

## LeaderImpact Podcast - Ep. 37 - Keri Schwebius - How to Create a Psychologically Safe Workplace

### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

psychological safety, work, leader, idea, question, listening, behaviors, coaching, impact, leadership, people, conversation, feedback, learned, admitting, team, mistakes, speak, respond, share

#### **Lisa Peters** 00:00

Welcome to the LeaderImpact Podcast. We're a community of leaders with a network of over 350 cities around the world dedicated to optimizing our personal, professional and spiritual lives to have impact. This show is where we have a chance to listen and engage with leaders who are living this out. We love talking with leaders. So if you have any questions, comments or suggestions to make the show even better, please let us know. The best way to stay connected in Canada is through our newsletter at [LeaderImpact.ca](http://LeaderImpact.ca) or on social media @LeaderImpact. And if you're listening from outside of Canada, check out our website at [LeaderImpact.com](http://LeaderImpact.com).

I'm your host Lisa Peters and our guest today is Keri Schwebius. Now Keri was on episode number 19 and we spoke about overcoming the imposter syndrome. So just a quick intro first. Keri is the president of Elevate Executive Coaching and the co-author of a leadership book called *Mind the Gap: Navigating Your Leadership Journey*. She's a certified executive coach with a Master's of Arts in Leadership and a graduate certificate and executive coaching from Royal Roads University. She's incredibly grateful for all the blessings she has been given in her life and always brings it down to earth approach to every engagement. Her purpose is to make a difference in the world and she does this by partnering with others who want to improve their workplaces. So I have invited Keri back to have a conversation on psychological safety. This is a term Keri that has been floating around. And I really just I think we should talk about it. And I thought, hey, let's call Keri and so thanks for joining us. I really appreciate you.

#### **Keri Schwebius** 01:43

It is my pleasure, Lisa.

#### **Lisa Peters** 01:46

So for anyone who's like, you know, I've heard this too. I've heard this psychological safety. What is it? What is psychological safety?

#### **Keri Schwebius** 01:54

Yeah. So, Amy Edmondson, who's a professor at Harvard, is the person who kind of brought this term to the forefront. And she describes psychological safety as the shared belief within a team that it is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. So what does that mean? It means I won't be

ridiculed if I speak up and share my ideas and my perspective. I won't be punished if I, if I admit that I made a mistake. Or I can bring my whole self to work. And I don't have to worry about, you know, putting on a mask and being somebody different when I am at work.

**Lisa Peters** 02:39

So my mind goes to that, what is it not? Because people can get an idea, like an idea can come to the forefront. And it can be a bad idea. But it's never a bad, bad idea. I mean, it makes a good idea. So rejection, but it's not rejection of you. It's rejection of an idea. I think so. Maybe explain what is it not?

**Keri Schwebius** 03:03

Yeah, that's a great question, Lisa. And it's, it's not a lot of things. It's not about being nice. And I'm not saying go ahead and be a jerk at work. But it's not, it's not just about being nice, because what might happen is we get into this area where we're so nice that we're afraid to give anybody constructive feedback. Or we're afraid to speak up against somebody's idea, because we don't want to hurt their feelings. So it's not about being nice. It's not the same as trust. So while it involves trust, trust is usually between two people, I trust you, you trust me. But psychological safety is a bit broader. So it's, it's the whole group, feeling that safety. And it's not about lowering standards, and having a free for all, just show up how you are and you know, do whatever you do. You really do have to hold people accountable. But you can allow people to speak up more freely.

**Lisa Peters** 04:15

Yeah, I That's it. That's great to know, because I think of it's not the emotion, like we need to remove the emotion from work sometimes, I think is that does that sound right? Like, you don't have to like me, you have to trust me that I have your back.

**Keri Schwebius** 04:32

Yeah, I would say that that's kind of fair. So I think I mean, we're human beings, we're emotional, right? And it's hard to take the emotion out of work. In fact, it's probably not a good thing to take the emotion out of work. But what I would say is that it's not about the person. It's about the idea, or the concept, right? And so to not take it personally, because it's not about you. It's about the company doing whatever's better for them.

**Lisa Peters** 05:07

So if someone not sure, what does it feel like? Or what does it look like, when it's not there?

**Keri Schwebius** 05:14

Yeah, it looks like fear. And I'll give you a couple of examples from my own work experience. So one of them is the annual employee survey. And my company, like many, did an annual survey. And when the results came back one year, and my team scored lower than the other teams. Still a really great score in terms of employee engagement, but just lower than, you know, some of our colleagues, teams. And when that score came in, my vice president,

executive vice president pulled me into her office and started asking me, who is responsible for these low scores? Who do you think would answer like this? Not why, you know, what are you guys challenged with? What's getting in your way? But who's the one to blame, basically. And it was a horrible experience. I walked out of the office in tears. And the next year, when I answered the survey, I used a strategy that I've read called five to stay alive, which means on a scale of one to five, I answered five, every time because I did not want to end up in that office again. Oh, and when I spoke to other teams, I heard about similar experiences that they had, which made them not want to respond honestly in future surveys, too. So there's that fear of what's going to happen if I speak up? Or if I point out what might be going wrong, or what might be better?

Another example, I have, from my personal experience, and I hate this story, because I hate that it happened. But I love sharing it because it's such a great example. I asked about, we were in an employee update with the CEO, the board chair, and the vice chair, and they were sharing their annual business plan. And they asked for questions, and I asked them, are there any plans to recruit women to our all-male board of directors? And they navigated the question, and they did a great job. And then the following day, I was in my boss's office, and I was verbally reprimanded for asking the question. And so after that experience, I can see why people don't want to ask hard questions. So you know, it feels like fear. It feels like, you know, keep your mouth shut and keep your head down. And, you know, just work.

**Lisa Peters** 08:01

Yeah. Wow, good examples. And I think they were meant to happen to you. So you could share them, right? Like, I think that's why life happens is because we need to share it. And we all can grow. Thank you for hashing those memories. So what happens when it is there? Like an ad? How do you feel? Or how do you know?

**Keri Schwebius** 08:25

You feel comfortable and safe. So you can share your ideas, even the stupid ones, right? Because sometimes those ideas spur on other ideas that are fantastic. And you share feedback, or what I like to call feed-forward, which is a term from Marshall Goldsmith. About how do we do this better next time? Without judgment, right? So you're not a bad person, because you, you know, you did it this way. But rather, this was great. And you can do better next time. It gives people the safety to try new things to be innovative. And one really important thing is to admit mistakes or point out problems without worrying about, you know, what's going to happen to me, what are the consequences? And there's some really good examples of that too, in, in some of the literature.

**Lisa Peters** 09:26

Yeah. So I'm thinking there's, there's maybe, I mean, there's lots of people listening, and there's the person that's listening is working for someone. And then there's the person so they're, you know, they have a leader, and then there's the people who are leading. So I'm not sure how you can ask this question, but how do you create psychological safety? And maybe

from both ends because for me, it's like, well, the leader has to create it. But I think we all have to be part of it or are the trust that you trust that I will do the job and I can trust that you'll do it? You know what I mean? I don't know. How do you create it? Where do you start?

**Keri Schwebius** 10:03

I agree with you, Lisa, it does have to start at the top. And the employees have to participate in it. Sometimes from that employee side of things, it's about courage, you know, having the courage to speak up. It's a bit, it can be seen as a bit of a risk. But if you have the right leadership response, then it's going to work out and you're going to create that psychological safety. So yeah, it does take everybody to participate. But it is so important for the leaders to set the stage for that. So in Amy Edmondson's book she writes about, it's called the fearless organization. And she writes about this three-step process for creating psychological safety. So she talks about setting the stage, inviting participation, and then responding productively.

So when she talks about setting the stage, it's about setting the expectation, and being very clear about it because people won't do something if they don't know that they're expected to do it. So we have to be very clear about what happens when mistakes happen? How do we deal with them? Well, we learn from them, we do better. We want to create psychological safety. So you know, these kinds of behaviors, like reprimanding somebody for speaking up or even, you know, making fun of somebody who says something silly. Those kinds of behaviors are not accepted. So what are the expectations? Be very clear about that, and not just once, but all the time, right.

And then inviting participation is about asking people. So some leaders will say, Oh, I have an open door policy. They know they can come in anytime. But the problem with that is that the door in and of itself can be intimidating, right? So we got to walk out of that office, get past that door, and talk to people, invite them, invite their perspectives. In meetings, you might have those people who are more verbose, who talk a lot more and share their ideas, they feel really comfortable, you might have those people who are quieter. So make sure that you're taking the time in those meetings to ask that quiet person, What's your perspective? You know, what are you thinking here? Another good question to ask is, What am I missing? Or does anybody see this a different way? So you're inviting that feedback, that input. And then responding productively, is about reinforcing those behaviors that you're looking for, right? So when somebody does speak up, thanking them, like thank you for your input. Thank you for your valuable perspective. When somebody makes a mistake, what do you do? How do you handle that? Right? Do you, you know, berate them, or, or do you take that say, Okay, that didn't go so well? What did we learn from that? Where do we go from here? So those three steps setting this stage inviting participation, and responding productively

**Lisa Peters** 13:37

I listened to that, and I think what happens when you have a team member on your team that is negative ninny. You know, and they're always just, you know, and, you know, I can think of a situation right now, where someone is just coming at me. And our group leader has said, I

need to nip this in the bud. Right, we need to stop this. And I sometimes wondered, you need to do that in front of everybody? So it's like, look, we don't we don't allow this type of behavior. Or do you do it personally, you know, because sometimes people think they didn't talk to anybody, like they're letting this happen. But like, No, we're not. I don't know. But like, just nipping that in the bud. Those negative people?

**Keri Schwebius** 14:25

Yes. Yeah. I mean, it's important to nip that in but, but I would say it really depends on the situation and the people in the room. Where there is no psychological safety, then, you know, doing that in the room is a humiliating experience.

**Lisa Peters** 14:42

Good point.

**Keri Schwebius** 14:45

Where there is psychological safety, you might ask them, you know, what's good about this? Or how can we look at this from a different angle? How do we reframe this in a positive way? Yeah, that I mean, it's always tricky those interpersonal behaviors and holding people accountable. And sometimes a one on one conversation is much more productive than calling them out in front of their peers.

**Lisa Peters** 15:14

Good point. Great. So what kind of benefits can we experience when we create psychological safety and as a team or as a person, but what can we see?

**Keri Schwebius** 15:29

Well, at the end of the day, we're gonna see financial benefits. And I'll just explain a little bit more about that. So what we're going to avoid more mistakes. And I'll give you an example of this. So Boeing put out the 737 Max, they had a new navigation system. And you might remember this, it wasn't that long ago in 2019. And it failed in two planes. And more than 300 people died because of these crashes. And they had to ground all these planes worldwide. And when they did a debrief around this project, they talked to all the employees, not only they talked to many employees, and what they heard was, employees tell them Yeah, we have concerns, but we were afraid to speak up. Because this was a billion-dollar project. And there were tight timelines. And I was afraid if I held that back, I would lose my job. So that is a, you know, a huge, not just financial impact, but lives were lost. So when there's not psychological safety, you have this huge risk. So when there is psychological safety in that situation, you would have seen them place pick up and say, Hey, this isn't, this isn't gonna work, right? This has potential negative consequences, let's deal with that. And you would have avoided all that.

So avoiding critical errors, you will experience in a workplace with psychological safety, more creativity, more innovation. So I think about diversity, equity, and inclusion, right, that's a big

topic for organizations these days, we see new jobs in those roles. And companies recognize that it's important to have diversity in their organizations. But it's not just enough to bring them in. We have to also be open to their perspectives and their ideas, because that's where the value comes in is that knowledge, right? So when we have that diversity, and we have that psychological safety, we're gonna see more creativity, more innovation.

And then it also creates a feeling of belonging, when you feel like you don't have to act differently, or show up as somebody differently when you come to work, you feel like I belong here, I fit in and I'm valued, and my ideas are valued. And that positively impacts retention. And we know turnover is a huge cost for organizations. So all of these things, better ideas, less errors, less turnover, those all have financial impacts. So psychological safety, better bottom line. So you can argue that?

**Lisa Peters** 18:40

nobody, no, we are all business people. The bottom line is is important. So if anyone's listening and you know, they're wondering, either, you know, where to start, what the skills? What are some of the critical leadership skills for psychological safety?

**Keri Schwebius** 18:59

Yeah, so I think maybe I will preface this with it is a journey. And you don't just, it's not like new software, you don't just implement it, and then you know, life goes on. It is constant work. It is always adapting. It is always learning and always growing. So these are skills that you have to work on. And there's a lot. So I just want to encourage leaders, give yourself some grace. And yeah, approach it as a learning experience and work on these skills throughout your leadership journey.

So one of them is about humility. And I find that leaders, especially new leaders, have this feeling or pressure to have all the answers. Well they put me in this leadership position. I have to know everything I have to I have to be the expert, I need to have all the answers and solve all the problems. But really, when you do that, you don't allow other people to bring their value. So admitting, when you don't have the answers, and asking for other people to contribute, that's really important. And then also admitting, when you've made a mistake. More than once, I've had to own up and say, Hey, I didn't do a really great job at that this time. You know, I've learned from it I'll do better next time. And curiosity is huge. Especially when we're very experienced, or if we've been in a role for a long time, because we think that we know, a lot, and we probably do. And so we maybe don't ask as many questions. But when you approach with curiosity, even to say like, Tell me more? Or, you know, I'd like to understand your perspective. Or, again, like, what did I miss? What am I missing here? So really approaching every conversation with curiosity.

And then, after you pose the question, you have to listen to the answer. This is a key skill. And it's very hard to be very good at listening because most of us want to be understood. So we're not listening to understand we're listening to respond. And when we listen to respond, our

brains are busy thinking about how they're going to respond. And they're not actually processing or fully listening to what's being said. And so just allow ourselves to have the space to listen, without worrying about our response, or being defensive. So working on those listening skills. And part of that is presence. So being fully present in those conversations, right? It's awful to have a conversation with someone who's scrolling on their phone because you don't feel heard. So what do you need to do as a leader to be fully present in those conversations? Do you need to, you know, lock your screen? Do you need to turn your cell phone over? Do you need to go into a different room to have a conversation with somebody so that you can give them your full attention and be fully present for them. And that helps a lot with listening.

Being inclusive. So we talked about not just having an open door? But asking, asking for opinions, asking for feedback. That's something that's really hard to do for some people, you know. How could I do this better next time? What am I doing that you appreciate? What am I not doing that you think I should be doing? Welcoming that feedback.

Another skill is modeling vulnerability. So you hear Brene Brown talk about this all the time, that of vulnerability, right? And, and showing that we're human too. We have feelings, we make mistakes. Because when you do that, you let everybody around you know, it's okay. It's okay to be human. It's okay to make mistakes. Yeah. So vulnerability is really important. And then what I think is a huge, huge skill that is also very hard, is self-awareness. And I actually watched a TED Talk about self-awareness. And it's Tasha Urich, I think is her name. And she talks about self-awareness and some research that her team did. And what they found was 95% of people believe they are self-aware. But in reality, only 10 to 15% truly are. So that's really tricky, because I may think I'm self-aware, but I mean, odds are I'm not. So it's, it's really important to manage your reactions, right? Our face sometimes some of us have those faces that we just can't hide our emotions. And I know I have one of those faces. And I got some feedback about that. And so, you know, just being aware of how am I responding? Everybody has blind spots, right? We judge ourselves by our intentions. And we judge other people by their actions. So I think I have great intentions. But I have to be aware of the impact that I might have on other people. And sometimes, I don't know until they tell me. Yeah, so. So looking at those blind spots.

And language, being really aware of your language. So the best example, is the word but. So when you're talking to somebody, and you say, Hey, that's a great idea, but I think and as soon as you say that, it's almost like you've just ditched that idea and said, Yeah, it's not really a great idea. I just said that. Right? And so the word but is so I don't it's not offensive, but it's so negative, you know, when you're trying to encourage people to speak up. And so what you might say is, I love that idea. And I think we could even do this as well. Yeah, right. We do an exercise in the leadership program that I do, where we actually do that we somebody shares an idea. And then the next person has, has to say, I love, you know, X, Y, or Z about that idea.

And they build on it. We go around the whole room, and yeah, love this. And, and that's practicing your listening skills, and also creating that self-awareness.

**Lisa Peters** 26:44

Yeah, we just did that in a leadership. And it was a group that I was in, and we did exactly that. And it worked beautifully. And one girl started off and she goes, I love that idea, and. We and then the, and we were prompted by a coach, but it works. And years ago, I have removed the word, but I'm not saying I don't still do it. But and. And it does add, you know, to the conversation, but it's like this. Cut, right? Yeah. And we can do this. Yeah. It's a great, it's a great something we can do

**Keri Schwebius** 27:24

Yeah. Tiny little word. Right. But it has such a huge impact. So language is really important. And then the last thing I would say for leadership skills is having that growth mindset. So reframing failures as learning opportunities. Admitting mistakes, sharing lessons learned, doing debriefs after projects, so you can do better next time. And understanding that, you know, we're all capable of great things, if we're given the right environment and the right tools to do so

**Lisa Peters** 28:00

And I really think when you set up a workplace of psychological safety, and you can't, I don't know how to say this, like, you can't go in and just tell everything, tell everything and give feedback, give feedback, I think the first thing you might want to do is ask for some feedback yourself. Because if you can take it, you might be able to, you know, ask for feedback. And if you're open, there can be you know, it'll sort of start the cycle of it's okay. Right, I've asked for it. And I'm okay, I'm still alive. You know, I just think I read that and Kim Scott's book, you know, just ask for feedback first, before you start telling everybody you know, what needs to be done here. Yeah, that's good,

**Keri Schwebius** 28:44

think to the focus is not on the person, but on the behaviors or the work, right, because then it's not some personal. So, you know, I said, What am I doing that you like, let it which I've stopped doing, and, and stop, start, continue is how I frame it. So, you know, what am I not doing that I should be doing? And that focuses on the behaviors and not the person, which makes it easier for the person authoring the feedback to speak up. Because it's, it's, it's not about me, and whether I'm good or bad as a human. It's about what I'm doing

**Lisa Peters** 29:24

Yeah. And it's it was that's a great point is that you can't just hey, can I have some feedback? Pose a question. You know, and you just did that. And I think that's really important because some people go, I don't know what to give you feedback on. Well, how am I How am I post my face in the meeting? How's my body language, whatever that question is, that you're looking for feedback. That's really great



So I know you're you've been a coach for many years and you have your resume is beautiful. You've been there. You've done that. You're on bigger impact because you're, you're a faith you have you have faith, you have a faith in God. So I want to ask you a little bit about integrating your faith into your coaching. Because I have had coaches and I believe I've said this before, you know, they're like, Well, if you believe in that stuff, well, okay, we're done. And there are people, you may coach that don't have faith. But there are people that do. And I know that for me, it was very important to find a coach that has faith. So how do you integrate faith and your coaching? Either with someone that has faith or don't have faith? Or how do you do it?

**Keri Schwebius** 30:41

Yeah, that's a great question. And I have been thinking about this. Because I think when you're in a coaching relationship, the coachee is doing all the work. Because as a coach, I believe the coachee has greatness inside them. And I'm just a thinking partner. And so I'm not telling them what to do or how to be, I'm just asking them questions to have them reflect. But what's so important about a coaching relationship, is that I am fully there for them. And who I am being for them, is a reflection of what I believe. So, I believe in God, I believe that he has created all of us. And I believe that we have a purpose. And so that affects how I show up for my clients. Sometimes we have conversations where I'll say something, and I'll tell them well, you know, I'm Catholic, so I believe in this. And this is how that impacts me. But mostly, it's about who I am. And who I am in that moment when we're having our conversations

**Lisa Peters** 32:04

It's how you show up.

**Keri Schwebius** 32:05

I really think, yeah, for sure. And I really believe that. I mean, the greatest of these is love, right? And so when I approach a coaching conversation, and when I talk to my clients, I bring the love. I really, truly want for them the best. I want them to be confident, I want them to succeed. I want them to feel joy and happiness. And so I bring the love.

**Lisa Peters** 32:35

Yeah, bring the love Keri. Well, that's I mean, we have gone through. I mean, as I said before, we talked about imposter syndrome. And that was phenomenal. And I think as you talked about self-awareness, I think you could come back and talk about that. Because if 90% of us believe we're self-aware, but actually telling 10% of us are, I think there's a whole discussion. And I didn't even want to get into it, because I'm like, we don't have time. But I really think that is like we need to talk about that. Because if you think you are something and you actually have no clue, you know, we need to bring some awareness to that. Now, Keri, if anybody wants to reach out to you find you in any way, where can they find you?

**Keri Schwebius** 33:24

Yeah, so my website is [ellevatecoaching.com](http://ellevatecoaching.com). And I have two L's for the feminine elevate coaching.

**Lisa Peters** 33:33

So E-L-L-E

**Keri Schwebius** 33:24

E LL. E. And E l. Le. Yeah, that's right. So they can reach out. You can even book a consultation with me. I'd love to, to give people an opportunity to experience coaching. It doesn't cost you anything for that call. So yeah, reach out. And

**Lisa Peters** 33:49

And I think that's the great thing that we've learned in the last few years is how easy it is to meet just like this. Right, time zone, whatever, just, we can make it work. So I appreciate you taking the time out of your day, Keri, I love everything you say. And you really do just bring yourself to our meetings. And I look forward to maybe in a few months, come back and let's do self-awareness.

**Keri Schwebius** 34:16

That sounds great. Listen, thank you so much for the opportunity.

**Lisa Peters** 34:19

Awesome. All right. Thank you again. Well, to everyone listening if you're part of LeaderImpact, you can always discuss or share this podcast with your group. And if you're not yet part of a LeaderImpact group and would like to find out more and grow your leadership, find our podcast page on our website at [LeaderImpact.ca](http://LeaderImpact.ca) And check out our free leadership assessment. You will also find on our web page Chapter One of Braden Douglass's new book, *Becoming a Leader of Impact*. It is an amazing leadership book. You can also check out groups available in Canada at [LeaderImpact.ca](http://LeaderImpact.ca) Or if you are listening from anywhere else in the world, check out [LeaderImpact.com](http://LeaderImpact.com) or get in touch with us by email [info@LeaderImpact.ca](mailto:info@LeaderImpact.ca) And we will connect you. If you liked this podcast please leave us a comment give us a rating or review. This will help other global leaders find our podcast. Thank you for engaging with us. And remember, impact starts with you.