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The making of successful teams: A study on psychological safety and great workplaces in Asia Pacific: 2018 Asia insights

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2018 ASIA INSIGHTS

A COLLABORATIVE STUDY
WITH THE SINGAPORE
MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY

Great
Place
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THE MAKING OF SUCCESSFUL TEAMS: A STUDY ON PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND GREAT WORKPLACES IN ASIA PACIFIC

By Richard R. Smith and Valerie Tan

INTRODUCTION

Technological breakthroughs and market forces continue to disrupt the way businesses operate both locally and around the world. As a result, many leaders are looking for effective ways to transform their workforces to navigate these disruptions and be better equipped for the future of work.

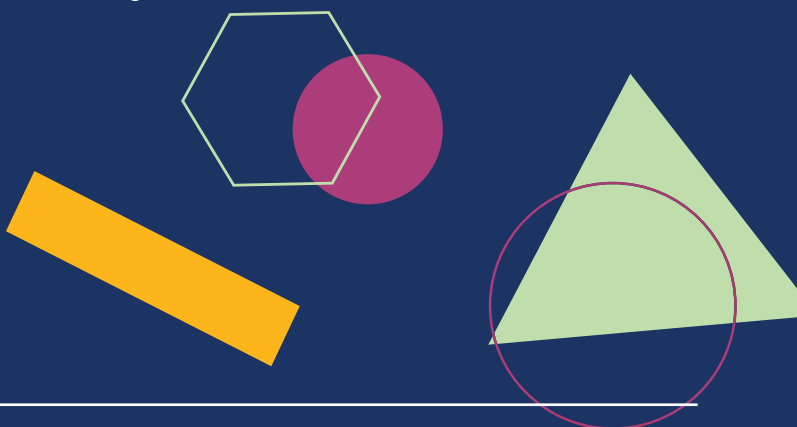
As organisations are grappling with disruptions, many are recognising the need for high-performing teams that can embrace the challenges ahead. Some firms adopt lean-team approaches that leverage design thinking to spur innovation, while others strive to foster more global teamwork and entrepreneurship. Peter Weill and Stephanie Woerner (2018) of MIT Sloan Management School noted that creating new roles and upskilling employees are some common initiatives that companies include in their strategic roadmap for growth in the digital economy. While there are many attempts to transform and create a sense of teamwork to embrace challenges of the future, it seems clear from our research that some organisations are succeeding in more ways than others.

One of the key underlying reasons for the disparity is the focus on organisational culture – an area which is often taken for granted or overlooked during transformations. By executing structural changes without taking cultural factors into account, even the best intentions and plans often fail to yield anything but confusion amongst the squads. Employees could also end up feeling burdened by these new initiatives rather than enabled.

Hence, organisations must identify core cultural building blocks and be willing to invest in them. This leads them to stay competitive while helping teams on the ground to embrace change cycles and feel empowered to drive new opportunities for the collective good. Studies tell us that a strong and positive teamwork culture is one such building block that provides organisations with the greatest leverage.

Drawing on existing literature as well as our own research, we set out to answer this question: **what is the best approach to foster quality teamwork that transforms companies into great workplaces that are future-ready?** We considered this research question specifically in the context of Asia Pacific – a region where Gartner predicts that 80 percent of traditional companies may lose 10 percent of their market share by 2021 if disruptions are not well considered and addressed.

For this purpose, we examined the Great Place to Work® data gathered from over 800 organisations with more than 400,000 survey respondents across the Asia Pacific region.¹



GREAT TEAMS BEGET HIGH-PERFORMING ORGANISATIONS AND GREAT PLACES TO WORK

According to a study published by the Harvard Business Review, the amount of time managers and employees spent on collaborative activities grew by at least 50 percent over the last 20 years. In addition, more than 75 percent of an employee's day is now spent communicating with colleagues.

With high-intensity, high-frequency workplace interactions becoming the new normal, the need for a positive teamwork culture has significant implications for many Asia Pacific organisations. It has become imperative for companies to shift towards a team-based organisational structure – a way of working that results from pressure to make rapid decisions, reduce inefficiencies, and continually improve work processes. Longitudinal research studies also suggest that there is a positive link between teamwork and organisational, operational and financial outcomes.

Our study of Great Place to Work®'s Asia Pacific data revealed a notable difference between the Best Workplaces™ and other organisations. In the Great Place to Work® survey², we looked at three specific behavioural elements of teamwork, measuring the degree to which they are perceived to exist in the organisation:

- 1. CONNECTEDNESS** A sense of belonging and relationship perceived by team members
- 2. COLLEGIALLY** Feelings of cooperation and collaboration amongst team members
- 3. CONTRIBUTION** Perceived willingness by team members to give extra effort

¹ For companies surveyed within the Great Place to Work® database, the 'best companies' or 'the best' here refer to organisations within the Asia Pacific region that have been ranked among the 2018 Asia's Best Workplaces™ lists, while 'the rest' refer to unranked organisations in the region that participated in the process.

² The construct of the Great Place to Work® survey is based on a total of 58 affirmative statements. Respondents are asked to rate each statement using a 5-point scale, starting with 1 (almost always untrue), 2 (often untrue), 3 (sometimes true/sometimes untrue), 4 (often true) and 5 (almost always true). The data points in the charts within this report refer to the average of all valid ratings.

As Figure 1 shows, employees in the Best Workplaces™ rate teamwork higher compared to employees in the 'rest', and this difference is significant.

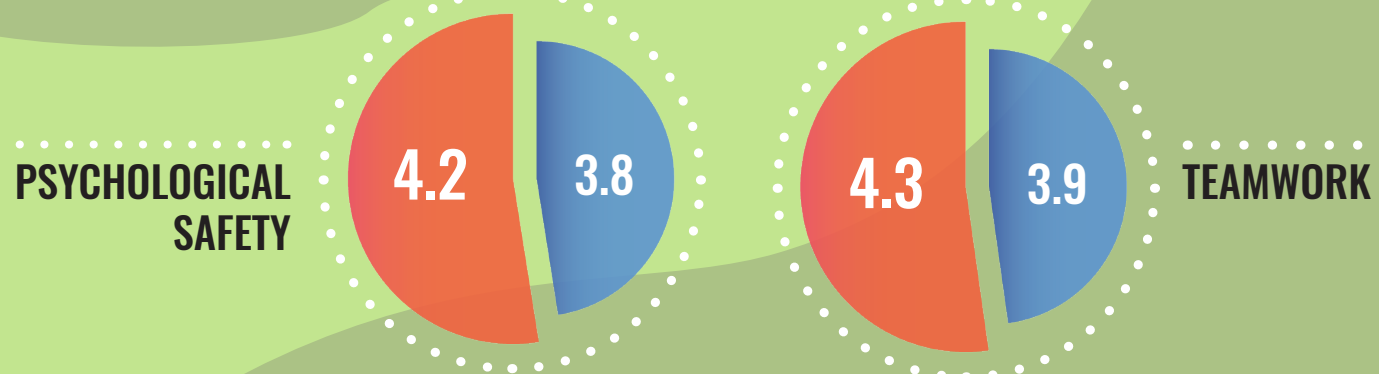
While the strategic importance of teams to organisations as well as the value of teamwork is undeniable, it does not fully shed light on other more pertinent questions. For instance, **why do some teams outperform others despite having very similar member compositions? Why do some teams readily embrace challenges to achieve positive results while others do not?**

This information alone also does not tell us what exactly produces the right environment for teamwork. For companies looking to build a culture that epitomises the 3Cs of teamwork for the benefit of the organisation, where should they even start? The answer to all the above questions lies in what is referred to as **psychological safety**.



**FIGURE 1
PERCEPTION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND TEAMWORK
(BEST VS REST)**

● ASIA BEST ● ASIA REST



PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND WHY IT MATTERS

“Psychological safety is a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up,” wrote Harvard Business School Professor Amy Edmondson. A psychologically safe environment is one where interpersonal trust exists, and mutual respect is given daily. It is an environment where people are comfortable being themselves.

Tech giant Google is the perfect example of an organisation in which teams form the primary unit by which all work gets done. Yet, Google’s management soon realised that even in a progressive, team-based organisational structure, not all teams thrived or performed well. It was a deceptively simple issue, yet no one could unravel the mystery.

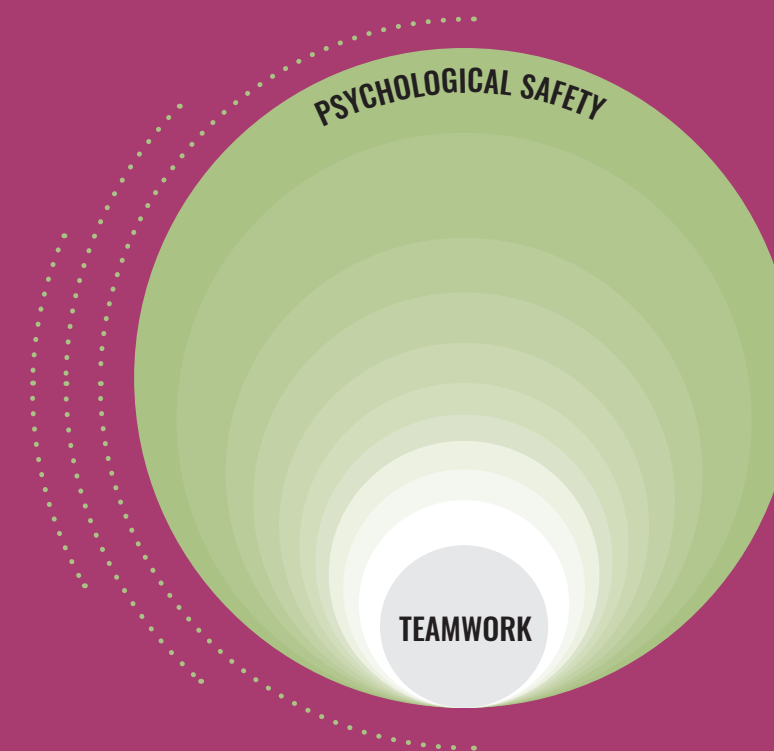
After studying hundreds of teams and employees to find a pattern, project researchers found that members of high-performing teams were more likely to feel secure with one another, to admit mistakes and show vulnerability, to partner with others, and to take on new roles. These are all attributes of psychological safety, one of the five contributing factors that Google had identified as essential to the building of successful teams, and the most important by far.

In other words, they found that high-performing teams were not defined by who its members were but by **how they treated one another**. Individuals who feel a significant degree of psychological safety are less likely to leave the organisation, “more likely to harness the power of diverse ideas from their teammates, they bring in more revenue and they’re rated as effective twice as often”.

Referring to our own Asia Pacific study in which we compared the Best Workplaces™ with the “rest”, we observed that psychological safety (defined by employees’ perceptions of a mentally and emotionally healthy workplace, and of leaders recognising honest mistakes) is significantly more positive in the Best Workplaces™ as well (see Figure 1).

To better understand the relationship between psychological safety and teamwork in Asia Pacific, we also tested a variety of other important factors in our analysis. Accounting for country differences, company size and industry dynamics, the results indicated that psychological safety had 10 times the impact on teamwork relative to all other organisational climate factors combined.

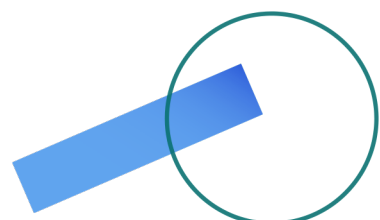
ORGANISATIONAL
CLIMATE FACTORS



More than remuneration, recognition and development opportunities, it is a sense of psychological safety that drives people to contribute more, take more risks and perform better as a team. While this pattern was evident in both the Best Workplaces™ as well as the rest, it was much stronger in the former group.

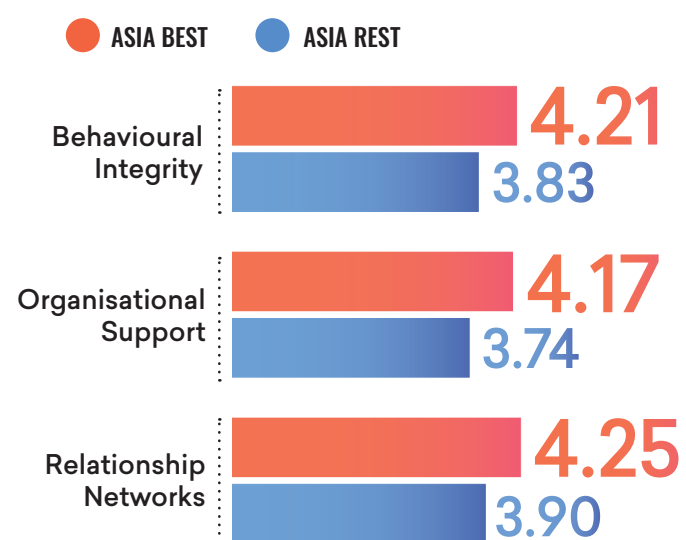
In order to provide practical insight for managers who are leading teams in the Asia Pacific region, we delved deeper into our data and explored **three areas** in greater detail:

1. What are the **drivers of psychological safety** required to create the ideal environment for teamwork?
2. Beyond teamwork, what **other organisational benefits** could result from a high level of psychological safety?
3. Do the drivers of psychological safety vary in importance **across the Asia Pacific offices**?



MORE THAN REMUNERATION, RECOGNITION AND DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES, IT IS A SENSE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY THAT DRIVES PEOPLE TO CONTRIBUTE MORE, TAKE MORE RISKS AND PERFORM BETTER AS A TEAM.

FIGURE 2
DRIVERS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY
(BEST VS REST)



DRIVERS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Prior research studies point to a number of important factors which are deemed essential for creating a supportive work environment, one which provides employees and teams with a sense of psychological safety. Not surprisingly, this includes the **behavioural integrity of leaders, supportive organisational practices, and relationship networks within the organisation**. To verify this, we identified several constructs and tested them in the Asia Pacific context, with the aim of identifying crucial areas of development that organisations and managers should focus on.

2018 ASIA BEST WORKPLACE™ SPOTLIGHT: BEHAVIOURAL INTEGRITY OF LEADERS

Mars Incorporated (Mars) is a private, family-owned business with a century of history. Mars has more than \$35 billion in sales from six businesses: Petcare, Chocolate, Wrigley, Food, Drinks, and Symbioscience.

"Principles-based company with family values at its heart. Doing the right thing for people, planet and performance. I've witnessed more than two decades of this company being true to its word, hiring principled talent and engendering huge amounts of goodwill and trust."

– Employee of Mars



1. BEHAVIOURAL INTEGRITY OF LEADERS

Our examination of the Best Workplaces™ in the region pointed to three important considerations that contribute to employee perceptions of integrity among organisational leaders:

- Management delivers on promises
- Management's actions match their words
- Management is honest and ethical in business

Each of these measures employee's perception of management's behavioural integrity, which can be linked to the overall trust in management and feelings of security. When employees do not have confidence in the promises or expectations of management, trust can erode, and doubts may surface regarding potential actions. In turn, these thoughts or feelings can have a negative impact on employee and team performance. In the longer term, the erosion of trust can lead to risk aversion, which limits creativity and inhibits positive actions at both an individual and group level.

Our survey showed that organisations where leaders and management staff were perceived as role models, trusted to act on feedback and for the good of employees, also ranked highly when it came to feelings of psychological safety among employees and teams. Unsurprisingly, the Best Workplaces™ scored higher in this area compared to other organisations (Figure 2).

2. SUPPORTIVE ORGANISATIONAL PRACTICES

To test the correlation between organisational support of the employee and its impact on the level of psychological safety and teamwork, we examined the data in two distinct areas: work-life balance as well as employee development. Organisational support in these areas was defined by the following statements:

- People are encouraged to balance work life and personal life
- People are offered training or development to further themselves professionally

Both are clear indicators of supportive organisational practices which result in employees feeling valued and cared for. Our data showed that overall scores were higher among the Best Workplaces™, where employees also perceived a strong sense of teamwork along with high levels of psychological safety (Figure 2).

Furthermore, there are other areas in which organisations stand to gain by supporting employees in meaningful ways. Recent research has highlighted work-life balance as a significant factor in employee retention as well as employer reputation. In many parts of Asia, training and development is also seen as a lever for attracting the right talent as well as an indicator of a good employer.



2018 ASIA BEST WORKPLACE™ SPOTLIGHT: SUPPORTIVE ORGANISATIONAL PRACTICES

DHL is the leading global brand in the logistics industry, with about 90,000 employees in more than 220 countries and territories worldwide.

- DHL cares for the physical health of its people through events in support of wellbeing. One example is its World Heart Day campaign, which encouraged employees to go through a 60-day Health Journey to protect their hearts through diet, exercise, and a health screening.
- The My Talent World platform is an integrated learning platform that offers e-courses and multimedia materials such as videos and podcasts, to support employee growth. Employees can register for courses and are granted certifications upon completion. The portal also provides a holistic overview of each employee's development plan, goals, succession plans and reviews.



3. STRENGTH OF RELATIONSHIP NETWORKS

Intuitively, we know that relationships matter at work. Our daily interactions with others have a discernible influence over our motivation levels and overall state of mind. In examining aspects of relationships that serve as a contributing factor to psychological safety, data was gathered using two specific statements:

- Management genuinely seeks and responds to suggestions and ideas
- People care about each other here

The first looks at management's receptivity to new ideas or the input of employees and is more than just a management philosophy; it provides the basis for a relationship of respect. Mutual respect between individuals regardless of role and hierarchy can be a powerful means of establishing trust and good working relationships.

The same is true with employee relationships – the second statement assesses the sense of personal concern that can be established between individuals. Both aspects are equally important and are prerequisites for building a culture where individuals and teams feel secure enough to take interpersonal risks and to be themselves.

Once again, it is unsurprising that the best places to work scored higher than the rest in terms of open communication and strong interpersonal relationships. As we had expected, there appears to be a positive

correlation between nurturing robust relationship networks and a strong sense of teamwork and psychological safety at the workplace (Figure 2).

2018 ASIA BEST WORKPLACE™ SPOTLIGHT: STRENGTH OF RELATIONSHIP NETWORKS

SAP helps companies revolutionise everything from cancer treatments to flood prevention. Their mission is to Run Simple, and they are big on using their technological and business know-how to make the world a better place.

"I feel empowered to do my job and am trusted to do a good job. Even though this company is very large, it never feels like a huge corporation that does not care about its employees. I feel that I can contribute in many ways and I am encouraged to help drive the company forward."

– Employee of SAP

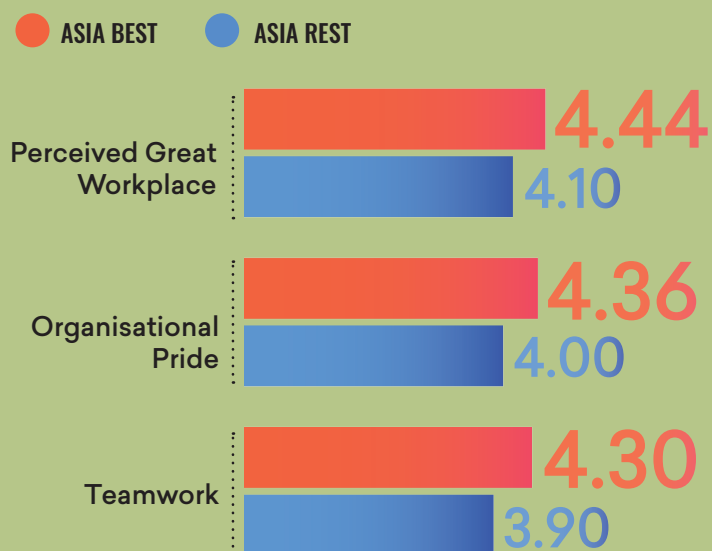


With our analysis of all three drivers, the results clearly show the strength of each factor in contributing to the overall level of psychological safety within the organisation (Figure 2).

CAPTURING OTHER BENEFITS OF HIGH PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

In addition to fostering teamwork, cultivating an environment with a high level of psychological safety can lead to other organisational benefits and worker outcomes. In particular, the Great Place to Work® survey data explored two aspects in relation to the indicated level of psychological safety: pride in the organisation and employees' general sentiments that their company is a great place to work (regardless of ranking outcome).

**FIGURE 3
PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY OUTCOMES
(BEST VS REST)**



Survey respondents who felt a strong sense of psychological safety in their respective organisations also gave positive responses when specifically asked if they thought their company was a great place to work in. In fact, 92 percent of those who believed that their company was a great place to work also rated their organisation high in psychological safety. While these findings hold true for both the Best Workplaces™ and the rest, the former group scored higher on both counts (Figure 3).

By understanding the drivers of psychological safety as well as the additional benefits of creating a safe workplace, it gives us a more holistic view of what it takes to cultivate the type of teamwork culture that delivers consistently high performance and why it matters.

92 PERCENT OF THOSE WHO BELIEVED THAT THEIR COMPANY WAS A GREAT PLACE TO WORK ALSO RATED THEIR ORGANISATION HIGH IN PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY.

The Best Workplaces™ are often those that are invested in setting up an environment where employees feel secure enough to speak their minds, make mistakes and be themselves without penalty or repercussion. While many may think that the idea of creating such an environment sounds simple, fewer actually succeed in reality. Managers who are interested in establishing a strong and positive culture of teamwork and team effectiveness in Asia must adopt a broader perspective and take all the key considerations into account.



In our survey, organisational pride was measured by asking employees if they were proud to tell others where they worked and if they looked forward to going to work each day. The survey data revealed that where an employee possessed a high level of psychological safety, the same individual also had a significant degree of pride in the organisation.



UNDERSTANDING MARKET DIFFERENCES ACROSS ASIA PACIFIC

When determining the approach towards building psychological safety in the workplace based on the key drivers earlier discussed, it is pertinent to consider country-specific differences. As a region, Asia Pacific is broad and culturally diverse, and this often accounts for the differences in organisational and group dynamics that exist in each country.

Tapping on the Great Place to Work® data set, we studied companies and employees across the region to identify core differences – with the goal of enabling local managers to chart the best path towards achieving effective teams.

An analysis of the key drivers for each country was conducted to understand the relative importance of the three factors when trying to foster psychological safety. A summary of the findings in Figure 4 clearly shows varying patterns across the countries. The existence of these differences suggests that leaders need to know what resonates with local teams and tailor their approach accordingly.



FIGURE 4
DRIVERS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY
(BEST VS REST)

L Low Impact
M Medium Impact
H High Impact

	AUSTRALIA	INDIA	SINGAPORE	CHINA	S.KOREA	UAE
BEHAVIOURAL INTEGRITY	M	M	M	-	H	H
ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT	L	L	L	H	-	-
RELATIONSHIP NETWORKS	H	H	H	-	-	-



Contextualising the approach towards achieving psychological safety in the workplace

AUSTRALIA, INDIA, SINGAPORE

Our study revealed that when trying to foster a psychologically safe environment, leaders in Singapore, India and Australia must pay close attention to **relationship networks** because it has the largest impact on psychological safety. **Behavioural integrity of management** and **organisational support** are also significant predictors in each of these three countries, albeit with a smaller impact on psychological safety.

Despite the fact that **relationship networks** rank highest in importance for all three countries, the nature of relationships may differ. In India and Singapore, for example, the authority of those in management positions may have a greater influence over employees relative to Australia. In contrast, Australians are in general, less afraid to speak their minds and are less inhibited by group expectations or organisational hierarchy.

As such, a 'good' relationship with management and colleagues may be defined primarily by a spirit of equality and camaraderie in Australia whereas it could refer to collective approval and acceptance in Singapore and India, where there is a greater degree of in-group collectivism.³ The distinction is important for the building of psychologically safe workplaces in the respective countries.

³ According to the Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness (GLOBE) studies, 'in-group collectivism' is defined as the degree to which individuals express pride, joy, loyalty and cohesiveness in their workgroups and families. In the study, countries are scored on a scale of 1 to 7.

SOUTH KOREA, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES (UAE)

Unlike Australia, India and Singapore, the **behavioural integrity of leaders** matters the most in providing employees with a sense of security in South Korea and UAE. In these countries, it is vital for leaders to deliver on their promises and align their words with actions, in order to establish a foundation of trust and feeling of safety among employees.

The decisive role of leadership in both countries could be attributed to a deep-rooted acceptance of power and authority on a societal level. In both countries, the deference to those in a higher position coupled with ingrained institutional collectivism provide a plausible explanation for the association between leadership integrity and psychological safety in the workplace. In particular, UAE's patriarchal societies are governed by strict rules of hierarchy and religion, where authority is often perceived as absolute. In this context, it is unsurprising that the behaviour of those in leadership and management positions has a more weighted impact on employees.

SOUTH
KOREA

CHINA

CHINA

Unexpectedly, the results for China suggest that **organisational support** is the primary driver of psychological safety in the workplace. For a society that is historically seen as deeply collectivistic, governed by Confucian ideals of social harmony and individual contribution towards the greater good, this is an unusual finding.

Some may attribute this to a younger, more assertive generation of workers who appreciate the benefits of tangible organisational perks in terms of work-life balance and development opportunities. This new group of workers seem to bring with them a different set of ideals and priorities that influence their decisions and behaviours at work. In a team setting, they may want to feel and see that the organisation cares enough to invest in them before they decide to commit themselves as a member of the team.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the beginning, we started off with the question: **what is the best approach towards fostering quality teamwork that transforms companies into great workplaces and future-ready organisations?** While the study of psychological safety is not new, this paper represents one of the first attempts to analyse the link between teamwork and psychological safety in the context of Asia Pacific. Analysing more than 400,000 surveys conducted in 858 companies across the region, it is one of the most robust efforts to date.

In order to construct the ideal environment for teamwork, three key drivers of psychological safety must be in place – **behavioural integrity of leaders, organisational support** and healthy **relationship networks**. Once established, a high level of psychological safety among employees and teams can also result in a greater sense of organisational pride and the perception of a great place to work. Over time, this can strengthen the degree of commitment, motivation and the ability of employees to take on the risks and challenges that will arise in workplaces of the future.

While the importance of psychological safety and the positive connection to teamwork is ubiquitous, cultural differences across the region mean that managers need to be discerning and consider the local context when deciding on their approach towards shaping organisational culture. As a broad guideline, we provide a framework and series of steps that leaders can take to achieve their goal.

WHILE THE IMPORTANCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND THE POSITIVE CONNECTION TO TEAMWORK IS UBIQUITOUS, CULTURAL DIFFERENCES ACROSS THE REGION MEAN THAT MANAGERS NEED TO BE DISCERNING AND CONSIDER THE LOCAL CONTEXT WHEN DECIDING ON THEIR APPROACH TOWARDS SHAPING ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEADERS

ASSESS YOUR TEAM ENVIRONMENT

Take a careful look at the team profiles within your organisation and consider this against the backdrop of organisational culture and country-specific peculiarities. With teams taking centre stage in the future of work, it is essential to identify the areas of business that need to be reorganised in order for the company to thrive and stay competitive.

CONDUCT A SENSE CHECK TO IDENTIFY GAPS

As we have seen, the behavioural integrity of leaders has a pronounced effect on the perceptions and mindsets of employees. Organisational support and healthy relationship networks are also significant and should be addressed where there are gaps. An organisation-wide trust survey can be a great way to surface key issues.

INVEST TIME IN CLEAR ACTION PLANS FOR CULTURE SHAPING

Culture shaping is a critical yet under-prioritised aspect of organisational development. A culture with a high level of psychological safety can have positive implications on team performance, which can impact long-term business outcomes. Culture shaping is an iterative process that takes time; a plan that involves a review and alignment of values, organisational practices, behaviours expected of leaders and employees, communication strategies and training needs to business goals will be a good starting point.

PROVIDE ROLE MODELS AND CLEAR GUIDELINES FOR DESIRED BEHAVIOUR

In the initial stages of the change process, recruit advocates to deliver key messages, demonstrate desired behaviour and support management efforts. Management encouragement can go a long way towards building awareness and signalling the changes in expectations.

ADOPT A LONG-TERM VIEW OF SUCCESS

Celebrate quick wins but also commit to sustained, long-term efforts to achieve meaningful and effective change at all levels of the organisation. Shaping organisational culture is not always a linear process and attempts to engineer change often pose a certain amount of risk to the business. To create an environment with a sense of psychological safety where teams feel safe to embrace uncertainty and new challenges, organisation leaders must set the stage and lead the way.

LOOKING AHEAD

The insights derived in this paper are by no means exhaustive or absolute. There is much more to learn regarding the influence of culture, society, demographics and industry on the development of organisations. What drives employees and teams to be their best selves will change as the world of work continues to evolve. Nevertheless, we hope that this paper offers a useful starting point for companies to chart the right path into the future.

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ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This study is part of an ongoing research collaboration effort between the Great Place to Work® Institute and Singapore Management University. The Great Place to Work® Institute has been gathering data on organisations around the world consistently since 1997 using a proprietary set of instruments and techniques that have been validated through scholarly research. Singapore Management University is one of the top management research institutions in Asia and we acknowledge the contributions of the faculty in the human capital leadership programmes, in support of these collaboration efforts.

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ABOUT GREAT PLACE TO WORK®

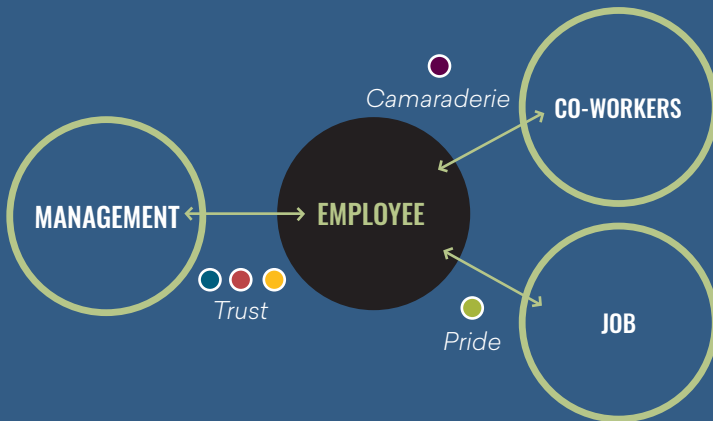
Great Place to Work® is the global authority on high-trust, high-performance workplace cultures. Through proprietary assessment tools, advisory services, and recognition programs, including the annual Fortune “100 Best Companies to Work For®”, a series of Best Workplaces™ lists and Great Place to Work® certifications in over 40 countries, the Institute provides the benchmarks, frameworks, and expertise needed to create, sustain, and recognise outstanding workplace cultures.

GREAT PLACE TO WORK® STUDIES ORGANISATIONS FROM TWO PERSPECTIVES: FROM THE EMPLOYEES’ ACTUAL EXPERIENCES AND FROM THE MANAGEMENT’S APPROACH

#1 EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

“the way things work around here”

A great place to work is one where you trust the people you work for, have pride in what you do, and enjoy the people that you work with.



Great Place to Work® Trust Index® Survey

#2 MANAGEMENT’S APPROACH

“how we create a great workplace here”

An organisation that performs and achieves goals, with people who are empowered to give their personal best and can work together as one team - all within a culture of trust.



Great Place to Work® Culture Audit® Tool

HOW WE CURATE THE BEST WORKPLACES™ AROUND THE WORLD

The following scoring criteria and standards apply to the curation of all Great Place to Work®’s lists globally:

TRUST INDEX® SURVEY

Accounts for 2/3 of a company’s score

- Responses from employees of the legal entity
- Response rate and key indicators must meet minimum scores



CULTURE AUDIT TOOL®

Accounts for 1/3 of a company’s score

- Organisation’s response to questions that seek to understand the organisation’s management philosophy
- The 9 Practice Areas are evaluated with a robust and standard framework that’s strictly adhered to by assessors

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