

Season 4 | Episode 7

# How Psychological Safety Creates a High-Performance Workplace



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### Rob Parsons:

Welcome to Season Four of Paychex PULSE, an HR podcast, where HR professionals can find great insights on today's top issues and be inspired to build and lead effective teams in a healthier workplace. Hi, everyone. Rob Parsons here. Welcome to the Paychex PULSE podcast. I'm joined today by Stephan Wiedner, founder and CEO of Zarango.com, and before that, Noomii.com. Stephan has a passion for psychological safety in the workplace and how it can be leveraged to unleash the collective potential of all of our people. Stephan, welcome to the podcast.

### Stephan Wiedner:

Rob, thanks for having me.

### Rob Parsons:

Fantastic. So, I think this is so interesting. I'm wondering, could you take me back to Noomii.com? What were you seeing in the coaching world that led you to this concept, and it's not a concept, but just being aware of how important psychological safety is?

### Stephan Wiedner:

Yeah, great. So, we were conducting a lot of coaching engagements within a variety of organizations, and all of those coaching engagements were for leaders, managers at different levels, sometimes C-suite, sometimes more of a frontline manager. And what we found is that throughout, all of those managers within their coaching were trying to improve as leaders or managers in their, for lack of a better word, their soft skills. So, they were trying to learn how to delegate better, or they were trying to learn how to be less abrasive or direct in their communication, et cetera.

### Stephan Wiedner:

Then I came across this concept of psychological safety when I read the book, The Fearless Organization, and what I was looking for at the time was a way of measuring the impact of the coaching. Because, as much as I believe in the value of coaching and the process and how it really helps individuals change their behaviors, I wanted to find a better means of having a tangible measure for organizations so that we can say, "Hey, look, you're spending money on coaching and these are the outcomes that you can point to."

**Stephan Wiedner:**

And psychological safety is a really important metric, because the evidence in the research is really conclusive that psychological safety is one of the, if not the most important, factor that correlates with high-performance teams. And so if a manager or leader can improve their interpersonal skills, their soft skills to be able to foster more psychological safety within their team and we can measure that before and after the coaching, that's a win. That's something we can tangibly say is one of the benefits of the coaching. And so that's really the beginning, the kernel of interest around the whole concept of psychological safety. It's measurable and it's linked to high performance.

**Rob Parsons:**

I really like that you were data driven, you were around KPIs. Could you help me out? What do you mean by psychological safety? It's a very broad term. I have a vague understanding of what I think it might be, but to define it in a data sense, in a KPI sense, you've got to have a real understanding of what that means.

**Stephan Wiedner:**

Yeah, and great question, because I think sometimes people have a basic understanding just on the term. It's, "Psychological safety. Hmm, what do I think that means?"

**Rob Parsons:**

Right.

**Stephan Wiedner:**

Well, there's a very specific definition that we work with, and it is the belief, and this is coming out of Harvard, so Amy Edmondson's the author of that book I mentioned, *The Fearless Organization*. And everyone, if you're interested, you should probably read that book, because it's a great introduction to the concept of psychological safety, and it gets into even more than just an introduction. But anyway, it is a belief that within your team or within your work environment, you can speak up, say what's on your mind, even admit mistakes without any fear of reprimand. So, it's that ability to kind of show up, say what needs to be said without feeling like someone's going to punish you in any sort of shape or way.

**Stephan Wiedner:**

And that doesn't mean you're getting fired, it means maybe someone might just think, "Oh, well, that's a stupid question." That's a consideration that we all have, because we're all used to being in school and putting up our hands or not putting up our hands and not wanting to come across as stupid or maybe someone who is just oppositional, and so we're always considering our reputations and how we show up. And that is really easy for us to manage, because we just don't say anything. In a lot of cases, we just don't say anything, and that doesn't subject ourselves to some sort of reprimand socially. If that makes sense, Rob?

**Rob Parsons:**

It does make sense, and I was thinking, I was always a hand-raiser in class. A lot of kids were not hand-raisers in class, and I can see why, and I can see how this could hurt a team, if I'm not hearing from all the voices. I've got my people there because I value them, I want them to contribute, and if they don't feel safe to do so, I am really robbing my team and my organization of all of that potential input.

**Stephan Wiedner:**

Exactly, and that really points to the value of psychological safety. Why is it linked to high performance? And it's linked to high performance because that's how teams learn, that's how teams innovate, that's how teams make decisions. The more information you have, the better decisions you're able to make. And so if you're only hearing from the person at the front of the class who's always saying, "Oh, oh, oh, pick me, pick me, pick me," and is willing to fill any void or silence in the room with whatever gibber-jabber they have to offer, well, you're only getting a very narrow slice of information when other folks in the room might be able to provide even more valuable perspectives.

**Rob Parsons:**

So, when we last spoke, you'd mentioned some research you were working on. Was that playing into the importance of psychological safety, or was that playing into what you need to do to create that environment?

**Stephan Wiedner:**

Yeah, it's definitely pointing to the latter.

**Rob Parsons:**

Excellent.

**Stephan Wiedner:**

So, what we're doing is we are measuring two things and we're seeing if they correlate. Obviously, one of them is psychological safety within a team, and the second is we're measuring a manager's interpersonal skills. More specifically, we developed an assessment called the Manager's Facilitative Interpersonal Skills, and we're building off of, it's a derivative of previous work that was done in the counseling setting. A really ingenious researcher out of Ohio State University, Tim Anderson, developed an assessment to look at the best counselors and assess their skills, and he developed what they call the FIS, the Facilitative Interpersonal Skills. And so we've modified that to look at the skills that a manager needs to exude in order to foster psychological safety.

**Stephan Wiedner:**

Now, our hypothesis is that those managers and leaders that have really high levels of interpersonal skills, and what that means is their ability, rather, to listen and be empathetic and to be able to approach conflict when it exposes itself, those managers and leaders are going to be able to foster psychological safety better than those who score lower on those interpersonal skills. And so it's a question that we can ask, and we're going to try to find an answer to see if those two things correlate.

**Rob Parsons:**

I highly suspect they do. At Paychex, we've talked about it also as EQ, your emotional intelligence. In general, can soft skills be developed, or is that something I have or I don't have and there's the world? I'm an analyst, I'm an analytical person, and I'm coming at you hard, or I understand the softer side of the world and I just get it naturally? Tell me a little bit about how we can help managers, if we can help managers, develop those soft skills.

**Stephan Wiedner:**

Well, that's really the billion-dollar question right there, Rob. I love that you asked it. The short answer is yes, you can improve those skills, and what we have found in our training is that there's a really steep learning curve because individuals don't typically practice interpersonal skills. We often have this fundamental belief that you either have it or you don't, someone is good in a room or not. And what we know is that these skills can in fact be learned if you start to employ some of the principles of deliberate practice. And one of the things we always say to remind people is that with interpersonal skills, it's similar to piano. We know that you can't learn to play the piano by reading a book, right?

**Rob Parsons:**

Right.

**Stephan Wiedner:**

So, why is it that we think that we can read a book about leadership or management skills? That's not enough. Sure, you can read a book on it, acquire some of the knowledge and some of the background information, but ultimately you need to practice those skills and use principles of deliberate practice. We have a sister company called Skillsetter.com, and it is a tool for practicing interpersonal skills, so it's kind of like a flight simulator, if you will, for managers. We have a bunch of stimulus videos depicting various scenarios within a team, and then

using your webcam and your microphone, you respond, practicing one skill at a time. You get feedback, then you get to practice again and again and again. Similar to the way you would learn how to play the piano or guitar or become a chess master.

**Rob Parsons:**

That makes perfect sense, and I've actually heard a lot about that in training settings, particularly with sales teams and helping people become better presenters and helping people watch themselves in action and learn what's happening. How does an HR professional go about implementing that? Obviously, you mentioned Skillsetter. Are there tools, are there softwares, are there programs that as an HR pro I can go out and make available to my teams to learn these kinds of things?

**Stephan Wiedner:**

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, that's what we're doing with Zarango. Zarango is a training organization, so that's the training arm of our business, and we use Skillsetter, which is the software platform. Skillsetter is strictly just the software and Zarango is the training, and we couple those two things together. So, we take the concept of psychological safety, we look at interpersonal skills, we break them down for people so they can practice one skill at a time, and all the while, we provide people training and practice on Skillsetter, which is a safe environment. It's not one where you're suddenly in the boardroom in a stressful moment having to use your skills. Evidently, or eventually, that's what we want folks to be doing, is using those skills in those types of environments, but we give them an intermediary. There's a step in between just learning the concept and then applying it immediately in a stressful situation.

**Rob Parsons:**

Yeah, for sure. I don't do my recital after my first day of piano lessons.

**Stephan Wiedner:**

Exactly.

**Rob Parsons:**

When we're talking about software, and I know at Paychex we've got HR professionals who are out helping coach managers, we have an LMS to make that available, but we're starting to see how machine learning and AI is coming into play too. What are you seeing in the world of AI when it comes to soft skills, when it comes to psychological safety?

**Stephan Wiedner:**

Great question. My business partner, he got a computer science degree in artificial intelligence, and so he's been interested in AI for well over 20 years. And when he first got a job out of university, he worked I think for the DOD, the Department of Defense, and was working on some AI. But AI back then was a really good concept and we simply didn't have the technology to really back it up in any really substantive way, and as we all know, computer processing has accelerated tremendously over the last 20 years and it's come a long way. We are using AI to do three things at the moment, and this is all kind of experimental research, so it's not implemented into our software just yet, but really cool stuff.

**Stephan Wiedner:**

We're doing three things with AI. We're able to have people record their responses, and we're looking at number one, just their tone. Their tone is irrespective of the language. If someone is yelling and they're mad, you can detect that no matter what language they're in, or if they're sad, happy, glad. The point is, we can detect emotion, we can detect sentiment from the tone and the tone only. The second is we can look at non-verbals. There's AI that can detect emotions on people's faces based on how they're interacting, and what we find so often with leaders and managers is they have very low emotional expression, and they're rather unaware of it. And so in order to be empathetic, for example, you need to say the right things, but you also need to demonstrate empathy on your face.

**Stephan Wiedner:**

And so that's the second form of AI, and then the third is you can transcribe what someone is saying and put it into text form and then analyze that text for what it is that they're saying, and you can, for example, one of the things we're looking at is looking at whether or not someone is speaking from a judgmental point of view. Are they accepting people as being different and unique? And you can tell that based on the way people ask questions or the way they make statements, and so analyzing that text is really interesting. There's a lot of AI in that area. There's these AI bots that measure emotional sentiment on Twitter, for example, on a daily basis, and all this sort of stuff, so analyzing text is very commonplace.

**Stephan Wiedner:**

Those are the three ways that we're looking to implement AI in order to give people more feedback, more accurate feedback. So, for example, in a 30 second clip where you're communicating, you might want to be able to say, "Look, you did not display any emotions, whether it was with your tone or with your non-verbals," or maybe the clip required you to demonstrate empathy because something sad was just communicated and you've got a smile on your face. So, maybe you're showing emotion, but it's incongruous with the content of what's been shared. And so being able to give people that sort of immediate feedback is really valuable in order for them to be able to adjust and adapt how they're communicating in the moment.

**Rob Parsons:**

I love that. I love that holistic, the visual, the vocal, and then just the actual content. It really makes a ton of sense.

**Stephan Wiedner:**

Yeah.

**Rob Parsons:**

So, we're coming to the end of it here, Stephan. Say I don't have the budget to hire a coaching firm or start an AI or any of that, what can I, as an HR pro right now, what can I do to help my managers start creating an environment of psychological safety? What should I be telling them to think about?

**Stephan Wiedner:**

Well, the first thing I'd say is, because you can measure it, you should measure it. Start there and have that be the start for an open discussion with your group, with your team. That's something that we offer organizations, so I'd be happy to extend that to your listeners, Rob, is for them to come to me with a team, and I'd be happy to measure the psychological safety of that team and debrief the results with them for an hour or two just to get the conversation started. Because ultimately, the best way to foster and build psychological safety in a team is to be able to talk about it. Say, "Hey, we think this is important. How can we have more psychological safety here?" And you start to work within the team so that it's not you imposing on, "Hey, you all need to speak up. Got it?" That's not necessarily going to work when you're driving it in that manner, but instead, having more of a two-way communication with your entire team to help them drive the solution with you. How can we as a team be more psychologically safe?

**Rob Parsons:**

I love that. Stephan, thank you for joining the podcast today. This was excellent.

**Stephan Wiedner:**

Rob, thank you so much.

**Rob Parsons:**

Fantastic. And thank you to our listeners for joining as well. It's great to have you all on our learning journey together here, and as always, please stay happy and healthy.

**Rob Parsons:**

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**Speaker 3:**

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