Webinar: Self and Safety: Creating a psychologically safe workplace

Kate Went

Thank you so much for joining us for another one of our Q&As. This session is Self and Safety: Creating a Psychologically Safe Workplace.

Kate Went

18 months of COVID-19 related anxiety, a looming threat of climate devastation, political fractions, and winter of discontent. Never have we all felt so vulnerable at the same time. It's an existential crisis on a global scale, and fascinating anthropological study. So what does a chronic feeling of vulnerability do to us? Recognising our response to risk and helping people address it can give us the tools to banish the burnout that comes with chronic and sustained stress. How can we do that in the face of so many threats and challenges? Who has the responsibility of taking on that task? Where do you even start? My name is Kate Went I'm Marketing Manager at employee engagement consultancy scarlettabbott. And I'm joined for this session by my colleagues, cultural anthropologist, Dr. Alex Gapud and Russ Norton head of client experience and D&I champion. Together, we're going to explore the critical role internal comms and HR professionals can play in helping us all feel psychologically safe at work. We'd love your questions, so do send them through to us, if anything crops up throughout the session, feel free to jump in with something and we'll cover those. as and when they come through. But before we do, let's kick things off by actually getting into what we mean by psychological safety - it's pretty big term. But you know, it's something that at the core of all of us. I think we know what it is, but how do we define it, Alex?

Alex Gapud

Yeah, thanks. Okay. Just a bit of context, as well, when I was thinking about this, as a World Changer, I was thinking about it really from that anthropological angle of we're all vulnerable, right? Vulnerability is one of the things that human beings wherever they are, it's part of what it means to be human. Right? We're fragile, we're mortal, more vulnerable to all kinds of things, both in terms of a little disease that, you know, starts halfway across the world, and before you know it, our lives are all turned inside out upside down, 10 times over. And part of vulnerability is also risk and how we deal with it, right? So whether that vulnerability is real or perceived,

all these different dimensions of it, and all these different ways we think about it, and deal with it and respond to it, and how it shapes us and how we think and what we say what we do. That's kind of the angle I was I'm really thinking about it in terms of, yes, psychological safety is a core aspect of it. But it's also this kind of bigger question of "what does it mean to be human and vulnerable?" So I guess, when we think about psychological safety, specifically in the context of the workplace, as Amy Edmondson who's a Harvard professor, she's kind of the author of this term, kind of the expert, she defines it as a shared belief amongst a group, that the group is safe for interpersonal risk taking. Now, to break that down that kind of is one of those academic textbook definitions on the surface. Again, we all kind of have a sense of "Oh, yeah, I think I know what that is". But it's also how comfortable are we with risk with putting ourselves out there? And with being vulnerable? Again, if that's kind of a factor of being human. How do we cope with that? I think it's kind of the wider question that, again, whether or not we want to take the discussion or those of you in the audience, if you're thinking along those lines or want to play with that a little bit. I think there's some scope to explore what does this look like in the workplace? And how does it also tack on to that conversation about being vulnerable? Coping with risk, managing risk - not just from a business standpoint, but from an individual wellbeing standpoint.

Kate Went

Yeah, what about you, Russ? When we say "psychological safety" what are the kinds of conversations that you tend to have with comms folk and clients about that? Because I know it's something that's come into our world more and more, we were starting to talk about it a bit before the pandemic. And then of course, now it's we're just having that conversation over and over. So what to you, does that look like?

Russ Norton

So I guess I come to this from probably two main perspectives. The first one is like as a evolution of diversity and inclusion work. And what's really interesting to me is working with large clients and asking them, "what fundamental difference does diversity and inclusion actually make to your organisation?" Because there's a tonne of studies out there that like, 'diverse teams are more innovative'. And you're like, well, that's great if your organisation is Netflix and exists to innovate, but if your organisation exists to automate and provide quality and consistency, then you don't necessarily want a bunch of people innovating on the fly and making things different and mucking up your processes. So then, when you scratch the surface of what actually we're doing all this diversity and inclusion stuff for, it's to create that culture of psychological safety in which everyone can be themselves, regardless of who they are and what characteristics they carry. The other place where I see psychological safety showing up is around workplace culture, is around beyond just diversity and inclusio, "How does it feel to work around here?" "Do I feel like I can give my all do I feel like I'm distracted?" "Do I feel like if I turn up to a meeting, I'm more worried about that awful stakeholder who I know is going to ask really challenging questions and try and embarrass me in front of all of my peers, or am I turning up to that meeting going, I've got a cracking idea. I'm so excited about the potential of this, I can't wait to share it. I can't wait to hear people's builds and feedback. I know that I'll walk away with a better overall outcome, rather than feeling like I've had a kick in the chest." So, I think that those are the two. Certainly where I talk about psychological safety most is diversity and inclusion, and then organisational culture.

Kate Went

I love that. And I think just hearing you talk about that brings to mind so many workplaces and personal experiences of where I felt really encouraged and nurtured and other places where that's not been the case.

And the difference that that makes to your ability to progress and to foster great working relationships is night and day. It really is. And what are the knock on effects that come from a lack of psychological safety in the workplace? I mean, we can kind of guess there, if you don't feel safe to speak out, there are things you're not going to put your hand up against. But what are some of the smaller and larger long-term things that can happen as a result of not having a sense of psychological safety? Alex, what do you think?

Alex Gapud
Yeah, I think one of the dangers there is, you know, going back to the examples Russ was talking about. You could feel a lot of stress and a lot of pressure when you don't feel psychologically safe, right? So if you've ever had those feelings, like your job is always under threat if you speak up, or if you disagree, or if you ask a question. Or you know, another really big case where this comes up and a huge knock-on effect is whistleblowing. if you're very afraid that there are going to be repercussions for your job or even your safety or wellbeing, if you raise your hand and say, "actually, there's something really shady or immoral or unethical or wrong going on here, and this isn't okay". You know, that's kind of the catastrophic effect of actually when people feel bullied, for example, or if they just feel that constant threat. They won't speak up if there's something really bad or really wrong happening. Obviously, again, that's kind of the extreme case. But I suppose, you know, more day-today, I think one of the things I think about is that chronic stress and vulnerability, what does it do to us? It creates a lot of pressure that I think we take home with us, you know. Work is such a fundamental part of our lives. So often when we meet someone one of the first questions we ask them is, what do you do, right? There's this relationship between our work and identity, but actually, it has that kind of tie-in into the rest of our lives. And it's toxic, and it's bad, and it's dragging us down, and really going to affect our overall sense of happiness, or overall sense of wellbeing, overall sense of fulfilment. And, again, that's not to say that psychological safety is the only factor in that, but it's a key factor. If you can't have a chat with your boss and say something doesn't feel right, or something's not working here, or I'm not sure I'm being I'm being utilised to my best ability or, I don't feel like I'm getting the opportunities that I'd like, again if you don't feel like you can speak out and actually do something to change your circumstances, I think that's already a dangerous position to be in. Because you have that stress and actually feel a bit stuck and tied, that you're not necessarily able to do something about it. So I think those are just a few examples there.

Russ Norton
And I guess I would build on that in terms of let's not beat around the bush - psychological safety is physical safety, right? So if you do not feel psychologically safe, you are fundamentally distracted, you're busy feeling vulnerable. You're busy worrying about what potential repercussions might be, you're busy catastrophizing, you're busy thinking about things that aren't the immediate task in front of you and say you're operating heavy machinery, you're driving a vehicle, say, you're making decisions. Those decisions will not be made as efficiently if you don't feel psychological safe. Similarly, if you don't feel psychologically safe, like Alex was saying, about ethics and whistleblowing, but even if you don't feel psychologically safe to challenge your superior to say, "Oh, woah, should you be digging there?" or "should you be touching that live wire?" or "are we 100% sure that there's not power flowing through those cables?" If you don't feel safe, then that person is prone to those mistakes. And that's when things can go disastrously wrong. You also multiply that that effect up. If your organisation doesn't feel psychologically safe, you fundamentally will be less productive, you will be less valuable as humans in the workplace. And one of our colleagues, Lisa, recently came across a stat that said 52% of a company's value is in its intangible assets, by which we mean it's not the buildings, the products, the stuff

that it makes. It's about the people and how they work together and how smooth information and work and value can be created among them. Half your organisational value is your people and how well they work. And psychological safety is a fundamental factor to that. So when I say "psychological safety is physical safety", not only is it a threat to life, threat to your personal wellbeing and your physical safety, it's also a threat to your financial wellbeing, the security of your organisation. A toxic workplace is one that is at risk. And I guess we saw that with BrewDog recently where people felt increasingly psychologically unsafe, to the point where they made a song and dance about it. Now whether or not those people's claims were true or not, they still felt psychologically unsafe enough to flag it, to bring it to the public's attention. And BrewDog suffered one hell of a knock as a result, what had previously been quite a well loved brand that surfed the wave of growth. And everyone thought they were this cool upstart, that lack of psychological safety damaged their brand and, ultimately, damaged their value. So yeah, it's it's a real, it has a price tag and a physical factor against it.

Kate Went
Such good points. Yeah, it's understanding the knock-on effect in the end, just how big the damage can be, in terms of reputation, and in terms of things that can go wrong. And tracking that all the way back to that sense of psychological safety, you can see just how valuable it is to invest in that. Hybrid working is obviously something that's on all our minds at the moment. We can't escape that term. What impact do you think that is having on our sense of psychological safety? Because obviously, for a lot of organisations they've gone from, from an in-person, workplace situation and having that clear line of sight, having that in-person interaction to being very dispersed. And although organisations have done really well to flex into that space, there are going to be knock-on effects that aren't immediately realised to the culture. What do you think it's doing to our sense of psychological safety, having hybrid working as a way that we are existing now?

Russ Norton
If I can chip in here? First of all, a couple of learnings, because I think there's winners and losers in this game of hybrid working. So I guess if you think about people who are in physical locations, their psychological safety hasn't necessarily changed throughout lockdown. They're still in the shops, they're still in the factories, they're still on the frontline. Their physical safety was at risk. And that probably impacted their psychological safety as well. So that obviously an impact as we're kind of coming out of the other side of the pandemic. Hopefully, that burden is easing slightly. I guess the other winners are office workers who felt that need to show up to the office and put on a face and be showered and be presentable and be that fully functioning human - like cosplaying as a real life grown up coming to the office, right? And that pressure has gone. You've got a bit more time in your day because you're not commuting. So you can do a bit more of the stuff that you love. I've already had two dog walks today. I've stood in a field surrounded by trees. I feel better for having that time that I would miss out on had I commuted to the office. We've also heard from some organisations where they've actually experienced fewer mental health sick days, as a result of people not feeling that like, "Oh God, I really can't face going to the office and seeing other people. I'm going to call in sick." Instead, "you know what, I feel a bit blue, but I can at least throw some pyjamas on and answers some phone calls, send some emails. I can still contribute, I can still feel psychologically safe enough to earn a wage, contribute, deliver some value." So yes, hybrid working. There are downsides. And there is that kind of lack of connection with your team, lack of those moments of checking in, like, "are really okay, that sounds like a tough conversation what's going on with you today?" But there are upsides. Let's recognise the fact that there are a lot of upsides.

Alex Gapud

Yeah, and I think, to follow on, Russ, there are lots of upsides. And again, there are trade offs, you know, Hybrid work is great for some people. It's not for others, you know? And I think that it's going to be one to keep watching, for sure, because we're all figuring out how hybrid works. And I know, especially in the US, as well as here in the UK, there are questions of :are we going to lockdown again? What's happening with all this?" So we're not out of it yet. Hopefully, we're in a more stable place, and now have a clearer sense of direction. But there is still a little bit of that lingering anxiety of what it means. And I know a lot of global organisations have delayed the return to office plans over and over again. Some have said, "Actually, it's not going to be 2021, it's going to be 2022, before people start coming in". I think there's trade offs. I think the psychological safety, sometimes it's those kind of informal relationships and conversations that are built through being together in a shared space, passing by each other in the kitchen, in the break room, the water cooler coffee pot. We actually get a little bit more sense of what other people are like, and especially if you're new to an organisation, I think it can be quite a challenge to build that psychological safety yourself. And I think it's very important for organisations to really support their people, whether that's creating an onboarding cohort of people that can check into assigning mentors that receive at least a little bit of training, as well on coaching and looking after people not just, "Hey I put my hand up, I don't know what this means. I don't know what this looks like, let's just do a thing and have a coffee once every month". I don't think that's enough, either. But I think it's important for organisations to think about how they support their people. Going back to what Russ says about organisational culture, this is a massive part of it. If you have a culture of presenteeism, where people still feel that and they feel like they always have to be online, instead of like rest, being able to take the dog walk. Obviously, that's going to have a strain on psychological safety, even though people are working at home. And I think one of the risks is that actually, because people are working in their living rooms, or a spare room, at the kitchen table or whatever it is, actually, if you're if your culture is toxic, it might even feel more invasive. On the flip side, if you always need to always be online, and I'm at home and I don't have anywhere I can hide. I think that can be that's one to watch out for. Hopefully, if you're on our webinar that doesn't describe your organization's culture. But at the same time, I think it's one to watch out for because that sense of presenteeism can also knock on to longer hours, more hours. I read a statistic that said on average in 2021, employees worked an extra 25 to 30% of their hours. So that means basically everyone's putting in an extra day and a half a week, on average, which is it's crazy when you think about it. And if again, your organisation has that presenteeism more, that's what people are expected to do. If not, this is nice to do, or we need to pull together to make things work for the first few months of lockdown. But if people feel "I absolutely have to be giving an extra day a week", you know, "two hours before I should be giving back my commute time to to answer emails", it's a really dangerous place to be. And it's going to take a toll on your people, whether they're in the office or at home. So I think a key part of psychological safety, in this regard, is this defining those expectations and being clear what the boundaries are for people. I understand that people need flexibility. And there's always going to be, especially in this hybrid world, a bit of porousness between the boundaries, right? I'm going to work from my kitchen table, because that's the working space I have. And I'll do that three days a week, between nine and half five - six o'clock. But at the same time, you know, if that ends up being I'm there, from seven to seven, day in day out, I'm not able to spend time with my family, or my partner, that has a knock-on effect on people that we really need to be careful with. So if we kind of say, "hey, you know, it's a matter of doing your time or or even better, producing these outputs, that's the performance we're going to measure you on". I think that's probably going to be a safer place for people to say actually, this is what's expected of me. I know what's asked of me to tick the boxes, to progress to do everything I need to do. And you're not going to ask for a pound of flesh as well. I think making that clear

for people is really important. And it's really important going forward, as we explore what hybrid means. I think a huge question that is still yet to be answered is "what does progression look like in a hybrid workplace?" because it used to be whoever gets the most face time with the boss, or the best face time with the boss, even, wins, and gets ahead. It's not going be like that anymore. If half of us are working from different places, for half the week, things are gonna change. But the truth is, I don't think we really know what that change looks like yet.

Kate Went

Some really great points there, Alex. I liked your point at the end about the face time side of that. That's something I worry about in terms of psychological safety, the sort of blind spots that we may have around not having visibility of certain things in our teams. It's very easy at the minute, particularly with our sense of time discounting, that the days just seemed to blur, sometimes. We're so busy, you're out of the office for a few days, you're not checking in with people online, it can go quite a while until you realise "I've not checked in with this person who I would at least pass in the corridor once in a while, I've not actually had any interaction with". And I do think about that in terms of how that will impact on people's progression, their promotions. And also, conversely, does it lead to a sort of lingering sense of paranoia? You know, "I've not spoken to certain sorts of senior people for a while, what's going on? Am I doing okay?" You know, if you don't have a formalised kind of check-in process, are you kind of left to your own thoughts and devices about your own performance and how well you're actually doing? So, I think in this, particularly now, being very deliberate and intentional is super important, to make sure that the gap between people who are in and people who are out, doesn't widen and that there aren't biases creeping in as a result of that.

Russ Norton

And I just to build on that, that is a problem that we ought to have solved, regardless of hybrid working in terms of setting clear and fair and equitable expectations across the team. And rewarding the people that meet those expectations is how promotions ought to work. And it's only this kind of flip to hybrid, where some people are away, and some people are present, that the studies have started to spot that it's the proximity bias, the people that are near it's the line managers that are getting the promotions. So this is a problem that we know exists and needs fixing, regardless of the world of hybrid and lockdown and all that stuff.

Kate Went

Yeah, it's a bit easy to sort of throw the blanket of hybrid working on and go, "it's a problem that suddenly just emerged." No!

Alex Gapud

And a lot of it, as well, comes back to, as you were saying, Kate, with managers. It's making sure that managers are equipped and trained. And part of that is that they're equipped and trained, and maybe most importantly, given the time to check in with their people. You know, if you're a manager you don't need to be best mates with your team members. But they shouldn't fear you to the point where actually, if you just want to check in and say, "Hey, how's it going? What's going on with you?" And not, 'you're in trouble' kind of way. But "you doing alright? We haven't spoken in a while", you know, if your people are so scared of their managers that they can't have a casual catch up like that, something's wrong.

Russ Norton

100%. And I'm giggling because there are so many TikTok videos about: manager puts it a one-to-one with no agenda, no context, like, the one-to-one meeting goes in your diary, and all of a sudden anxiety for two days solid until the meeting. And what I quite like is this new generation of workers who are communicating some of this unspoken workplace culture like, if you send a catch up from a line manager, it creates that uncertainty and that's shit practice. You shouldn't be sending anyone an invite to a meeting without some context or some agenda. And then what I love is that there's just this new generation of people who are using humour, using video, using Instagram to communicate and educate the generation above them about what good digital etiquette looks like to protect psychological safety.

Kate Went
Absolutely love that. That is so true. And yeah, there are there are many instances of this, like you say, on TikTok, examples. And yeah, I think we've all felt the fear of of the no context, email. Do keep your questions coming through, we do want to cover as many of those as we can.

Kate Went
On that note about the email coming through and actually giving context to some of your emails, I want to just think about some of the things that we can do to promote and encourage an environment where people can feel comfortable to speak out. And I'm looking at this from two dimensions really. I'm looking at this from us as individuals, and what we can all do in our own lives, in that sort of way. And also from the very specific lens of internal communicators, because internal comms holds a lot of power and a lot of ability to affect change, and to drive positive behaviour change, and to sort of influence the dynamic of how truth is spoken around the organisation - to be that source of truth. It has a massive knock on effect to the sense of psychological safety, if it is authentic and if it is done well. So, in terms of things that we can individually do, one example, I see around the place on social media, and I'd like confirmation as to whether this is something that feeds into psychological safety, is the adding of pronouns onto things to say, "she/her", or "he/him" or "they". That invites a sort of a safe space and an ability to say, "this is a space where you can be show up and be your authentic self and have that conversation with me". Is that an example of a psychologically safe, positive action that you can take?

Russ Norton
So I would say so I think. I come to this with a particular interest. So as a gay man, I spent a lot of time hiding who I was, and feeling not psychologically safe about the repercussions of what would happen if I was honest about who I was. And I mentioned earlier, that puts a tremendous burden on you. And so for anyone whose gender identity does not conform to the usual binary, that that show of allyship from others can contribute to a safer space in which they feel more psychologically safe. It's certainly not going to solve it. But my question always is, "who does it harm?" Absolutely no-one. And it's the same argument about wheelchair ramps in buildings and wheelchair accessibility in buildings. Who does that harm? Absolutely no-one, and yet it invites in people who may need to use a wheelchair. So if it ain't harming someone, go ahead and do it. I think there's also a really interesting thing around digital identity. And certainly, in the olden days, I put a lot of thought into what I did. I put a lot of thought into what clothes I was wearing in order to go into certain environments, you get dressed up for a job interview, you get dressed up for a big pitch, you know, if I'm talking to a retail client, I'm going to wear slightly trendy clothes. If I'm talking to a financial services or law, I'm gonna wear a suit and a tie. And there's a part of that "how do I assimilate with you?" What visual cues have you got that I'm like you, and I'm one of your tribe, and you don't have to be threatened by me, because look, I'm making the visual cues to

create that kind of aura of safety around me, look, I'm an ally". I think as we've shifted to virtual working, certainly for kind of information knowledge workers operating on Zoom, this is our identity. This is like prime real estate for demonstrating that you are creating a safe space. And so, for example, what I've got behind me is my sewing projects. And in theory, it's a way for people to go, "oh, what's going on with the sewing machine behind you?" "Oh you have a hobby, you're a human being, let's connect on a human level, let's let's have a conversation." Same with pronouns in your name. If it comes up on your screen name, that's vital real estate as that clue. So I think it's really important these days, in this kind of virtual world, that you use whatever real estate, you have to silently communicate that you are a fully functioning well-rounded three dimensional human being who's not going to be horrible. And whatever that takes. This is your opportunity and it's in your gift to use it.

Kate Went

That's reminded me of the example that I'm seeing more and more as well, which I think pertains to the the hybrid working and more global organisations. It's that nice sign off in your emails to say, "look, I may send you an email, within this time frame, please do not feel the need to respond until you are ready." It just gives that permission to say "you don't have to jump just because I've sent you an email, please take the time and do it within the time that suits you." I think that's so important, particularly now when we are finding it harder, as Alex said, to shut off and to create those boundaries. For us, having the permission and being implicit in our permission to others, actually helps to create that sense of safety, that I don't need to feel panicked because you've sent me an email. I think that's that's really important to give people the empowerment and manage their time as well.

Alex Gapud

You know, Kate, it was a really interesting one, I read a study about receiving and sending the emails in strange hours or on weekends, that the sender doesn't usually think it's that big a deal because they think, you know, I'm sending it when it's good for me. But sometimes, I think it was especially poignant amongst the younger workers, they freak out whenever they get an email from the boss out of hours and feel that need to immediately respond to that. And so I guess how I respond to this question is thinking about that example, as well, and what Russ was saying, I think that if you're in a position of power, and authority, showing vulnerability and your human side is vital. An example I always used to use - I used to be an academic, I used to teach at the University of Edinburgh, during and after my PhD, and it's really interesting, because A, how few people in higher education actually talk or think about psychological safety, and making a safe space for their students in the first place. B, I was acutely aware of that. And one of the things I always did is if you ever take a class with me, the first 15 minutes, whether you were a Masters student, or a Fresher was always going to be the same. We talked about the same things, about my story, my journey, why I was there, what I wanted your classroom environment to be, and my expectations and how I handled that. It's really interesting how few people do that, both in higher ed settings, workplaces, etc. Again, it goes back to setting the the expectations and the parameters. But one of the things I found really powerful was when I could tell students, "by the way, it's okay to not be okay. I struggled with anxiety from time to time I've struggled with depression, I've struggled with grief." And when students would hear that the way that they saw me, I could see it in some of their eyes, was changed. And they knew that if they had a problem, they could come to me, and the number of students I was able to help and support when they were struggling with. It doesn't have to be anything serious, it can just be actually "I'm just feeling really overwhelmed by uni right now." If you're in a position of power, I really want to

encourage you to think about creating that sort of environment with your team, where actually you can say, "I'm a human being, I worry about this, this and that. I worry about money, I worry about my kids, I worry about everything and I have an anxiety." You know, there's some people that might have used that, but I think they're gonna be many, many, many more people that will feel empowered, and safe and respect you and trust you even more because of that. I think that if you're a leader, one of the most powerful ways you can practically create psychological safety is just by admitting that your human weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Our leaders aren't infallible, our managers aren't infallible, and that's okay. But it goes back to what we're saying about sometimes the boss does seem infallible or out of reach. And if you have that authority, and you have that power, if you can ease up on a little bit, and kind of, you know, not rule with an iron fist, but actually rule with the heart, and be very human about it. I think that will change I really do believe that plays such a powerful role. If that's authentic, that can really change the tone around psychological safety and the culture of your company.

Russ Norton
And I think that word is super important here: "authenticity", because again, back in the journey of my career, I did some training with Stonewall. And they talked about when you come out, you are a role model to other people who might be in the closet. And when you are a role model in any position, you're on a pedestal, right? You have this perception that others are perceiving you and have an expectation of you. And that can put pressure on you to be perfect so like, you worry about what it's like to be gay and how people are going to respond to you, and then you come out and then all of a sudden there's this pressure to be like "the perfect homosexual" with the delightfully decorated house and the six pack and the abs and, like adorable adopted kittens and all of that stuff. And it's just non existent. You can't put that pressure on yourself as a role model, as a leader. You have to take that pressure off and be open about, "here's how I can help you as a leader, here's how I can't help you. Here's who might be able to help you who's better than me." That kind of expression of, like Alex is saying, vulnerability, of authenticity, of just being three dimensional and human is incredibly powerful. It sets a precedent that it's okay to not be the perfect glossy LinkedIn version of yourself at work - you can be a human. And one other really, really interesting thing from the Stonewall training was around different identities - having like a "work you" and a "real you" and your "real you" cares about your family and maybe it cares about gardening and nurturing plants. Maybe it cares about baking and the attention to detail. And then you go to work and you're expected to fit into your job description and do your tasks and tick them off and not break the mould. And so sometimes there's this like "work identity" and the "home identity". And what I love and what this training kind of empowered me to do was to go "what from my home life are my superpowers at work? How can I pull my journey, my learnings, all of the parts of me to be a better role model and provide better advice to my team and provide better support to my team?" And if I haven't had that learning and that experience, and if I haven't gained that expertise, well then stay in my lane, I'm not going to pretend that I can, I'm going to help them find someone that can help them with those gaps. And I think that that's really important for anyone, as Alex says, in a position of power.

Kate Went
I love that. And I think from working from home, and from having to adapt to this sort of scrappy, online remote working way that we have, we have seen that vulnerability, that authenticity come through more. We have had those glimpses into people's lives a bit more. And to Alex's really great point about leader authenticity and vulnerability, one of the things that was highlighted so much at the beginning of the pandemic was the leaders that showed up on camera and showed up from their bedrooms and showed up and said, we're finding this

hard, too. And that's something I think we don't want to then gloss over and leave behind as we do start to return to normality. We want to remember the power and the impact that that had, and continue to pull that through and not try to go back to being too glossy. I just want to read out a lovely comment that Amy sent saying, "that's amazing. Dr. Alex, I wish I'd have professors who set expectations and create a culture of safety. Ditto for managers and organisational leaders."

Kate Went

A couple of questions. I'm conscious of time, but we're going to whizz through see if we can get through some of these. Again, Amy has just popped a question through saying "what can internal communicators do when organisational culture isn't transparent or accountable to steer leaders towards such traits to build psychological safety?" I think we've we've covered off some of that with the vulnerability and authenticity. But anything else you want to cover there?

Russ Norton

So this is where the role of internal comms, which is a classic, you know, "what's internal comms seat at the table?" "Strategic advisors or the mailboxes?" It's that classic thing that's been on every webinar for the last 10 years. I think this is where though, internal comms can massively step up. I worked with a team recently who described themselves as the eyes, ears and heart of the organisation, telling the stories that are true. Which is to say, if a team comes along and goes, "hmm, we've got the best employee assistance programme". They'll go, "No, we don't. We've got a fairly solid employee assistance programme. And here's the employee feedback that says where it could be better." And so I think step one is internal comms being empowered with the feedback from employees. The more listening you do, the greater influence you have at that senior level to go, "people are afraid to suggest ideas, people are nervous of leader X, Y Z." The other, which picks up on some of the points I was making earlier, it's about the risk of not addressing this, "is it okak that we can potentially damage our share price? Is it okay that we could potentially have chronically awful reviews on Glassdoor?" And I think for some leaders, they're afraid of that raw, unfiltered employee feedback. But I always say it's better to be slapped in the face on Yammer than stabbed in the back on LinkedIn and Glassdoor. Be open to that feedback because your people feel it. And if you don't address it, and you don't listen to it, and you aren't open to it as a leader, well, they're just going to tell their friends family, Twitter, Tik Tok, as many people as they're connected to, that yours is a horrible place to work. So there's a risk of not addressing this.

Alex Gapud

It goes back to that BrewDog example. Russ you really nailed it for me in terms of in employee comms, we're often asked to be the messenger but as Russ is saying, we're here to be the the ears and the eyes and the heart. My big passion really is seeing employee comms be a two-way street. Obviously, I'm an academic. I'm a researcher, really. And actually, to me, I'm excited about the possibility and what should be the case of, employee comms representing the employee voice upwards to leaders and not the leaders mouthpiece going down to the employees, saying explain this, tell them to do this. It's actually, you know, things are not great here, look at the employee turnover, look at the engagement scores, look at the job satisfaction, look at the challenges we're having in hiring people. All those things are, again as Russ is saying, feedback to give to leaders of saying something's not right with our culture here. If leaders don't have the appetite to do this, to be transparent or accountable, you do have real challenges. But I think one way to put some pressure on them, and kind of field them that way is through the data. You can't dispute that, really, if you have good data.

Russ Norton

Final point on this is as internal communicators, being really clear where your remit starts and ends. Your job is not organisational culture. The decisions and the actions of your leadership team are what leads to the organisational culture that you see and hear around you. As internal communicators, it's your job to make sure that people have the information that they need to do their jobs brilliantly. And to feel proud in the work they do and feel like alignment to the direction that they're heading. If your leaders are making decisions that will negatively impact employee sentiment and employee wellbeing, you can provide the advice, but you can't take responsibility. Because that isn't your job. You probably don't get paid enough to take on that level of burden. And I think that is a theme across the entire internal comms industry, that all of us are so protective of our audiences and have such a "can do" attitude and wanting to protect and foster this incredible culture. But at the end of the day, we can only communicate things that are true. We can't spin - we're not we're not PR, we're not social media. We're not, sorry, Kate, we're not marketing. We are truth tellers. And so if the if the truth that you're telling is upsetting to people, then allow the consequences to happen and report back on them, because that's the pulse of your organisation.

Kate Went

Totally agree. And also how very dare you! Ok, last question from Joanna: "how do you think we can help people to cope with the anxiety that comes with out of hours messages, even when they know they don't need to reply? It still seems like a power struggle where the person in a position of power puts their needs (getting it out at time convenient to them) above those of people who feel that they need to check and get anxious as a result". Any thoughts on that?

Russ Norton

I think conversation and just being really, really crystal clear. And I think this is where line managers have an awful lot of influence. So Netflix have a no holiday policy and a no expenses policy. But they do have some fairly strict guidance for what happens when those rules are abused or when they go wrong. But the studies that showed how much holiday people took were directly influenced by how much holiday the line managers took. So if their line managers took 10 weeks, they would take seven weeks. If the line managers took four weeks, they would take three weeks. The general vibe was that people didn't take more holiday than their line managers. And no matter what you think of your role as a leader or a role model, you are incredibly influential to the employee experience in setting what's right and what's wrong amongst your team. So the things that you do, the behaviours that you show, are incredibly influential. So one technique that I use as a line manager is, if I'm working out of hours, I use the delay send function. So I'll draft my emails after hours, but they won't land in people's inboxes until 10 past nine. it's like the simplest little button in Outlook and it just sets that precedent that even makes me look incredibly efficient, because gosh, I bashed out 40 emails in 10 minutes! But at least like I'm making that mindfulness that rather than putting the disclaimer in the back of my email, I just find a solution to not even send it to them. And if I am sending it to them, making it really clear why and apologising and making it triple clear. But if people are feeling that anxiety, we have to just put it on the table, right? What are the things that people feel pressure about? Let's have a conversation about them. Is it feeling the need to be at your desk? Is it feeling the need to use annual leave to go to a doctor's appointment? What is that stuff? Let's just have a chat and make it culturally okay - what's okay and what's not okay? That can only happen amongst a team.

Kate Went

Absolutely, great points. We've had some lovely feedback I'm just going to read: "Thanks so much, I needed this webinar more than I knew. Thank you". That's lovely to read. "Thank you for your amazing advice. So appreciate your expertise and candour with taking too much responsibility. And I see in my organisation, this will help me attempt to create that boundary to improve my own psychological safety." That's absolutely lovely feedback and we really appreciate that. And I hope that everything that you've seen and heard here today has helped. We're out of time for today. But if you do have other questions and thoughts, do feel free to reach out to us, send us questions and get in touch, we'd love to continue the conversation. We know how important this is. And if we can help in any way to talk through those ideas about boundaries, we would love to do that with you. So please do keep in touch with us. We'll send the recording out after, when we have it available. And if you think it'll help a colleague or a pal in the comms space, do feel free to send the link on to them as well. We'd love to hear feedback from them too.

Russ Norton

Can I just channel my my interview RuPaul right now and, the spirit of "available on iTunes", scarlettabbott have just released a book. It's called "Even Better If" and it's got an entire chapter dedicated to safety, both physical safety and psychological safety. And it's not available on iTunes, but it is available on Amazon.

Kate Went

Yes! We will be sending lots of information about that coming soon. And that is a chapter you are definitely going to want to get into. So yes, more on that to come soon. Thank you so much for that prompt. And thank you so much for your time with us today. Thank you, Alex, thank you, Russ. And to all of you for tuning in. We will be in touch with the recordings soon.