

## **Roundtable Session 2 – Table 10 – Empowering a Speak Up Culture in the Biopharmaceutical Industry: Promoting Psychological Safety**

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### **Abstract:**

In this high-stakes, highly regulated environment of the biopharmaceutical industry, fostering a culture where employees feel empowered to voice concerns, challenge decisions, and share ideas without fear of retaliation is essential for both scientific integrity and organizational success. This roundtable explores the concept of psychological safety and the belief that one can speak up without facing negative consequences.

From front-line scientists to executive leadership, psychological safety is a key enabler of open dialogue, innovation, and error reporting. Yet, achieving it is particularly complex in environments shaped by compliance pressures, strong hierarchies, and cross-functional dependencies. Join us to share challenges, best practices, and actionable strategies to create safer, more inclusive spaces that encourage speaking up, not only in quality and safety contexts but also in the realms of everyday collaboration and decision-making.

### **Discussion Questions and Notes:**

1. **What does psychological safety look like in practice in a GxP-regulated biopharma setting? How can we recognize its presence or absence?**

#### **Indicators of Psychological Safety**

- Participants emphasized that psychological safety manifests when team members feel empowered to speak up, ask questions, and admit mistakes without fear of punishment. A psychologically safe environment encourages open dialogue, regardless of personality type—introverted or extroverted individuals should both feel supported in expressing their views.
- Surveys were mentioned as a useful tool to gauge whether employees feel safe to voice concerns.
- Managerial behavior plays a critical role: when leaders respond constructively to mistakes and foster a culture of learning, it signals safety.
- Inclusive communication practices—such as actively inviting input from quieter team members—help reinforce this environment.

#### **Signs of Psychological Unsafety**

- Conversely, the absence of psychological safety was described as a “no speak-up” culture, where concerns are suppressed and frustrations are vented privately, leading to a toxic atmosphere.
- Low productivity and bottled-up emotions were flagged as effects.

- A lack of transparent communication, such as decisions being handed down without explanation or input, was seen as a red flag.
- The contrast between HR systems in large vs. small companies was briefly noted, suggesting that organizational scale may influence how psychological safety is supported or neglected.

**2. What are examples of situations where speaking up had a critical positive impact (or where failure to speak up led to negative consequences)?**

**Positive Impacts of Speaking Up**

Several participants shared examples where speaking up led to meaningful improvements in workplace culture, operations, and employee well-being:

- **Work-Life Balance Initiative:** A VP introduced a program to support work-life balance but provided no implementation guidance. Employees spoke up, leading to clarification and better execution.
- **Emotional Health Survey:** A six-question survey prompted deep reflection. Employees spent time analyzing responses and presented the findings to leadership, resulting in stress-reducing changes and greater emotional awareness.
- **Customer vs. Internal Problem Ownership:** Employees voiced concerns about unrealistic timelines and the need to balance customer expectations with internal capacity. Leadership acknowledged the feedback, improving planning and prioritization.
- **Knowing When and How to Escalate:** Participants emphasized the importance of understanding organizational dynamics—knowing who to approach and when to raise concerns to higher levels.

**Consequences of Not Speaking Up (or Speaking Up Poorly)**

Some reflections highlighted the risks and complexities of speaking up:

- **Program Fatigue:** One employee raised concerns about repetitive programs being reintroduced every few years without time to reflect or improve. The feedback was met with cold reception from HR, suggesting that timing and delivery of feedback are critical.

**3. What are effective organizational or procedural mechanisms (e.g., anonymous reporting, feedback loops) that support a speak-up culture?**

Participants highlighted a range of tools and practices that help foster a culture where employees feel safe and encouraged to voice concerns or ideas:

- **Anonymous Questionnaires:** These allow employees to share honest feedback without fear of retaliation. They're especially useful for surfacing issues that might not be raised in public forums.
- **Feedback Sessions & 1:1 Conversations:** Regular, structured opportunities for feedback—whether in group settings or private meetings—help build trust and normalize open dialogue.
- **Targeted Feedback Sampling:** Selecting a diverse group of individuals to provide input ensures a broader range of perspectives. However, voluntary participation may limit the depth and diversity of feedback received.
- **Anonymous HR Reporting Channels:** These serve as a more formal and secure route for raising serious concerns, especially when other avenues feel unsafe or ineffective.

One participant introduced the concept of **feedforward** instead of traditional feedback. This approach emphasizes future-oriented suggestions rather than dwelling on past mistakes—encouraging constructive dialogue and continuous improvement.

4. **Are there differences in how psychological safety is perceived in R&D vs. manufacturing, quality, or regulatory functions? How should approaches differ?**

In principle, psychological safety should be consistent across all departments. It's fundamentally about teamwork, open communication, and mutual respect—values that apply universally.

In practice, however, participants acknowledged that perceptions and needs vary significantly between functions.

R&D teams often operate in development mode, where experimentation and flexibility are essential. There's typically more leeway to explore ideas, make mistakes, and iterate—creating a naturally more psychologically safe space.

Functions such as manufacturing and regulatory, tend to be more structured and compliance-driven, with stricter protocols and less room for ambiguity. In such environments, prioritization and clarity are critical, and psychological safety may hinge more on clear expectations and safe escalation paths than on creative freedom.

5. **How do cultural, regional, or generational differences influence perceptions of psychological safety in global teams, and how can companies adapt?**

In some countries, organizational culture tends to be more hierarchical. This can affect how freely employees feel they can speak up—some may wait for permission rather than proactively voicing concerns.

Working with customers across different cultures requires sensitivity to varying norms around communication and authority.

Younger generations may be more inclined to take initiative, while older generations might prefer waiting for direction—highlighting different comfort levels with autonomy and risk.

Younger employees are often more enthusiastic about integrating tools like AI, which can influence how psychological safety is perceived in tech-driven environments.

Teams should invest time in understanding the cultural and generational backgrounds of their colleagues. This fosters empathy and improves collaboration.

Rather than viewing these differences as barriers, participants emphasized using them as strengths to build more resilient and innovative teams.