

Columbia Construction Implements a Psychological Safety Program



Those in the construction industry know the importance of safety: physical, mental, emotional. Many firms contribute resources - financial and otherwise - to implement programs to ensure that each of their workers go home at the end of the day in the same condition they arrived at its start. But the idea of safety reaches far beyond physical and mental wellness. Psychological safety has entered the construction scene, an initiative that helps to ensure employees are comfortable at their workplace and can express themselves without fear of backlash.

Columbia Construction, an AGC of Massachusetts member, is a third generation construction management company with more than 200 employees and based in North Reading, Massachusetts with offices in Boston, Florida and New Hampshire. Bill Aalerud, executive vice president, Columbia, and his team discovered psychological safety recently and sat down with *Constructor* to discuss the concept and how the company is implementing it.

Constructor: What is psychological safety? Aalerud:

As Amy Edmondson, PhD, Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at the Harvard Business School, describes it, psychological safety is defined as a work environment in which people are comfortable expressing and being themselves. They are able to share concerns and mistakes without the fear of embarrassment or retribution. They are confident that they can speak up and won't be humiliated, ignored or blamed. When a work environment has reasonably high psychological safety, good things happen: mistakes are reported quickly so that prompt cor-rective action can be taken; seamless coordination across groups or departments is enabled and potentially game-changing ideas for innovation are shared.

At Columbia, we discovered psychological safety while researching how to encourage and support high-performing teams. Our research uncovered an intriguing case study. Several years ago,

Google spent millions focused on building the perfect team. This multi-year effort was code-named Project Aristotle. Google measured nearly every aspect of their employees' lives including educational background, hobbies, friends, who they ate lunch with, etc. No mix of personality traits, skills or backgrounds explained why some of their 180 teams performed well and others did not. Then Google discovered the concept of psychological safety, and everything fell into place. They found that psychological safety was the number one attribute of high-performing teams.

Constructor: Why is the construction industry a good candidate for this type of initiative? How does it work and what results have you seen?

Aalerud: Last Planner System (LPS) is a planning system used in the construction industry to create a predictable workflow among trade partners to achieve reliable results and deliver maximum value to the customer. One of the key tools of LPS is pull planning, the purpose of which is to create a plan to have labor, materials and equipment arrive on the jobsite only when needed to maintain the workflow. The planning is a collaborative effort among trade partners who share the specifics of their work and identify exactly when they will finish so the next trade can follow directly behind and maintain the flow of work. There must be a relatively high level of psychological safety among the trade partners to be effective. The Lean Construction Institute (LCI) calls it their "Rules of Engagement" that foster a productive work environment where problems are solved and ideas are freely shared.

At the end of every project or interview for new work, we conduct a lessons-learned meeting to understand what went well, what didn't go so well, and where there are opportunities to improve so we can share what we learned with future project teams. We are human, and we make mistakes. However, mistakes are an incredible learning opportunity. For an effective lessons-learned session, there has to be a relatively high level of psychological safety. The facilitator

of the lessons learned is key to creating an environment for open, honest and transparent sharing by demonstrating care, empathy, compassion and kindness and letting the participants know that what they share will benefit others.

Constructor: *As with most initiatives, they start at the top. How does Columbia onboard leaders to this initiative so they buy into it? Have staff members (as well as team leaders) been responsive to it?*

Aalerud: Two years ago, Columbia set out to do something purposeful in the space of diversity, equity and inclusion. We established a five-member DEI Working Group and hired an experienced diversity consultant, Culture Coach International, who helped us create a strategic plan focused on improving DEI. The first step was to understand where we were relative to DEI. Our consultant administered a DEI survey to all employees, interviewed dozens of team members and held multiple focus group discussions. We gathered a boatload of information, which the DEI Working Group used to establish three goals:

- Create and foster a psychologically safe and accountable workplace culture with the intent of improving inclusion and the feeling of belonging among members of project teams and departments.
- Build and maintain a diverse group of employees across all levels of the organization leading to better innovation and problem-solving skills resulting in individual opportunities and organizational success.
- Serve as a change agent for a more diverse and inclusive construction industry by providing opportunities for historically underutilized individuals and businesses.

The DEI Working Group collaborated with the executive leadership team monthly for their feedback and buy-in to the creation of the goals. Once the goals were established, we realized the all-volunteer DEI Working Group did not have the capacity to implement the strategic plan successfully. Nine months later, after an intense and exhaustive search, we hired Jerrett Jones, PhD as our director of diversity & inclusion. His primary focus is to oversee the implementation of Columbia's DEI strategic plan. Concurrent with the recruiting effort, we hired a second consultant, Holonix, an expert in psychological safety and workforce development. This past summer, Holonix conducted multiple workshops and training sessions for our employees, introducing them to the concept of psychological safety and how it's foundational to increasing the feeling of belonging and improving the performance of our project teams and departmental work groups.

In October of 2023, Holonix conducted an assessment of the entire Columbia organization to determine our employees' perception of psychological safety across four dimensions: open conversation, willingness to help, diversity & inclusion, and attitude to risk and failure. We are currently in the midst of Holonix cascading the results of this organizational assessment to employees using heat maps depicting the levels of perceived psychological safety throughout the organization. Concurrent to this, we are also having Holonix train a dozen employees to attain the Fearless Organization Scan (FOS) Certification. The training will allow our internal practitioners to administer, interpret and use the scan with project teams or departmental

work groups to help them reach higher levels of psychological safety and consequential improved feelings of belonging and improved performance of the teams, enabling them to be more effective, innovative and better problem-solvers, which directly benefits our clients.

Constructor: *What have been some challenges the company has faced that led to implementing the 'psychological safety' initiative?*

Aalerud: As with any new organizational initiative, one has to be aware and sensitive to the workforce's capacity to be able to take this on. The introductory training session alone for all employees was a three-hour commitment. That's a huge commitment in the day of the life of a construction professional. We carefully scheduled the training sessions after we had completed several months of training our operations staff on a new project management platform. There was no way we could have overlapped these two initiatives and been successful.

An organization must get its senior leadership team on board to support the initiative. Although our DEI Working Group met monthly with our senior leadership team, it took several months for the leadership team to realize and accept that the new director of diversity & inclusion role would be a full-time position. Initially, leadership thought the all-volunteer DEI Working Group had the capacity to oversee the implementation of the strategic plan. There's a saying, "if it's not in their job description, it ain't gettin' done." Thus, we created a comprehensive job description modeled after the DEI strategic plan, and it quickly became apparent that overseeing the plan's implementation was more than a part-time role.

Constructor: *How does this initiative help improve productivity (team and individual) with Columbia team members?*

Aalerud: In time, I think we will see teams improve at solving problems, being more innovative, more productive and creating more value for our clients. This next step should start to unfold once our internal FOS certified practitioners have an opportunity to work with project teams and departmental work groups. It's an incredibly exciting next step. By the time this article is published, our practitioners will have conducted perhaps a dozen readouts with project teams and work groups assessing the current level of psychological safety within the team or work group, analyzed the data and reported back to the teams/work groups, then collaborated on identifying subtle changes in behavior and communication with the intent of improving the level of psychological safety. The assessment is a 5-minute, 7-question survey. After the initial survey and readout, the practitioner can re-administer the survey in six months to measure and hopefully see an increase in psychological safety.

Constructor: *How can other AGC member firms learn more about 'psychological safety'?*

Aalerud: Amy Edmondson's book, "The Fearless Organization," is a great start. It's only eight chapters and is an easy read and listen. Or, any AGC member could reach out to me at baalerud@columbiacc.com. I would be happy to share advice and/or answer questions. ■