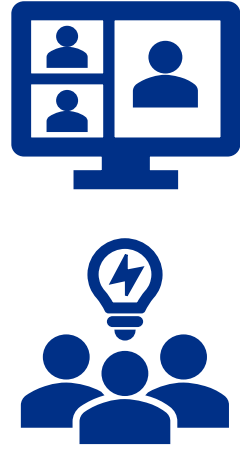**BCH Academy for Teaching & Educational Innovation and Scholarship**

Academy Seminar Series

January 27, 2025

Creating Psychologically Safe Learning Environments

Disclosures

The speaker(s) do not have relevant financial relationships to disclose.

Introductions

Patty Stoeck, MD
Attending Physician, Hospital
Medicine
BCH Academy Assistant
Director of Teaching
Development

**Lauren Pfeifer, PhD, RN,
CCDS**
Clinical Documentation
Integrity (CDI) Educator
HRO 2.0 Team Lead

**Anderson Lamberto-Wilson,
MSW**
Training and Performance
Specialist, Immersive Design
Systems

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Learning Objectives

Define psychological safety within the context of health professions education

Identify barriers to psychological safety in learning environments

Practice key strategies for cultivating psychological safety among learners

Evaluate the effectiveness of psychological safety strategies by interpreting learner signaling

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Let's Jump Right In!

As you watch this [video](), ask yourself the following questions:

What were some of the behaviors you saw in this video that **impacted psychological safety**?

What did you observe about the **learners**?

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Reflect

What were some of the behaviors you saw in this video that **impacted psychological safety?**

What did you observe about the **learners?**

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What is Psychological Safety?

"Psychological safety means creating an environment where team members **feel comfortable**, encouraged, and **EXPECTED** to **ask questions**, **speak up about concerns**, discuss mistakes, share ideas, and offer different opinions **without fear** of negative backlash (e.g., retribution, punishment, ostracism) or a reaction that damages their confidence or self-esteem (e.g., public humiliation, shame, dismissal). In a psychologically safe environment, the focus is on **shared learning,** and the input from every team member is valued respectfully, regardless of where they fit in the organizational structure."
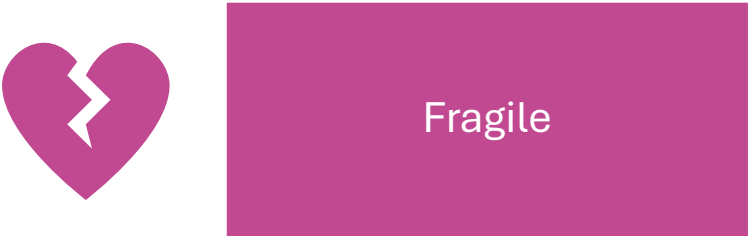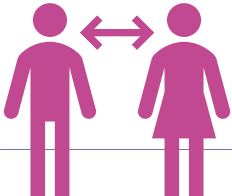
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What is Psychological Safety?

Continuum

Changes over time, according to the group members, with our collective experiences

Fragile

Built over small moments and social exchanges

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Why is Psychological Safety Important in the Learning Environment?

Divergent thinking **=** Creativity and Innovation

Safety is a <u>prerequisite</u>

↓ Focus on how others are perceiving them

↑ Focus on actually performing tasks and growing in role

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What Academy Members Had to Say About Speaking Up

History of Dismissal or Lack of Support: past negative experiences, such as having ideas dismissed or ignored, can create lasting reluctance to speak up

- "In the past when I have tried to do so I did not receive support, my ideas were dismissed, and I did not feel heard."
- "I avoided asking questions or sharing ideas because I felt that my input would not be valued."

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Power Dynamics and Fear of Judgment: the presence of authority figures, such as executive leaders, or known interpersonal dynamics can make individuals hesitant to engage due to fear of judgment, retribution, or dismissal

- "In a room with executive leaders, I avoided asking the question about the elephant in the room because of the 'known' dynamics and history about an individual involved."
- "When leaders are present, I hesitate because I fear that asking questions might be perceived as criticism."

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Intimidation in Large or Unfamiliar Groups: entering large or new groups without understanding the social or conversational dynamics makes it harder to feel safe contributing

- "If I am in a new group and don't know the dynamics, I may hesitate a bit to raise my hand until I have a better understanding of the flow of the group/meeting."
- "In large groups, I fear judgment rather than criticism, and that makes me more reserved."

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Avoidance of Difficult Conversations: reluctance to address sensitive or systemic issues, particularly when a lack of psychological safety prevents difficult conversations from taking place

- "It is difficult to address the issue if people don't feel comfortable talking about it."
- "When sensitive topics arise, I fear that speaking up could escalate conflict or create tension."

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Lack of Diversity and Inclusivity: the absence of diversity in a group can make individuals feel excluded or unsupported, discouraging them from sharing ideas or asking questions

- "When there is a lack of diversity, I feel less comfortable contributing."
- "If I don't see people like me in the room, I worry my perspective won't be understood or valued."

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Two Big Barriers to Psychological Safety

Vulnerability

Power Gradients

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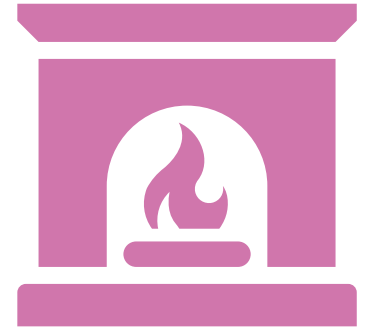Where the world comes for answers

Vulnerability

Two Types:

- Systems vulnerability: weakness or failure within a process that put our work in jeopardy
- Emotional vulnerability: risk for exposure when we show up and contribute

Fear of judgment or shame are major barriers to psychological safety

Comfort with emotional vulnerability → ↑ ability to address system vulnerabilities and potential weaknesses

Power Gradients

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Power Gradients

Implicit or explicit difference in authority, status, or influence between individuals or groups

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Power Gradients

Implicit or explicit difference in authority, status, or influence between individuals or groups

Acknowledge that inherent power gradients exist in healthcare

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Uneven power distribution → one individual or group holds higher power and influence over another

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Uneven power distribution → one individual or group holds higher power and influence over another

Inhibits open communication → those with less power are more reluctant to share concerns, questions, or offer divergent ideas

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Shared goal on flattening the hierarchy

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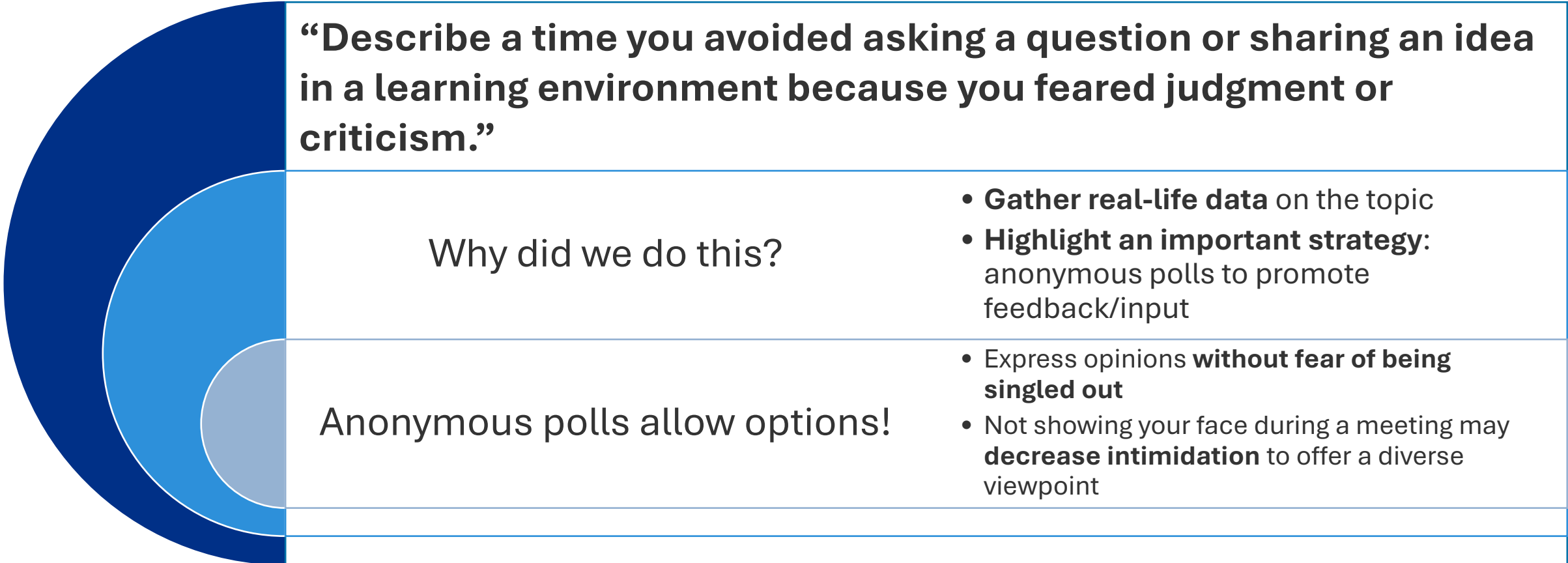
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Why is Psychological Safety Important in the Learning Environment?

"Describe a time you avoided asking a question or sharing an idea in a learning environment because you feared judgment or criticism."
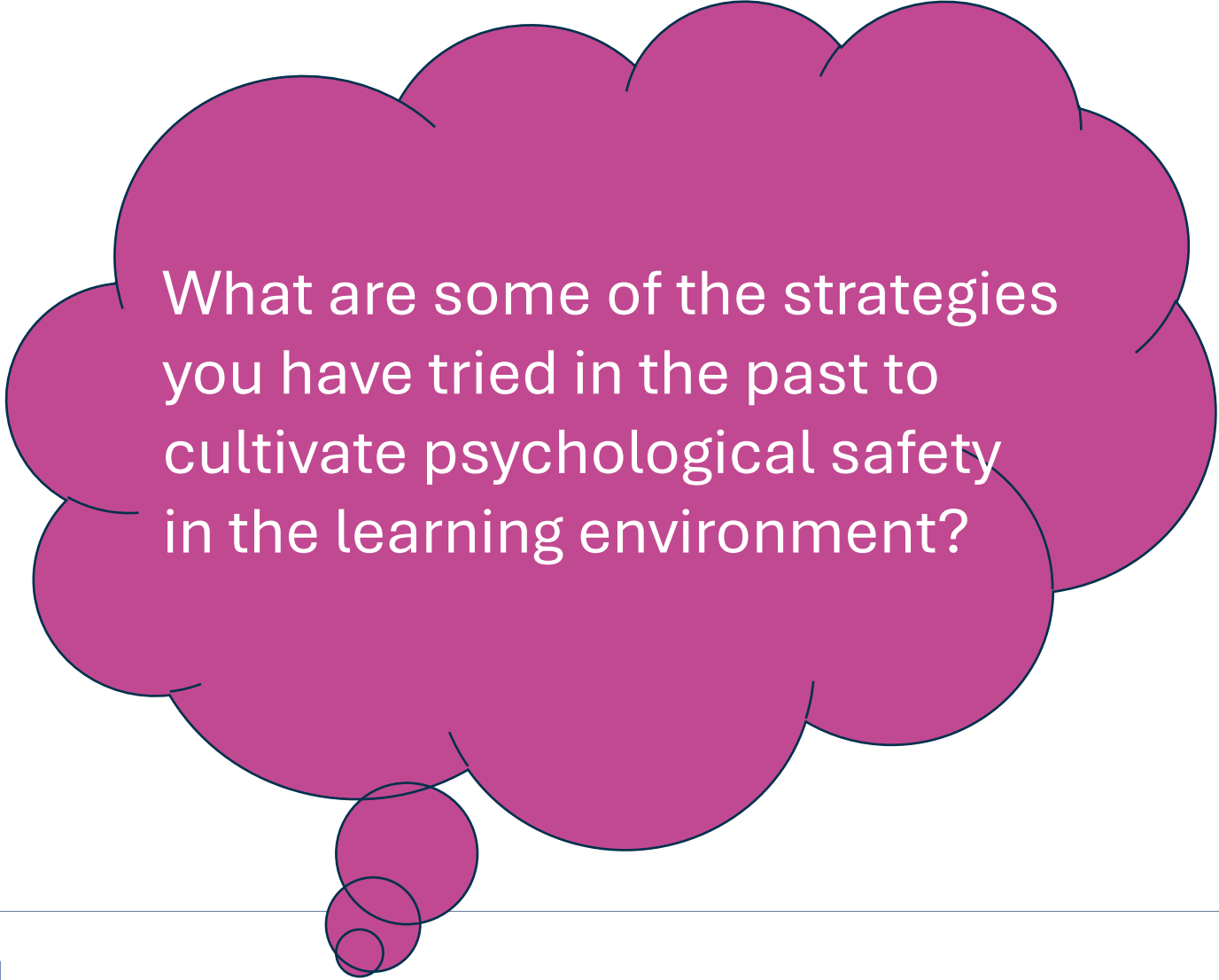
Why did we do this?

- **Gather real-life data** on the topic
- **Highlight an important strategy:** anonymous polls to promote feedback/input

Anonymous polls allow options!

- Express opinions **without fear of being singled out**
- Not showing your face during a meeting may **decrease intimidation** to offer a diverse viewpoint

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What Has Worked For You?

What are some of the strategies you have tried in the past to cultivate psychological safety in the learning environment?

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How Can Educators Cultivate Psychological Safety in a Learning Environment?

Key strategies

1	2	3	4	5
Promote curiosity and shared continuous learning	Encourage diverse input and healthy debate	Foster a no-blame culture	Model openness and emotional vulnerability	Build empathy and connection

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A New Patient Education Program

Your department would like to roll out a new discharge education program for patients with multiple complex conditions based on high rates of re-admission in this patient population. You have been tasked with leading an interdisciplinary educational workshop to start rolling out this new program, so you will be meeting with several stakeholders to hear their ideas about how best to implement it.

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This program includes:

- Educational materials handed out at discharge and outpatient visits
- A new patient website with resources and videos for self-management
- Follow-up phone calls by residents, nurse practitioners, and nurses to address questions

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A New Patient Education Program

You are not sure how this proposed new roll out will be received by the team, as you have heard secondhand that several attendings feel it is being launched at the "wrong" time, many nurses don't feel they've been part of the planning process (though it is still early in the process), and unit administrators have expressed confusion regarding their role and responsibilities.

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Learners: Nurses, nurse practitioners, physicians, unit administrators, social workers, pharmacists, physical therapists, psychologists, respiratory therapists

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Learners: Nurses, nurse practitioners, physicians, unit administrators, social workers, pharmacists, physical therapists, psychologists, respiratory therapists

Your Goal: The goal of this workshop will be to brainstorm ideas about how best to implement to the new program. As one of the team leads, you aim to cultivate a psychologically safe learning environment, so team members feel encouraged and comfortable asking questions, raising concerns, sharing feedback and offering diverse perspectives and new ideas about the intervention

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Group Activity

In your breakout room, your group will select one of these strategies

1 Promote curiosity and shared continuous learning

2 Encourage diverse input and healthy debate

3 Foster a no-blame culture

4 Model openness and emotional vulnerability

5 Build empathy and connection

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To the Breakout Rooms!

Review the Strategies for Cultivating Psychological Safety Handout → Select 1 of the 5 strategies

Choose a team representative to take notes on key discussion points

For the next 7 minutes, discuss the following 2 questions:

What are some tactics that could be considered during the workshop to cultivate psychological safety?

How can you assess if the tactics are working (both during the workshop and long-term as the program is being implemented)?

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Group Activity Report Out

1 Promote curiosity and shared continuous learning

2 Encourage diverse input and healthy debate

3 Foster a no-blame culture

4 Model openness and emotional vulnerability

5 Build empathy and connection

What did you discuss in your room?

How can you assess whether these strategies are successful?

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Take Home Points

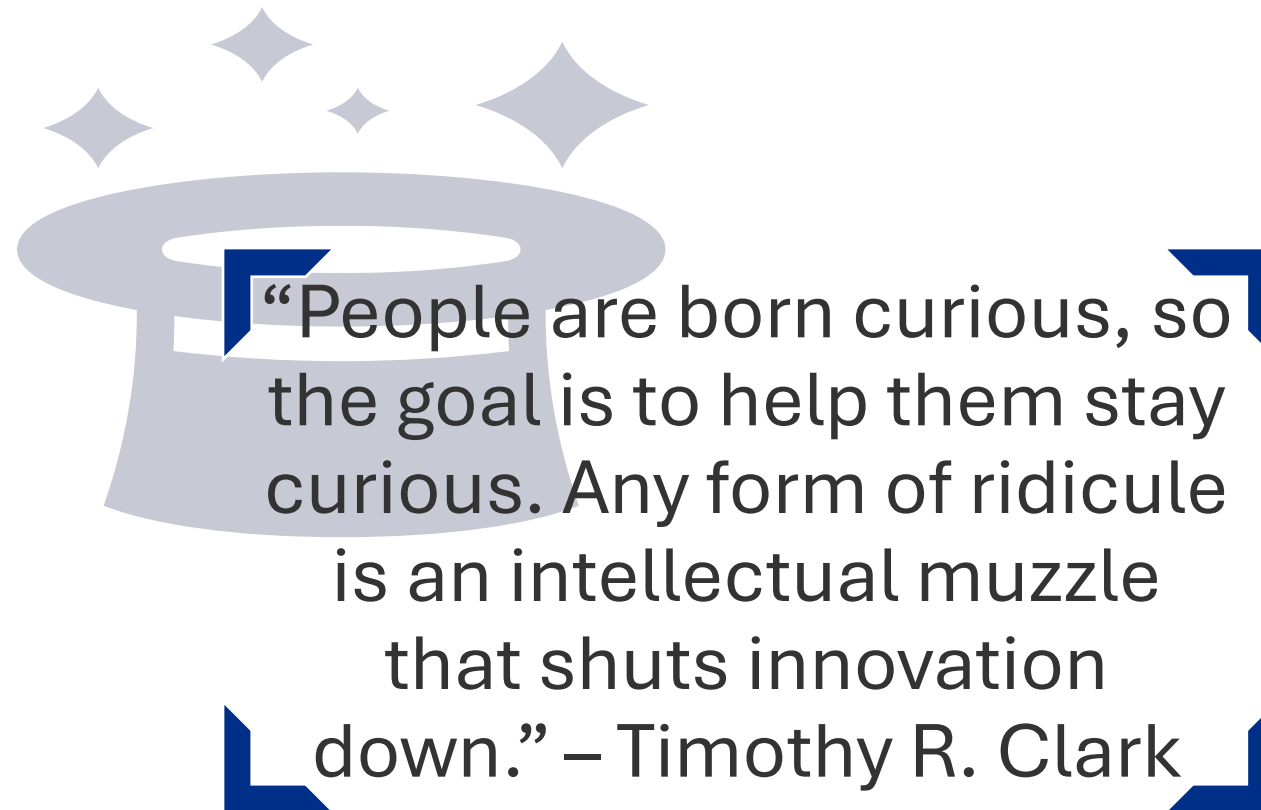| |
|---|
| Psychological safety has many facets, but is underpinned by people **feeling comfortable speaking up** |
| It is **context dependent** and built over small moments → sometimes even a single exchange! |
| To advance psychological safety with our learners, we need to be **vulnerable** with them and be mindful of **power gradients** |
| Use **some** of these strategies **some** of the time |
| Check in with your learners and **monitor** whether **the learning environment** feels psychologically safe for <u>all</u> |

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In Closing...

"People are born curious, so the goal is to help them stay curious. Any form of ridicule is an intellectual muzzle that shuts innovation down." – Timothy R. Clark

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Contact BCHacademy@childrens.harvard.edu with any questions, feedback, comments, or ideas for seminars!

Thank you!

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Anderson.Lamberto-Wilson@childrens.harvard.edu

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