

UNLEASHING THE POWER OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY WITH ACTION LEARNING

Edited by Farah Rani

"Together we are stronger," they say - but for Stephanie Van Aken, Head of Operations and Founder of IDEAS Academy, achieving team cohesion felt anything but powerful. Facing mounting pressure and internal roadblocks, she knew something had to change.

Her team was struggling to overcome obstacles and react to mistakes constructively. Feeling the weight of an important milestone approaching, she knew they needed practical interventions to enhance their performance.



Upon discovering Amy Edmonson's concept of Team Psychological Safety, Stephanie saw its potential to elevate problem-solving, innovative thinking, and collaboration in her team. Attending the TEAM.AS.ONE Psychological Safety Practitioner Certification

program provided her with a thorough understanding of team dynamics and practical improvement strategies.

Two key challenges that Stephanie's team faced were how to overcome obstacles and how to react to mistakes in a constructive manner. With an important milestone approaching, Stephanie knew they needed practical interventions. One of the tools that had been recommended during the Team Psychological Safety certification was the Action Learning process from the World Institute of Action Learning (WIAL) and its question-based group coaching methodology.

During an Action Learning session, the team addressed a specific challenge involving optimising the inquiry process, which encompassed multiple channels through which potential contacts could reach out to the school. The difficulty arose from a lack of designated personnel for follow-up and the need to prevent lead-loss, especially given limited resources.

Through the Action Learning process, team members who were initially hesitant to share concerns gradually found their voices emboldened. This blossoming culture of Team Psychological Safety empowered them to engage in open discussions and collaborative analysis of root causes, leaving behind any fear of intimidation.

Stephanie noticed her team taking more ownership of their roles and initiating support conversations among themselves, a shift from waiting for her direction. This change led to a more positive and happier team atmosphere. "It changes everyone's mindset to realise they can take charge and come forward," Stephanie shared.





Contrary to common misconception, Team Psychological Safety is not about being nice but about candour, the ability to have open and honest conversations. It is a mutual understanding within a team that it's OK to take risks, to voice ideas and concerns, to question, and to admit mistakes without the fear of negative consequences. As Edmondson puts it, "it's felt permission for candour."

The Action Learning approach fosters a supportive team dynamic, where asking for help is as natural as providing it. The shared understanding that we are all working towards a common goal contributes to the strength of this environment, ensuring that no team member feels alone in their efforts, and that everyone is invested in each other's success. Evidence of this is in the spontaneity in which the IDEAS team members sought and offered help during the Action Learning session.

With psychological safety in the team, members were able to share what their mistakes were, even though their actions led to a bad outcome. In this environment, no one faced judgement or criticism for their mistakes; instead, the entire team learned from them. Conversations surrounding a constructive view, with questions such as 'What can be done to improve here?', encouraged a mindset of learning from failure and exposed the problem, leading to the identification of critical issues and collaborative solutions.



Through the process of asking questions, the gaps in information were bridged. Questioning provided a holistic view of the issue and a better understanding of what everyone was doing. Once the team gained a clear understanding of the situation, two key problems emerged: the unclear process for receiving inquiries and the lack of clarity on whose responsibility it was to follow up. The team then seamlessly came together, crafting solutions that implemented a clear process, assigned clear responsibilities, and set defined deadlines. Remarkably, within just 90 minutes, they had successfully addressed a long-standing issue that had previously seemed insurmountable.

Action Learning facilitated Team Psychological Safety by encouraging individuals to delve deep into problems, identify their root causes, and reflect on past mistakes. This process created empathy and rapid support within the team, fostering a sense of unity.

The process was more than just problem-solving; it embodied Team Psychological Safety principles. Every voice was valued, and mistakes were seen as learning opportunities. The leader witnessed firsthand how the integration of Team Psychological Safety and Action Learning spurred innovation, support, and growth within the team. With the first challenge conquered, the team was ready for more. They embarked on another Action Learning session to address a second issue, encouraged by their experience that Team Psychological Safety and Action Learning were not just theoretical concepts but powerful tools for real-world success.

In her reflection, Stephanie expressed how much she gained from the Team Psychological Safety practitioner certification. She found the practicality of the lessons particularly valuable, emphasizing their applicability to real-life scenarios. She mentioned that the program had helped her develop tangible interventions that she was eager to implement, both for personal development and in her role as an educator. Stephanie added, "I can see the immediate value of bringing these insights to my students, showing them how to work together as a team more effectively and navigate their interactions in a positive way."

Equipped with Team Psychological Safety principles and the effective practices of Action Learning, IDEAS Academy confidently approached its milestone. This story showcases the transformational impact of leadership, collaboration, and the synergy between Team Psychological Safety and Action Learning in turning challenges into learning and success in the realm of social entrepreneurship, and any corporation or institution at large.



Ideas Academy is transitioning into a social enterprise secondary international school . We aim to become self-sustainable by becoming the most affordable international school for Malaysians and foreigners, while at the same time offering refugees and the underprivileged grant fees.

At Ideas International we believe that every individual has the right to quality education and to be given the opportunity to create a positive impact in the world regardless of

background, race or economic standing. We are driven by a vision of a better future, where education is a catalyst for transformation and equal opportunities.

Ideas International is a diverse and inclusive school and our mission is to create a compassionate community where it becomes second nature to collaborate and pay it forward.

For questions, contact Marie Tseng, Professional Action Learning Coach Malaysia at marietseng@culturalimpact.org

Source: [Unleashing the Power of Psychological Safety with Action Learning \(culturalimpact.org\)](https://culturalimpact.org)

