

SAFETY AS A TEAM PROCESS: AN ACTION LEARNING PERSPECTIVE ON EXPERIENCING AND REPORTING SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AS A TEAM PROCESS



Professional Action Learning Coach Christoph Maria Ravesloot from WIAL Netherlands specializes in working for teams with trauma blocking the team development. The first step is to make the safety in the team negotiable and get it to the attention and care of the team. He wrote a blog on that theme from two action learning perspectives: who reports unsafety in the team and who experiences it? Those two perspectives define the intervening questions an action learning coach can ask the team.

Interlude:

The text below aligns with the description of safety according to Amy Edmondson as cited by Hans van der Loo in his book *TEAMING*.

Edmondson and van der Loo, and with them many others, name safety from a content observation. Social safety is then about harassment discrimination, bullying and aggression, thus describing the phenomenon from its cause. This becomes visible in an accumulation or concatenation of behaviors of one or more persons. The behavior of one person at a moment is named as psychological safety: complaining, whining, not looking at someone, false accusation, suggestive insinuation. It is a pattern that becomes important within action learning when repetition of behaviors is involved. In action learning, to these substantive phenomena is added who observes and reports it and who experiences it.

- Hans van der Loo and Patrick Davidson (2022), *Teaming, the new reality of collaboration*, VakmediaNet.

- Amy C. Edmonson (2019), *The fearless organization, create psychological safety in the workplace to drive innovation and growth*, Business Contact.

This article adds the perspectives of the person experiencing it and the person observing and reporting it. This fits better with action learning and gives more room for exploring the core message behind the symptomatic description of situations. And from these two perspectives, the Action Learning Coach can place interventions that initiate and sustain the team process.



Which perspective fits social safety and which fits psychological safety?

From the action learning perspective, insecurity should be a team problem, otherwise the session becomes an intervision about one person's problem. The action learning protocol is not suitable for that. Failing that, a feeling of insecurity has become a personal problem or for a team member and, if not, for the action learning team coach, who must ensure that the personal problem becomes a team problem so that the action learning session can have meaning. The action learning coach leads the team back to a team problem and a team process.

To do so, the coach can encourage the team to discuss psychological safety in the action learning session and determine what the process looks like to restore safety. If that does not happen and the team moves in the opposite direction, then the action learning coach has uncovered an underlying problem: it apparently does not feel safe in this team to change anything on its own, and so intervention by the coach is needed.

In choosing the appropriate intervention, a distinction between psychological and social safety is helpful. Psychological insecurity exists from the personal experience of insecurity and is experienced and or reported by one person.

Social insecurity exists from an action learning perspective from a team experience and is reported from a team. More people experience it and dare to address it.

It helps the coach to be able to clearly distinguish between a social insecurity in the team process and a psychological insecurity in one person. The interventions needed to make it

a team problem are different and independent of the content interpretation in the definition framework of Edmondson and van der Loo, for example.

What perspective fits psychological safety

For an action learning coach, it is important to realize immediately how it is possible to intervene in insecurity. Possible interventions must be part of his skills as a coach. For that, the coach must understand that psychological insecurity is thus experienced and reported by one person, during a team process. Social insecurity is experienced and reported by more people in the team during a team process. The action learning coach will make several interventions on this with the following intervening learning question:

A: What does insecurity of a team member mean for the whole team and the team process?

B: How will you as a team further explore your problem of insecurity?

The basic skill of the action learning coach is to turn psychological safety into a social safety problem.

Psychological safety therefore involves a process in which a person or (preferably) several persons within a team go through how to move from insufficient psychological safety via reporting to a situation of social safety. The action learning coach facilitates that process by stimulating open questions and making statements and judgments discussable and correctable.

Social safety thus involves a process in which a team experiences how to transform from perceived insecurity to a team process of safety. This sometimes requires a personal process of safety first. After all, a personally felt insecurity may trigger or make the team aware of it. Because the action learning coach has and deploys the skills to do so, this skill can be transferred to the team members.

Team WIAL Netherlands coaches support building social and psychological safety in a team, for example, with consent decision-making. With consent, each participant in an action learning team is asked what predominant objections he or she has in establishing agreement on a core problem. This deliberately avoids the pitfall of consensus formation on the core problem. Consensus can lead to artificial harmony, based on the socially desired behavior for its own sake or by adapting to others. In this way, a concatenation and accumulation of psychologically unsafe behaviors is prevented and social insecurity cannot arise and exist.

The conditions for being able to experience a socially and psychologically safe team environment are easy to imagine, and difficult to maintain: open questioning and judgment avoidance and solution deferral, consent decision-making and distinguishing personal processes and team processes from unsafe to safe.

From action learning, the coach focuses the perspective on psychological and social safety from individual interest toward team interest. The important question is: How is individual interest aligned with team interest and further to organizational interest? Or in the more confrontational choice of words:

- What contribution have you had in reporting and experiencing social safety?
- What contribution would you like to make in building psychological and social safety?



Which intervention fits which of the four basic situations:

Unsafety reported by the team

The first check by the coach is from self-management: how can I myself be cause or catalyst of insecurity reported by the team. With a predominant yes, the coach should withdraw himself from the process. With a predominant no, the coach can make an intervention with the open question: in what way would you like to be coached to discuss and investigate your report of insecurity? Depending on the answer, the coach will indicate how he will intervene and coach to have the team take ownership of the reported insecurity.

Unsafety is reported by a person

The first check by the coach is from self-management: how can I myself be cause or catalyst of personally reported insecurity. With a predominant yes, the coach should withdraw himself from the process and enter into conversation with the person about what happened. With a predominant no, the coach can make an intervention with the open-ended question: In what ways might your reported insecurity within the context of this action learning session not be true for you personally now? Note that the person is speaking for themselves and not for another present. If the answer is clearly no, that the insecurity will not go away within the framework of the action learning session, the coach should intervene on further participation of this person. D The question is how can the team help you create a safe environment? If the person is visibly relieved by being able to imagine that reported insecurity need have little to do with the action learning session and setting, the process can be continued.

Unsafety is experienced by the team

The first check by the coach is from self-management: how can I myself be cause or catalyst of insecurity experienced by the team. With a predominant yes, the coach should present his own role to the team for reflection and possibly withdraw from the process. With a predominant no, the coach can make an intervention with the open question: In what way would you like to be coached to discuss your perceived insecurity and change together? Depending on the answer, the coach will indicate how he will intervene and coach to have the team take ownership of the reported insecurity.

Unsafety is experienced by one person

The first check by the coach is self-management: how can I myself be cause or catalyst of personally felt insecurity. If most of the answer is yes, the coach should start a conversation with the person and possibly withdraw from the process. If the predominant answer is no, the coach can make an intervention with the open question: In what ways might your perceived insecurity within the context of this action learning session not be true for you personally now?

If the answer is clearly no, that the insecurity is indeed personal, and that it does not simply go away within the framework of the action learning session, the coach should intervene on further participation of this person. The question is how can the team help with this? When the person is visibly relieved by being able to imagine that reported insecurity need have little to do with themselves and with the action learning session and setting, the process can be continued.

From these four basic skills, an action learning coach can continue to manage safety as a team process. It should be noted that the coach should not and cannot be the cause of insecurity and that the coach may and must sometimes force a breakthrough so that a team member or team members feel psychologically too insecure to report this to the team.

Experience the possibilities of WIAL NL to help you and your team. We invite you to be allowed to learn how you as a team can take ownership of social safety yourself.

	Who reports unsafety ?	Who experiences unsafety ?
Team members	social unsafety	towards social safety
A team member	psychological unsafety	towards psychological safety

	Who reports unsafety ?	Who experiences unsafety ?
Team members	intervention question by a coach at <i>social unsafety</i> . In what ways would you like to be coached to discuss and investigate your report of insecurity?	intervention question by a coach in process towards <i>social safety</i> . In what ways would you like to be coached to discuss your perceived insecurity and change that as a team together?
A team member	intervention question by a coach in <i>psychological unsafety</i> . The question is how can the team help you create a safe environment?	Intervention by a coach in process to <i>psychological safety</i> . The question is how can the team help you to experience a safe environment?

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