

### III. Creating an emotionally safe environment



The first time I heard about emotional safety, I felt that the terminology sounded like it belonged in a therapy environment. I was more used to terms like positive communication, empathy, good team spirit and trust. Emotional safety felt almost too much to me; however, when I came across an explanation of this topic by my favourite author, Simon Sinek, I found I could relate to some of the things he spoke about and even saw how it was part of my own seminars, to some extent.

I noticed, for instance, that a certain seminar went well due to the level of openness and sharing that the participants brought to their discussions and that, as a trainer, I could consciously steer such a process using my leadership skills. From that point on, my attitude towards comments by and the concerns of seminar participants became much more sensitive. Instead of quickly proceeding with my slides, I would pause, holding myself back; in this way, I showed that I took a serious interest in the seminar participants' comments, opinions and ideas.

I also started to intervene more should someone in the seminar emotionally overreact; I would guide the person and the class in such a way that made it clear how we can and should treat each other. As I generally prefer to avoid overt micro-management, I used to hold myself back from intervening when a conversation was emotionally side-tracked. Nowadays, I do just the opposite: using a kind manner, I advise the members of a group how they can take responsibility for their reactions and emotions. The more I become aware of my ability to set the standard for this type of high-level communication, the more sharing and discussion takes place in my seminars. This isn't surprising, as the seminar participants feel safe and are thereby able to express themselves more openly.

#### People need to become accustomed to a certain type of transparency

I have also been in situations where I was not able to 'turn the emotional tide' in regards to transparency. This happens when a company culture is still using ingrained hierarchical thinking. In such an atmosphere, people are not used to being exposed to a higher level of openness.

I eventually grew to appreciate that people need to become accustomed to a certain type of transparency, and that only with a lot of patience and by showing them a good example are they able and willing to be drawn out of their secure hiding places. In each seminar, I continue to work and refine the skills needed within this particular group dynamic. It is interesting to watch how the attendees look forward to starting to create their own emotionally transparent environment, with themselves as a leader, within their own organisation and with their own people.

The development of transparency within a group of people has proved to be somewhat fascinating. It develops quietly, in the background, and (while it is not explicitly noticed) it is felt by all. When a group of people are offered safe surroundings in which to talk, they are truly thankful for this experience. They then discover that they have been creating this environment just by and among themselves.

When we ask attendees what they thought was the highlight of the seminar, they don't so much mention the well-structured program or the engaging videos or trainer; rather, they focus on the positive and open atmosphere within the group. An environment is created where they can all be themselves and openly discuss issues, even rather personal matters. Some attendees even tell us that they have never experienced this kind of ambience in a seminar.

It has therefore become clear to me that us managers, as part of our function as leaders of people, have the great responsibility to create and guide a process that supports and encourages emotional safety in all our meetings and encounters with people.

## The foundation for all good collaboration, teamwork, loyalty and engagement

Please do not misunderstand this dynamic; it is not merely a cosy and soft atmosphere that creates an escape from the tough business world. Rather, it is the foundation for all good collaboration and teamwork and, according to Sinek, the only way to create true loyalty. It produces a dynamic that encourages engagement and commitment, making the 'carrot and stick' method fully redundant.

When searching the internet for information on this subject, I discovered a concise summary (see [bit.ly/2lkNDU3](https://bit.ly/2lkNDU3)) by a psychologist, Aakriti Varshney, who is an expert in the topic of stress, burnout and personal ineffectiveness. Her work tallies with my own observations. Here is a checklist based on her writing, which I hope will allow you to evaluate your own emotional safety:

- When did I last feel comfortable to express my honest emotions and concerns at work (with my peers, managers and others)?
- When and with whom did I have the freedom to talk openly about my inner thoughts and weaknesses, where I could be sure I would be understood and taken seriously?
- Lately, have I been able to freely trust others at work in an organic manner, rather than by virtue of hierarchy or popularity?
- Has it been possible for me to freely talk about some of my serious doubts, without the subject being immediately brushed aside?
- Recently, have I truly felt respected for who I am? Am I certain that I am not being ridiculed or criticised behind my back?

As true leaders, we need to help, support and even teach our people how, together, we can create an emotionally safe environment. This will take some time; additionally, it can never be forced on people since the dynamic is based on a reciprocal approach. Our employees need to positively react to our invitation to become more transparent. First, however, they need to be convinced, that we have their best interests at heart and that matters of openness will not be used for our own gain. We will also need to have the courage to emphatically correct those who might not understand (or be interested in) this kind of working atmosphere. Overall, this type of communication is common sense but not common practice; it is based on normal and natural human relationships.



When times are uncertain or tough in the business world and/or the world at large, most employees will want to cling to leaders that give them a sense of emotional security. However, we do not want to use this tendency to make them co-dependent on us as leaders; rather, we need to give them the opportunity to find security in their own co-created safe environment. At an organisational level, this process is the foundation for building a safe company culture, one that will allow an organisation to cope more easily with change and, when necessary, brave any strong winds or even storms.

**Rob G. M. Bots** is a Senior Management Trainer and Executive Coach. He was born in Holland and currently lives in Germany and teaches in Europe and the Middle East.

[bots@trust-consultant.com](mailto:bots@trust-consultant.com) | [www.onlinecoaching-manager.de](http://www.onlinecoaching-manager.de) | [www.trustconsulting.eu](http://www.trustconsulting.eu)