology, or establishment of an innovative hybrid work environment. Thinkers behind the emergent discovery process stress that, for it to work, there must be “a culture that views ‘flawed’ ideas not as dead ends but as building blocks and considers the evolution of ideas to be a collectively shared responsibility.”

## **Employees as Resources**

Central to both the tailoring/customizing and try-assess-tweak approaches are employees. Employees can be resources, benefactors, and/or casualties of the work redesign process. And Psychological Safety and Intrinsic Motivation can affect where employees land within each of these roles. As resources, employees can be leveraged in two ways: (1) as sources of ideas, and (2) as providers of real-time feedback.

## **Employees as Sources of Ideas**

Employees are the best, and in some cases the only, sources for ideas about how to structure the new work reality. As experts on themselves and the realities of the job they perform, turning to them for ideas helps ensure plans will fit both their own and the company's needs. Furthermore, employee knowledge may be more valuable now than ever before. This increased value comes from the fact employees have had an unprecedented chance to gain self-knowledge about what they need to thrive at work because of lockdown restrictions forcing the entire workforce to go remote. It's not often that all employees in a company get to do the same job in two vastly different ways, allowing for side-by-side comparison of advantages and disadvantages.

## **Sources of Feedback and Error Reporting**

Given employees are the ones embedded in the new work structures being tested, they will have firsthand real-time knowledge of what is working and what is not. Why wait for months, or even years, for numbers to come back when companies can gain qualitative evidence in the moment to determine how their plans are going? This readily available qualitative data will be especially useful for making small tweaks with big impacts. For example, Edmondson (2019, p.37) described a hypothetical situation in which a poorly designed linen distribution system in a hospital could significantly disrupt nurses' work. Without sufficient access to linens, nurses would be forced to either stop their task, putting the patient at risk, or steal from a neighbor, creating a shortage for the neighbor along with resentment and anger. This kind of easily fixable, big-impact issue would be difficult to detect without firsthand employee reporting.

The fact that some of the most important resources a company's restructuring plan hinges on are ideas and feedback from employees should make it obvious why Psychological Safety and Intrinsic Motivation are important. If employees worry about their ideas being harshly critiqued or tossed to the side, they will not speak up. If employees feel a lack of choice over changes or are excluded from decisions, they will be less motivated to engage in that kind of reflection that would allow them to identify problems and come up with solutions. Thus, to ensure employee participation in the above DPB, employers need to remove the barriers and increase motivation for their engagement.

## Employees as Benefactors

By including employees in the restructuring process in a way that provides Psychological Safety and supports need satisfaction, employees can become benefactors of the process. It's also worth keeping in mind, when employees benefit, companies benefit too!

Specifically, if employees are given a safe environment where they can contribute ideas that would make it easier for them to perform their job, and space to candidly provide feedback when someone else's idea isn't working for them, there is a much higher chance that the eventual work structure that is adopted will end up improving their work lives, boosting their productivity and leaving them feeling more satisfied and energized by their work.

Furthermore, if the methods by which managers involve employees in the restructuring process are designed to provide satisfaction of the three needs, then employees can benefit from increased Intrinsic Motivation and wellbeing. Intrinsic Motivation may also arise from engagement in the restructuring process itself. Elements such as innovation, complex problem-solving, and collaboration make this kind of work ripe for intrinsically motivating experiences of interest and enjoyment. Even more importantly, the work may feel meaningful, laden with the possibility of leading to improvements for the company, colleagues, and the employee themselves.



# **Employees are the best, and in some cases the only, sources for ideas about how to structure the new work reality**

## **Employees as Casualties**

Including employees in the restructuring process also protects against the backlash and resentment that can arise from their being shut out of it. It's not difficult to find damning narratives detailing the negative impact some companies have had on employees as a result of their work restructuring policies. Something all these narratives have in common is employees feeling unheard and lacking agency. One employee at the University of Minnesota pleaded for people in positions of power to realize that the story about how to return to work is "also a story about power," and if they choose to "locate power over how we work entirely in the hands of supervisors, problems will ensue" (Perry, 2021). This sentiment was echoed in a letter sent by Apple employees in response to Tim Cook's announcement that he would soon be ending fully remote work to shift to a hybrid work model (Schiffer, 2021). They stated, "Over the last year we often felt not just unheard, but at times actively ignored," and noted, "It feels like there is a disconnect between how the executive team thinks about remote / location-flexible work and the lived experiences of many of Apple's employees." This letter goes on to indicate this lack of understanding and responsiveness to employee concerns on the part of administrators is what led to the resignation of some employees.

This is not a call to employers to shift all decisional power into the hands of employees, or to say that fully remote work is best. Instead, the key takeaway is that these employees felt their needs were ignored and their ideas not sought. They felt a lack of choice and a powerlessness to elicit attention for their concerns. They felt that the higher-ups had not taken the time to understand their feelings, signaling they did not value their input and did not trust them to determine what works best for them. This is a situation that hurts intrinsic and other high-quality forms of motivation and lowers employee wellbeing.

This is where Psychological Safety and need supportive (i.e., Intrinsic Motivation supportive) practices come in. If Tim Cook had included his employees in the decision-making process for crafting the return-to-work policy, even if the decision ended up being the same, it is likely his employees wouldn't have felt so demoralized by the decision. When companies work hard to ensure they craft their return-to-work policies in a climate characterized by Psychological Safety, where employees' input is actively sought and their psychological needs are prioritized, it makes it possible for companies to move forward with policies that, while they may not be every employee's ideal choice, elicit a sense of volition and commitment to the plan without damaging motivation and wellbeing.



# 6

## Learning and Adopting New Technology

**Another challenge** that companies are facing right now is the increasing necessity of figuring out ways to ensure their employees learn and adopt new technology, especially that which will allow hybrid work to, well, work. This challenge is not new. The premium placed on the learning and adoption of new technologies by employees has been growing for years (Coetzee, 2019). Companies realize that agile integration of digital work tools is essential for innovation, efficiency, access to the talents of a global workforce, and enhanced customer service and engagement. While the challenge is not new, its urgency reached a crescendo when the Covid-19 pandemic suddenly forced workers across the world to learn how to perform their jobs almost completely via the use of technology. And it seems this challenge is here to stay as all signs point to this trend of enhanced digitization continuing after the pandemic (McKendrick, 2021). In order to rise to this challenge, companies will need to effectively support their employees' learning process and elicit their ideas regarding utilization of the technology. As Coetzee (2019, p.317) said, "An organization's success in realizing its digital transformation strategy hinges on its employees' knowledge and creative solutions."

Again, enter Psychological Safety and Intrinsic Motivation. Psychological Safety has been shown to enhance the technology learning process via greater knowledge sharing among peers, enhanced comfort to ask questions and seek help, and more innovative use of technology (Coetzee, 2019; Edmondson, 2019). Intrinsic Motivation has been shown to improve efficiency and consistency in the uptake of new technologies (Ryan & Deci, 2017); and is associated with a variety of positive experiences such as increased perceptions of the pragmatic value of technology, more satisfying user experiences, and enhanced ability of technology adoption to increase wellbeing (Partala & Kallinen, 2012; Partala and Saari, 2015). Emphasizing Intrinsic Motivation may be especially important for this pandemic-triggered shift towards digitization given evidence that sudden (vs. incremental) forcing of technology onto workers is met with greater resistance and associated with decrements in intrinsic and other high-quality forms of motivation (Coetzee, 2016a, 2016b).





# 7

## Strategies for Fostering Psychological Safety and Intrinsic Motivation

**So how do we support** Psychological Safety and Intrinsic Motivation? More specifically, how do we ensure that we understand what our employees need to feel motivated and thrive, to instill in them a sense of choice and self-determination, and to make them feel comfortable enough to give us feedback about how the new work worlds and tech learning are going?

Strategies for improving Psychological Safety in hybrid work have been reviewed and discussed elsewhere extensively (e.g., Dilan, 2021; Edmondson, 2019; Menabney, 2021; Newman, et al., 2017; O'Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020). But oft-repeated tips that are worth highlighting include:

- Intentionally communicate the importance of Psychological Safety by providing a convincing rationale.
- Clearly state newly established work guidelines to ensure employees feel capable of following them effectively.
- Regularly and explicitly express gratitude for team members. And ensure they know you recognize and appreciate their contributions.
- Ensure employees feel a sense of belonging and connection by supplementing in-person interaction with other kinds of informal interpersonal exchanges.
- Give employees space to express concerns. And try to reach a deep and complete understanding of the concerns so employees feel your policies are informed by the realities of the job. This means asking open-ended questions, and not stopping until your understanding is based on explicit information rather than assumptions, even in situations where it feels like your assumptions are the only possible interpretation. For example, most people think getting a promotion is always a good thing, but for a minority of people it might trigger feelings of anxiety at the new level of responsibility, or grief over the loss of membership to the team they are leaving.

Another tool that has taken on the status of canon in strategies for improving Psychological Safety is anonymous standardized assessment (e.g., Edmondson, 2019). In the context of the current discussion, this means an empirically validated scale that can be administered electronically, scored anonymously, and used to quantify the level of Psychological Safety on a team. This kind of assessment has quite a few advantages. First, the sheer act of giving employees an anonymous, and thus safe, method of providing feedback to managers and team members will contribute to feelings of Psychological Safety and directly facilitate employee engagement in the DPB of providing feedback. Second, investing in an assessment aimed at understanding employee's experiences will signal to them that management cares about their wellbeing and wants to understand their point of view, which in turn can provide satisfaction of the three needs and lead to increased Intrinsic Motivation. Third, the company benefits as well, because the standardized nature of the assessment will allow managers to track employee responses to structural changes and gauge success of the changes over time. Fourth, it can provide an additional way to make management approaches more targeted by allowing for objective comparison between teams to determine which teams are in greatest need of intervention and which managers might be struggling to support team members' needs. Fifth, electronic administration will significantly ease the assessment process in a hybrid work environment where a whole swath of the workforce is on the other side of the city, or even the world.

So, what exactly does increasing Intrinsic Motivation for DPB look like? It means employers must figure out a way to make the employee want to spontaneously engage in DPB on their own. The behaviors themselves must be interesting, fun, need-satisfying, or congruent with employees' personal values. While this may sound abstract, luckily decades of research have produced actionable tips that employers can utilize to enhance employee Intrinsic Motivation.

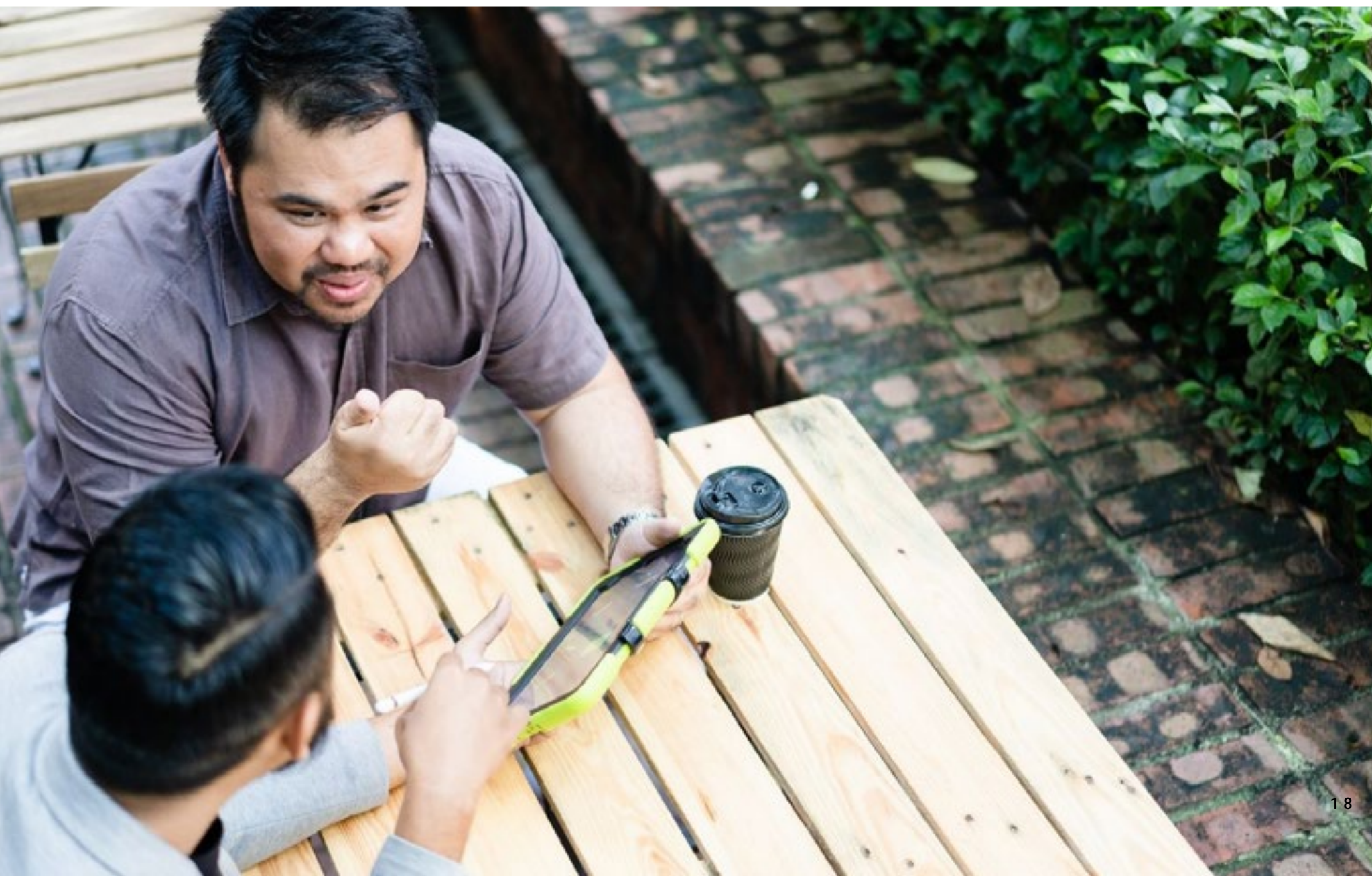
To begin with, the reason I chose to highlight the above suggestions for supporting Psychological Safety is because they rang many bells for me as an Intrinsic Motivation researcher. The strategies for supporting Intrinsic Motivation that the literature have been championing for years are strongly represented in the above suggestions for promoting Psychological Safety. In fact, there is initial evidence that interventions designed to increase Psychological Safety also provide satisfaction of three needs and thus Intrinsic Motivation (Mattjik & Sanders, 2020).

The following is a very brief summary of the literature on strategies for supporting Intrinsic Motivation at work: provide choice when possible, minimize the use of controlling language, seek to understand and then acknowledge employees' hesitations or concerns, provide a meaningful rationale for decisions and limits, develop a trusting relationship with employees, and avoid connecting employee intelligence or ability to outcomes (e.g., do not say something like, "If you do well on this project it will really show how smart you are").

**By being included in decisions, employees will feel a sense of choice and control over the work environment that they helped craft**

Another way to improve intrinsic motivation is to understand more about each employee's work motives, such as the 11 motivators identified in research performed by Attuned. Knowing each employee's unique constellation of motivators can provide a window into understanding how to best support that individual's Intrinsic Motivation because it tells management which aspects of work they find the most fun, interesting, and value congruent. This understanding can be used by management to maximize the most motivationally potent aspects of work for each individual. For example, if an employee reports Progress as one of their top motivators, this tells management that providing that employee with opportunities to learn new skills and engage in challenging and complex tasks will provide them with the competence satisfaction they need to make their intrinsic motivation bloom.

Evidence-based methods specific to supporting Intrinsic Motivation for DPB can be taken from the literature on empowering leadership. Empowering leadership involves actively encouraging employee ideas for improvement and giving the employee discretionary power to make changes and carry out ideas. Research has shown that this kind of leadership style increases Intrinsic Motivation for DPB (Ju, et al., 2019). It has also shown that it can increase Intrinsic Motivation more generally. Specifically, by being included in decisions, employees will feel a sense of choice and control over the work environment that they helped craft (i.e., autonomy satisfaction). Their involvement will also communicate that they are seen as competent and knowledgeable enough to have their input sought (i.e., competence satisfaction). Employees will also feel that they are a valued and embedded member of the company if they are being entrusted with this task and seen as having an intimate enough relationship with managers to make decisions in their name (i.e., relatedness satisfaction).



# 8

## **An Empathy Exercise to Support Psychological Safety and Intrinsic Motivation**

**As a clinical psychologist** who spent years as a therapist helping clients to undertake massive life-altering changes, I learned an important lesson. I had memorized every step of the best available therapies. I had expertise in the biological, cognitive, and emotional milieu created by depression, anxiety, etc. But if I did not also ensure that I developed a deep and nuanced understanding of how my client experienced our work together and ensured that the things I was telling them to do fit into their unique life circumstances, without a doubt I would have failed. The same is true for CEOs and managers. Anytime people are involved, you must know not only what works on paper, but also what works in reality. And understanding what works in reality means understanding the people involved.

Thus, the first step in any process involving massive structural change should involve an empathetic examination of the employee experience of what their companies are asking them to do. After all, employees are the ones who will be affected the most, who are carrying out the changes, and who companies are reliant upon to make their changes work. There are a few advantages of employers entering into the change process with empathetic knowledge of the employee experience. First, it will allow for the proactive, rather than reactive, building in of features to safeguard against damage to employee wellbeing. Second, it can improve leaders' listening and assessment skills while they interact with employees by helping them to ask better questions and look out for key phrases that carry deeper meaning. Third, it is the socially responsible thing to do—rather than putting all the responsibility on employees' shoulders to explain how changes are affecting them, managers and CEOs should invest their own time to try to understand the employee experience. Caring about other people doesn't just make you a better person, but it can also give you a little boost of relatedness satisfaction and wellbeing! And last but certainly not least, empathetic understanding of the employee experience can set the stage for the emergence of Psychological Safety (Edmondson, 2019) and Intrinsic Motivation (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2017).

So, what does an empathy exercise look like? It involves dedicating time to really try to step into your employees' shoes. Block off an hour, close your door, open a Word document, and try to write a list of all the possible struggles and emotions employees could experience during this process. To get started, try to imagine yourself or one of your loved ones as an employee.

# **Anytime people are involved, you must know not only what works on paper, but also what works in reality**

Ask yourself, “How would I feel if my employer said XYZ to me first thing on a Monday morning? How would I feel if my child called me and told me their employer said XYZ to them? How would my father have reacted if he was being told XYZ after 20 years on the job?” If you have trouble coming up with possible emotional reactions, do a search for “emotion wheel” in your browser’s images section.

Here are some possible reactions employees could have to this work restructuring change process, which can be used as a starting point for the empathy exercise:

Given all the learning of new skills, technology, and schedules that employees will have to do, and the increasingly complex environment in which they will have to accomplish them, companies should expect the following. Workers may feel overwhelmed by all the new technology, and their energy drained from conscious and effortful (vs routinized) engagement with the technology. Workers will have lots of questions that they need answered, and more difficulty in getting them answered if they are working remotely. They will also have heightened concerns about making mistakes or failing to achieve personal and team goals. Employees may fear the new technology or work structure will be less effective and make it difficult to maintain previous levels of productivity. They also may fear a loss of status to junior or inexperienced employees who are more tech savvy.

The high levels of uncertainty and experimentation can lead to employees experiencing possible exhaustion from repeated experimentation and tweaking. Annoyance at a lack of rationale and evidence for why certain strategies are being tried. Being prone to feeling resentful and losing confidence in leadership if managers fail to take employee perspectives into account despite the lack of evidence available from non-employee sources. Conversely, employees might feel nervous about providing upward feedback to managers and bosses, become tired of being repeatedly questioned about how things are going, or feel annoyed at having to spend time and effort to engage in a feedback process which is not part of their contracted (i.e., paid) work.

Employees can be left feeling used, forgotten, and taken for granted in response to everything from management failing to include them in decisions, down to seemingly innocent choices of wording in emails providing updates about changes.

Finally, it is essential to recognize that all of the above stressors are happening in the context of a pandemic. Employees have already been subjected to months and months of change, uncertainty, fear, grief, and losses of autonomy. This means employees have already had their motivational and emotional resources drained so there is less available to cope with changes from work restructuring and technology adoption. It is also important to realize that there is variation among employees in terms of the degrees of stress they have experienced; for example, in the US, Black and Latinx workers may have experienced more Covid-19 deaths within their inner circles (Centers for Disease Control, 2021). Furthermore, individual employees differ in the extent to which they can cope with change; thus, just because some team members report being okay does not mean that others with similar demographics will feel the same.



# 9

## Conclusion

**In summary,** the pandemic has given employers an unprecedented chance to build a new hybrid work reality. One in which massive changes will be made to work structures and technological tools. The process of building this new reality will be best achieved if it is employee-centered, both prioritizing the satisfaction of employee needs and using employee needs as signposts to identify what kinds of changes to make and how to make them. The way to get the most out of this employee-centered approach is to utilize strategies that support and maximize Psychological Safety and Intrinsic Motivation. A psychologically safe and intrinsically motivating restructure approach will allow companies to form a new work landscape that is high-performing, efficient, and contributes to employee wellbeing and work satisfaction.



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