

The Inclusive Team Toolkit

Building Psychological Safety for Team Connection and Performance

This curated collection of psychological safety-building techniques is designed to help you cultivate a workplace atmosphere where all individuals feel secure, valued, and empowered to express their thoughts and concerns openly. By fostering an environment of trust and inclusivity, these practices enable teams to collaborate more effectively, unlock creativity, and cultivate higher levels of team cohesion and performance.

While many of these practices reflect original methods and insights tailored for this toolkit, some have been inspired by thought leaders in the fields of psychological safety, collaboration, and team dynamics. We extend our gratitude to these creators, whose work continues to inspire the evolution of inclusive leadership practices.

As you explore these techniques, we invite you to adapt and customize them to fit your unique team and organizational needs. The flexibility of this toolkit allows you to meet your team where they are and grow from there, ensuring every voice is heard and valued. May these tools spark meaningful conversations, deepen connections, and pave the way for your team's collaborative success.

Guide for Facilitators:

Create a Brave Space:

Start by setting the tone of non-judgment. Remind participants that the goal is to create a supportive, open environment where everyone's voice is heard and respected. Reinforce that honesty and vulnerability are encouraged and ensure that no feedback or ideas are dismissed.

Lead by Example:

As the facilitator, model openness and vulnerability by sharing something personal first. This will set the tone for the team and encourage others to follow suit.

Set Clear Expectations:

At the beginning of each exercise, explain what is expected from the participants (e.g., sharing candid thoughts, giving feedback). Let them know that passing or staying silent is always an option if they aren't comfortable.

Time Management:

Keep activities running smoothly by adhering to time limits, but also be flexible if an activity naturally needs more discussion. You can use a timer for transitions or quietly manage time.

Debrief and Reflect:

After each exercise, guide a short reflection. Ask participants how the exercise felt, what they learned, and what insights they can take forward. This helps solidify the experience.

Ensure Confidentiality:

For exercises that include personal sharing, emphasize confidentiality. What is shared in the group stays in the group to foster deeper trust.

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Level 1 Techniques (Building Openness & Empathy)

These are foundational techniques teams can implement immediately without requiring significant time or preparation. They are great for everyday use to build comfort with vulnerability and openness.

Battery Life: Share where your energy is at (e.g., percent charged) to gauge team energy levels.

Work Weather: A quick way for team members to describe their current mood and state of mind.

Getting To Know You: A set of icebreaker questions that help you dig beneath the surface.

It's 'I Don't Know' Time: Normalize vulnerability by admitting uncertainty.

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Level 2 Techniques (Encouraging Participation & Feedback)

These practices require slightly more involvement but offer immediate value. They work well in team settings where you are working to increase participation and gather insights from all team members.

Snowball Share: An anonymous way to gather feedback and input by crumpling and tossing papers.

1-2-4-All: A structured method for iterative feedback and idea generation.

Fist to Five: Gauge team alignment with hand signals, encouraging consensus and quality voting.

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Level 3 Techniques (Fostering Vulnerability & Problem-Solving)

These are more in-depth techniques that take time to plan and execute. They're designed to foster deep psychological safety, empathy, and collective strategy-building.

Devil's Advocate Assignment: Designate a team member to challenge assumptions and provide alternative perspectives to improve decision-making.

Stinky Fish: Surface unspoken concerns or "stinky fish" that could derail team success.

Anxiety Party: Ask team members to share something they're worried about, then score/solve as a team.

Hot Seat: Allow a team member to present a personal challenge for group feedback and problem-solving.

Rainbow Thinking Caps: Figuratively "try on" new perspectives for inclusive, expansive thinking.

Level 1 Techniques

(Building Openness & Empathy)

Battery Life

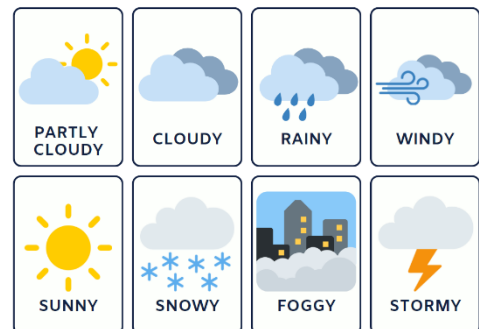
At the start of a meeting, at a break, or after a meeting concludes, ask everyone to share where their energy is at. Display an image like the one below to prompt sharing, or ask everyone for their “percent charged” (10%, 50%, etc.). Ask for a volunteer to start. Working your way around the room, acknowledge each person with a verbal “thank you” or a head nod of encouragement after they take their turn. (It’s ok for people to “pass” if they’d like and participants are not required to share context).

Optional: If needed, ask individuals or teams to identify ways to “recharge” and commit to take action.



Work Weather

At the start of a meeting, ask everyone to share a descriptor of how their “work weather” is going today. Display an image like the one below, or ask for everyone to come up with their own forecast. Acknowledge each individual’s response, and thank them for sharing to give others context about their mindset and energy levels.



Getting to Know You

Help the team get better at listening to understand AND help them open up to share by taking a few minutes to discuss a key question at the start of each meeting. Below are several to get you started. Rotate questions by inviting a different person to choose (or make up) the question each meeting.

1. If you could trade places with a celebrity for a day, who would it be?
2. When was the last time you felt truly relaxed, and what were you doing?
3. Who are you particularly grateful for right now?
4. If you could wake up tomorrow with one superpower, what would it be?
5. Is there something you have always wanted to be good at? If so, what is it?
6. What do you value most in a friend?
7. What is a positive characteristic that you’ve worked hard to shape in yourself?
8. If your house caught fire while no one was home, and you had a chance to save just one object, what would it be and why?
9. If you had “intro music” when you walked into the room, what song would you choose?
10. What is one thing you’ve been really proud of this year?

'I Don't Know' Time

Foster openness and normalize vulnerability in a team by creating a safe space where leaders and team members can admit uncertainty without fear of judgment.

This can be introduced as a routine during team meetings, allocating a few minutes on the agenda for 'I Don't Know' Time. Open the floor for people to share something they don't know how to handle or are feeling uncertain about. After someone shares, invite the team to offer insights and ideas.

Leaders can start by modeling vulnerability, saying, *"I don't know the best way to approach this issue—what are your ideas?"* The key is to normalize that it's okay not to have all the answers. By making space to share uncertainty, it is framed not as a weakness but as an opportunity for collaboration.

Level 2 Techniques

(Encouraging Participation & Feedback)

Snowball Share

Use this technique to gather anonymous feedback or input from a group, creating a safe way for team members to voice concerns, ideas, or suggestions.

Prepare the Topic: Before starting the exercise, identify a clear topic or prompt for the team to respond to. This could be related to a current challenge, project feedback, team dynamics, or brainstorming solutions.

Instructions:

1. Distribute blank sheets of paper to each team member and ask them to anonymously write feedback or respond to a specific issue (e.g., *"What questions could we face from clients as we implement this change?"*)
2. Once participants have written their feedback, instruct them to crumple the papers into "snowballs." Ask everyone to toss their "snowballs" into the center of the room or across the room to randomize the distribution. Repeat, asking everyone to pick up a "snowball" and toss it again to ensure anonymity.
3. After a few rounds, pick up a random "snowball" and read it aloud. Invite thoughts from the group. Take turns having each team member pick up a "snowball" and read it. As the responses are read, encourage participants to listen actively and openly, without immediate judgment or defensiveness. Facilitate an open discussion on themes that emerge, emphasizing that the feedback is valuable and will help the team move forward. Depending on the nature of the feedback, you can use different approaches:



For actionable suggestions: Encourage the group to brainstorm solutions or ways to address the issue.

For concerns or challenges: Acknowledge the issue and invite further discussion if needed, or note it for later follow-up.

For positive feedback or ideas: Celebrate the positive contributions and explore how they can be implemented.

Remind the group that all feedback is valid and that the exercise is intended to uncover insights, not to assign blame or create conflict.

4. **Summarize and Reflect:** After all the snowballs have been read, summarize the key themes or issues that emerged during the exercise. Highlight any recurring patterns or common concerns. Encourage the team to reflect on the input and discuss how these insights can inform team actions or improvements moving forward.

Facilitator Tips:

Create an atmosphere of trust by reinforcing that the purpose of the exercise is to promote openness and collaboration, not criticism. Allow for a short reflection after the exercise to ensure that participants feel heard and supported, even if not every issue is immediately addressed.

If sensitive or difficult feedback arises, acknowledge it thoughtfully, and offer to follow up one-on-one if needed.

1-2-4-ALL*

Use this collaborative thinking and discussion tool to promote an inclusive, iterative method for feedback, idea generation or problem-solving. It engages all members of a large group and ensures everyone has an opportunity to be heard.



1 (1 minute, 1 person)

Individual Reflection: Allow each team member one minute to silently reflect on the given question or topic, writing down ideas.

2 (2 minutes, 2 people)

Pair Share: Pair up team members to discuss their thoughts for two minutes. Each person shares their reflections with their partner.

4 (4 minutes, 4 people)

Small Group Discussion: Form groups of four and have a more in-depth discussion for four minutes. Members share insights from both their individual reflections and pair discussions.

All (All):

Whole Group Sharing: Bring the entire team together to share key points and insights from the small group discussions. Each group can briefly present their most poignant thoughts or findings.

Best practice tips:

- Don't skip quiet self-reflection!
- Write down ideas at every stage
- Use bells for announcing transitions
- Stick to precise timing

**Originated by Keith McCandless and Henri Lipmanowicz of Liberating Structures*

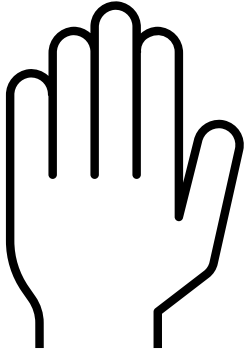
Fist to Five

Fist to Five facilitates team decision-making. It takes teams beyond the “yes” or “no” vote and introduces the element of the **quality** of the “yes.” A fist is a “no” and any number of fingers is a “yes,” with an indication of how good a “yes” it is. This moves a group away from quantity voting to quality voting, which is considerably more informative.

Whenever teams use Fist to Five, they can provide their input on different project issues by simply raising their hand and showing a closed fist or a specific number of fingers. For example, the team facilitator restates an action the group may take and asks the team to show their level of support. Each team member will then respond by holding up a closed fist or a number of fingers corresponding to the support level.

If a team member holds up fewer than three fingers, they are given the opportunity to state their objections, and the team can then respond. The facilitator will continue the Fist to Five process until the team achieves consensus (everyone holds up three or more fingers) or agrees to move on to the next issue. It may be acknowledged that total consensus may not be reached and majority voting can be used in a second and final vote after people with 0, 1, or 2 fingers up have had an opportunity to speak and share their concerns and potential solutions.

If it is obvious that the vote is wildly split, with no real majority, despite a winning “yes,” the group knows it has more work to do, and that the decision may not endure. They can expect more controversy and know a plan must be made to address the polarized views.



FIST TO FIVE

Closed fist. Total opposition. A closed fist is a way to block consensus.*

One finger. I have major concerns.*

Two fingers. I would like to discuss some minor issues.*

Three fingers. I'm not in total agreement, but I feel comfortable enough to let this proposal pass without further discussion.

Four fingers. I think it's a good idea and will work for it.

Five fingers. It's the best possible decision.

**Three fingers or less = conversation toward consensus*

Level 3 Techniques

(Fostering Vulnerability & Problem-Solving)

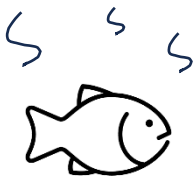
Devil's Advocate Assignment

Assign a Devil's Advocate: Improve decision-making by actively designating someone to play the role of the devil's advocate. This person should challenge assumptions, poke holes in arguments, and stimulate critical thinking. The aim is not to create unproductive opposition, but to improve decisions by broadening perspectives. Rotate the responsibility of being the devil's advocate to different team members.

Instructions for the individual assigned to be the devil's advocate.

- Understand the Goal: Uncover potential weaknesses and alternative perspectives.
- Be Curious: Pose insightful questions to prompt deeper exploration.
- Challenge Assumptions: Critically examine underlying assumptions and identify potential risks.
- Explore Alternatives: Actively propose different potential solutions or courses of action.
- Express Concerns Clearly: Communicate concerns respectfully and clearly.
- Be Solution-Oriented: Contribute to finding solutions, not just identifying problems.
- Maintain a Constructive Tone: Ensure a positive and collaborative atmosphere.

**Inspired by Chip & Dan Heath's book ["Decisive – How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work"](#)*



Stinky Fish

Clear the air by putting the “stinky fish” on the table – surfacing those things that will only get “stinkier”/worse if hidden or ignored.

Set the Tone

Remind participants that in times of change and uncertainty - worrying about challenges is completely normal.

Explain the purpose of the exercise: to create group openness. The exercise is designed to uncover unknown factors, silent problems, unasked questions, potential derailers, or unexpressed emotions that could limit success. These are things people are thinking about but no-one is saying. This is not a venting session, the goal is to make issues visible so the team can solve them.

Individual reflection: State that every situation has stinky fish, and dealing with them earlier is better. Ask each person to write down at least 3 stinky fish ideas, or use thought-starter questions like: “What unspoken issues are causing tension?” or “What is everyone thinking about but no one is saying?”

Partner & group sharing: invite each person to share their stinkiest fish (or use the 1-2-4-all method). Validate concerns and thank people for their contributions. Move on to group voting, problem-solving, or sharing how the input will be used.

**Inspired by [Hyper Island](#) and [Fearless Culture](#)*

Anxiety Party

This exercise made famous by Google isn't as scary as it seems. Each person gets an opportunity to reflect on and articulate their biggest concerns or obstacles. The team helps relieve pressure by scoring each idea on a scale of 1-5 (1 = haven't noticed/doesn't affect me to 5 I've noticed/yes it affects me"), and then helps find solutions.

[Why You Need to Host an Anxiety Party—and How to Throw One \(hotjar.com\)](#)

Hot Seat

Provide structured feedback in a supportive environment, helping individuals work through a specific challenge or share something they need help with.

Instructions:

1. Prior to the meeting, solicit a volunteer (or multiples) to take a turn in the "Hot Seat."
2. During the meeting, the "Hot Seat" participant has 2 minutes to share their current challenge (see preparation questions below, which can be sent out in advance of the meeting).
 - *What's my current challenge right now?*
 - *What have I already tried to address it?*
 - *What kind of support or feedback would be most helpful to me?*
3. The rest of the team gets a designated number of minutes (between 5-10) to offer supportive suggestions, ideas, or resources. Use a timer to timeblock the exercise.
4. The participant's only role is to share, and then to listen silently, taking notes. They say "thank you" at the end without responding or debating, allowing them to absorb the feedback. They can choose to use whatever is helpful.
5. Optionally, the participant can follow up individually later if they want to dive deeper into a particular idea.



Rainbow Thinking Caps*

Rainbow Thinking Caps is a structured way of considering specific perspectives to expand thinking as a group figuratively "tries on" new ways of thinking about an issue. This structured activity can be used in any meeting scenario to guide inclusive decision-making.

**Inspired by "Six Thinking Hats" from Dr. Edward de Bono.*

Instructions: Identify an issue or situation to explore. Set up the discussion by describing the exercise as a way to think creatively about what's happening. Spend a few minutes trying on each color of "cap" and focusing their thinking on ONLY that perspective, before moving on.

Introductory Points:

To help us think through [*the issue at hand*], we're going to use a process called Rainbow Thinking Caps, a creative modification of the 'Six Thinking Hats' framework. It's designed to stimulate innovation and inclusive thinking.

Active participation from everyone is important as we "try on the caps" and move through the phases together. Each unique perspective contributes to the richness of our discussions and decisions. As we theoretically "try on" each cap, Let's begin with the Red Cap.

Red Cap – Values Alignment

What are our values and why are they important in this situation?
How can we use our values to guide us, or help us make a decision?

Orange Cap – Expansive Impact

How might our choices affect different groups/communities, and how can we maximize positive impact?
Who might have concerns about what we decide, and why?
Who else might we need to hear from to broaden our thinking before moving on?
How should we collect any additional feedback we need?

Yellow Cap – Empathy Perspective

How might our decisions impact individuals emotionally?
What compassionate approaches should be considered?

Green Cap – Neutral Thinking

How can we use data and facts to make an informed, objective assessment?
What additional research do we need to do before moving forward?

Blue Cap – Diversity of Thought

Who has a perspective that hasn't been explored yet? What else should we consider? How could we examine this from a different angle? Does anyone have any "wild" or "random" ideas they haven't voiced?

Violet Cap – Action!

What do we need to do next?

**Note – you may want to use the Fist to Five technique to make a decision.*

Let's summarize the actions we will take.

Reflecting on our individual strengths, how can we make the implementation of this idea a success?

Closing points:

Let's take a moment to consider the wealth of insights shared and to acknowledge the importance of this kind of holistic, inclusive, and strategic approach.

Who has appreciation to express about the value of the process or contributions from participants?

Thank you for your active participation!