THE AUTHENTIC ORGANIZATION

HOW TO CREATE A PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE WORKPLACE

GINA BATTYE

The Authentic Organization is an empowering guide, offering an approachable framework for organizations to go beyond diversity and inclusion. Its innovative approach to psychological safety and self-reflection is a standout feature, providing practical strategies for fostering a culture of authenticity and inclusivity. The emphasis on individual expression and authentic self-representation is both refreshing and necessary. This book is an invaluable resource for any leader hoping to gain and maintain a competitive edge in today's talent market!

– Sergio Rodriguez, Senior Manager, Global Workforce DEI Solutions

The Authentic Organization deals with a hugely important topic – how to create psychological safety in the workplace. Through developing an intuitively appealing framework centered on the 5 Pillars, along with a number of practical hands-on tools on how to implement them, the book presents a highly valuable resource for practitioners who seek to create psychologically safe environments in their organizations. The book is insightful, practical, fun, and easy to read!

– Andreas Richter, Professor of Organisational Behaviour,
University of Cambridge

This is a timely book, written with heart. There is an increasing focus on psychological safety and Gina brings the concept to life, explaining how to make it a reality for everyone in our organizations.

– Simon Blake, Chief Executive Officer,
Mental Health First Aid England

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For the courageous trailblazers paving the way toward safer, more inclusive workplaces and inspiring others to follow in their bold footsteps.

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Preface: Psychological Safety in Action

It was 6 p.m. on a winter's night. The sun had set long ago. It was cold and the rain was bouncing off the floor. I stepped out of the office, pulled my collar up around my ears and headed back to my car after a busy day at work. I was 22 years old. 4 ft 11 inches tall. Tired. Vulnerable. My laptop was slung over my shoulder as I made my way back to the car park on the edge of town, alone.

I had a 15-minute walk ahead of me from the probation office. Around 6 minutes into the walk, I felt a presence appear behind me. A man was now keeping pace with me. He was close. Uncomfortably close. I stopped, hoping he would continue to walk ahead of me. But he didn't. He stopped walking and lingered behind.

Not knowing what to do, I picked up the pace. We had more distance between us now but I could still hear his heavy breath when he exhaled and his footsteps as his boots made contact with the wet floor. I knew I was in danger. I tried to remember protocol. Ah yes, call the office. Step one. I grabbed my phone and called Cath in the office. She was always there at this time of night, waiting for our phone call to let her know we had arrived home safely.

This call was different. I asked her to talk to me until I got into my car. She did, my tone telling her everything she needed to activate Code Red. Within a second, I was

on speaker phone with everyone at head office listening in. They had a second line ready to call the police and a third line ready to call the probation office emergency number. Typically, my panic alarm was in the bottom of my bag. Groan.

After what felt like an eternity, my car was in sight. I got in, slammed the door shut (nearly taking my leg off), locked it and drove away in less than 10 seconds. But not before I saw my mysterious stalker. He was a very tall man in his forties. I knew who it was. I had been teaching him for the last three months.

The next day my senior leaders called an emergency meeting with all five of the probation offices I worked in. Security was stepped up for me. My stalker's probation officer was alerted to his behavior and they began the process of dealing with it from their end. The teaching contract I had with him ended immediately.

My stalker continued for three weeks. Every time I was in Dewsbury Office, there he was. Following me. Watching me. I was given bodyguards. I couldn't leave the office without a probation officer escorting me. From the moment I pulled up in the car park to begin my working day, during lunch and tea breaks, through to walking to my car at the end of the day, there was always a male probation officer next to me to protect me.

For those three weeks, I had a phone call at the end of every day with my manager, to check in on how I was feeling, to talk about any concerns I had and to highlight any potential issues that were arising. We talked about my work, my students, my home life and everything in between. I was out as a gay woman at work. Everyone I came into contact with during my working week knew about my sexuality,

including my colleagues, students, probation officers and administration staff. Nothing was off limits to discuss with my manager or team if I chose to.

Navigating a High Stakes Classroom

From my first day in the role, my protection, safety and well-being were taken very seriously by my employer. They had to be. It could have been a matter of life or death.

I realize this might sound scary for a first job fresh out of university, so let me help you visualize my work environment and the safety precautions that were put in place to keep me safe.

Rotating around five probation offices across the region during the week, I worked in little consultation rooms, where every hour one ex-offender would leave and another would take their chair – a student for the next 60 minutes. I was there to teach adult ex-offenders English and math. Or so I was led to believe.

The consultation room always contained four things. There were two chairs with a large, heavy desk separating them and a filing cabinet that locked if you kicked it. Hard. The floor was cold, the walls were bare and the windows barely opened. The radiator was broken; permanently fixed to ON at full blast. It was hot, oppressive and smelt funny. Not in a good way.

There was a big, red panic button under the desk (a secret one) and one visible on the wall by the "probation blue" door. Everything in these places was painted royal blue, which was a source of much amusement amongst my colleagues. The panic buttons were placed strategically so

we could easily access one from wherever we were in the room, in the eventuality that something kicked off. Which it did. Frequently.

If you pressed one, either on purpose or by accident (for example, when crossing your legs under the table), urgent assistance burst through the doors in the form of large, muscly, shaved-headed probation officers. Imagine sitting there teaching the intricacies of adding and subtracting fractions to a 47-year-old, or how to read ABC style to a 69-year-old, when three muscly men come crashing through the door. Awkward. Yes, it really happened.

My first day in my shiny first proper job went like this. At 9 a.m. I walked up to reception and took my place in the queue, behind a myriad of people that were high, drunk or looked like they hadn't slept in a week. That is what I was dealing with. When it was my turn, I was asked to sign in and directed to wait in the waiting room with everyone else. I looked very out of place in my new trousers, funky animal-patterned shirt, waistcoat, polished shoes and snazzy laptop bag. After what felt like an eternity, someone came to collect me and took me through to the offices.

After initial introductions to the probation officers on duty that day and the office managers I was shown to what they called my "teaching room" and was handed a security fob that would open all the doors in the Probation Office.

As we have already established, the "teaching room" left a lot to be desired. I was hoping it would be behind the safety of all the security doors. It wasn't. I was allocated a room that the probation officers used to meet with their cases, some of which were high risk and would later become

my students. I got acquainted with my "new" office for the day. It didn't take long. There wasn't much of it.

I was there to teach people who had committed offenses related to drugs, alcohol, violence, theft, criminal damage, road traffic offenses and sexual offenses. These crimes, the people committing them, and their stories were part of my daily reality. It is safe to say that my workplace was a hostile, aggressive and nerve-wracking environment.

Before I met any student for the first time, I had to read a report telling me everything I needed to know about the person. This included information about their childhood, their education, work history and information about their key relationships and family members. And most importantly, their offenses. In minute detail. Oh, and what I needed to be aware of when I was with this person on my own for the next 60 minutes, including potential risk of harm they may cause me. It was riveting reading.

I had a stack of these reports on my desk and a full diary of students to work with one-on-one. Now remember, this is day one. Talk about initiation by immersion!

I started to read the reports. Within minutes I was overwhelmed by the intensity of what I was digesting. I can honestly say, my mind could not comprehend some of the offenses, especially the animal cruelty cases. I still feel sick to this day about a handful of cases I was involved with.

In 10 minutes my first student was due to walk through the door. And I was beyond terrified. I had never been in trouble with the law and had yet to sit eye-to-eye with someone that had. Terrified doesn't come close to how I was feeling on that first day.

I had read every single morsel of information about this person. I knew who they were, what they thought,

what they had said and how they responded under pressure. I knew too much. Any time now I would receive a phone call from reception to collect this person from the waiting room for their first lesson.

For seven months, I met student after student one-on-one, teaching them English and math, just the two of us in a pokey little room. After seven months I was promoted to a senior role within the teaching department. I was exposed to more and more serious offenders and, for the first time, groups.

I got to know these people. And I realized something quickly. The report that I had read. It wasn't them.

What I learnt is that every single person I taught and spoke to had veered away from their true selves to meet external expectations; they had lost touch with their Authentic Self and this is the reason they had committed an offense. They had molded themselves into someone they thought might be more accepted or loved. Some people had put up barriers to protect themselves from being hurt any further, whilst the others had lived up to the expectations that their peers and/or family had of them. If you constantly hear as a kid "you are a bad boy," that becomes ingrained into your subconsciousness. You are more likely to "act" that way. My students told me time and time again that they heard these messages about themselves as kids, so that is what they became.

After a few sessions working together, the desk became a real barrier to their learning, and to our emerging trust and respect for each other. Controversial, I know; we sat side by side. The panic button a million miles away from me. Not one of my students wanted to be there to learn English and math. They had to attend as part of their conditions of probation. Some were dedicated and attended every session with me. Others I only saw once before they

were recalled to prison, or they didn't show up at all, leaving me picturing them based on their damning reports.

In that room, nothing was out of bounds for us to talk about. They all knew I was gay. No one had an issue with it, even the people that were in my room due to assault-related offenses. They trusted me and told me their stories, their challenges, their background and I told them mine.

We engaged in intense discussions about their life, the circumstances of their offenses and how they could break the cycle. What emerged through these conversations were the beliefs they had formed about themselves and how they were showing up in the world because of that, beliefs ingrained from early childhood.

This made me think about Psychological Safety and how to cultivate environments where people can thrive. Pillar 1 and the Authentic Self Process was born! But more about that later.

The deep, nurturing conversations we engaged in allowed them to process their old conditioning, past hurts and experiences and to learn new strategies to be their Authentic Self, even when under pressure and influence from others.

Despite the fact I was working with people who had done some very nasty things, I felt safe at work. My employer put safety mechanisms in place: the panic buttons in the offices, my personal panic alarm and the detailed report about the person I was teaching. The teaching room was behind a security door needing a fob to access. I had to phone the head office to sign in and out, every morning when I arrived at work and every evening when I arrived inside my home. We had a Code Red plan which was discussed regularly (and activated in my case). If we felt any sort of unease, we had to phone the office straight away. We all had a weekly

check-in with my manager where we discussed health and well-being and were offered support. We could talk about anything – personal or professional. When I was stalked, this became a daily phone call, and I was allocated probation officers to protect me outside the office.

The team working to keep me safe were cross-organizational and included the Probation Service, the company I worked for and the leadership teams within probation offices. Everyone had clear roles, knew what we had to do and when, knew how to initiate the protocol and escalate, if needed. We had established ground rules and were all working to the same goal – "to keep Gina safe." And in my pokey little teaching room (that exceeded 24°C/75.2°F most days), I created and maintained a safe space for myself and my students to learn and to be their Authentic Self.

I learnt a very early lesson in my career: communication is key. This is what kept me safe during those scary three weeks and it is a lesson I have carried with me every day since, ensuring that all expectations are clarified and understood and that messages are communicated and received accurately.

Even though I was stalked by a dangerous man, I felt safe and supported in the workplace. Most importantly, I felt comfortable bringing all of who I was to work and respected by everyone I worked with.

A Toxic Workplace Unveiled

Roll on two years. From the very first day in my new job, I felt uncomfortable with my manager. She was a dictator. Controlling. Manipulative. She made fun of my colleagues

in the office, in front of them. She lied. She abused her power. She made people feel unworthy. I watched her bully members of the team out of their roles. When complaints were made about her, she always came out on top and was very smug about that.

A stark contrast from my previous workplace, I was shocked and unnerved to find that homophobia and biphobia were prevalent in the further education college I now worked. Although mostly underlying and subtle, it was particularly noticeable amongst the older members of staff that had worked at the college for years. They had not received any LGBTQ+ awareness training through their annual Continuing Professional Development (CPD) program, and as a result, they were ignorant of their current behavior and evolving standards for conduct and language in the workplace.

From the moment I started my new job, I knew I had to keep my sexuality to myself. I didn't feel safe to be an "out" gay woman in that environment. My colleagues gossiped about gay staff members and students, and frankly, I was disgusted by what I heard.

In one of my early lesson observations, a senior manager gave me the feedback that I have very "gay mannerisms" and needed to tone it down. Not wanting to "out" myself to my colleagues or students, I took their advice. I started to suppress my natural gestures and mannerisms and was noticeably more muted in my teaching style. Over time, this started to affect my creativity with lesson planning and delivery. I questioned every lesson I put together. I ran it through my "heterosexual filter" to make sure that if someone else was watching me deliver that lesson, they would not suspect I was gay.

I had a fear of being outed publicly. I was scared that someone would "find me out" and within minutes everyone in the college would know I was gay. I had a fear of being treated differently and gossiped about behind my back. Not only would it open me up to abuse, harassment and criticism, but it would also impact on my ability to get the promotion I was aiming for. I had aspirations and knew that if I came out, I would be saying goodbye to those dreams for my future, because people like me don't get into leadership positions.

My colleagues could tell I wasn't being my Authentic Self with them and they sensed that I had put up a shield all around me. I was disconnected from them and wasn't going to let them in. They saw the barriered version of me that I chose to show them. I wore a "mask" and pretended I was a straight woman in a heterosexual relationship. They knew nothing about me or my life.

Always on edge and worried about what my colleagues may ask me when we were alone together, I had stories made up in my head, in case they quizzed me about my private life. I ran away from having any personal conversations with my colleagues in the staff room. As soon as they started talking about their partners, kids or what they were doing at the weekend, I would leave the room. And I wouldn't come back until they had finished talking about their plans with their families or other gossip they had fallen into.

They mirrored my behavior back to me. They were equally as distant with me and I was given the cold shoulder. As a result, I didn't feel accepted. I felt excluded from their world and like an outsider. I felt unsafe and vulnerable at work. Isolated and lonely. It made me not want to

socialize with them outside of work, and I dreaded the compulsory team Christmas Dinner small talk. I specifically remember sitting around a table with six of my colleagues, with our Christmas Cracker party hats on. You can imagine it, right? I felt super uncomfortable and kept the conversation focused on work the whole time, so I didn't need to talk about my personal life. The company wasn't great and the food was terrible. I couldn't wait to get out of there. The things you remember.

Being in the closet, I couldn't bring my whole self to work. From the moment I arrived at work in the morning I was living in fear. On tenterhooks. Always watching my back. Showing up as a fraction of who I really was. I felt restricted and caged. And I was suppressing my knowledge, skills and creativity in the classroom. I became exhausted. From running. From hiding. From trying to remember what I had told people. From pretending I was someone else.

Around six months into the job, my manager found out about my sexuality and began a torrent of abuse. I experienced daily harassment, in the form of bullying, intimidation and online abuse.

This impacted dramatically on my physical health, which in turn affected my performance at work. The stress that I felt because of the daily hate incidents resulted in me having IBS – irritable bowel syndrome. I became unable to teach classes in the mornings. Whoever heard of a teacher that can't teach in the morning? Well, it happened. I was only able to teach afternoon and evening classes because my IBS symptoms were so severe in the morning; the time my manager was in "full swing."

I hated going to work. I woke with a sense of dread and a heavy feeling in my whole body. From the moment

I stepped into the office and saw her face, to the moment I left work at night, I had the worst feelings in my body. Tight, tense, niggly and running to the toilet every 10 minutes (in the morning). In the afternoon, I was exhausted from feeling so poorly and from internalizing all the nastiness she directed at me. I dreaded her putting her head round the door to talk to me and wished for those phone calls where I could go out to visit a learning provider or when someone called for my support to deliver something.

I didn't report the bullying at first. I was too afraid to "out" myself to the leadership team. I knew I would have to explain the context of the harassment and as soon as I did that, they would know I was gay. I didn't want anyone else at work to know. I had so much evidence, having documented all the incidents, emails, and communications, and I had witnesses willing to speak on my behalf. But I also had so much to lose by going through with it.

It reached a point where I couldn't take it any longer. I reported the harassment and her behavior. HR told me not to progress the case any further because it would highlight my sexual orientation to my colleagues and peers. I felt I had no choice but to drop the claim. In hindsight, I wonder if I had progressed with the claim, if it would have set the wheels in motion for the college to be a more accepting, safe and inspiring place for others to work. What happened to the woman involved? She was promoted.

Two very different experiences. What is the difference between these two workplaces? One cultivated a psychologically safe environment. The other did not.

Life often presents us with unexpected challenges; moments that push us to our limits and redefine our understanding of ourselves. I believe this experience was one of those life-changing moments. They say that the greatest

change often emerges from the deepest struggles. These two contrasting experiences led me to dive headfirst into the profound concept of psychological safety and champion the cause of psychological safety for everyone in the workplace.

Creating Work Environments Where People Thrive

I am the founder and CEO of the Psychological Safety Institute. As an organization we predominantly work with multinational corporations and their people. We hear the same conversations over and over again, regardless of the company we are working with.

1. "We know we have an issue with psychological safety (sometimes referred to as a fire) but we don't know where it is, what caused it or what to do about it."
2. "We can't accurately measure psychological safety. We ask a few questions tagged on to other surveys, but we are not getting any useful information back that we can act upon."
3. "Our staff don't feel safe bringing their whole self to work. And that is impacting on communication, teamwork, productivity, creativity – literally everything!"

I believe in one fundamental truth. We all have the right to feel safe at work. Yet, we know that many employees (including leaders and managers) don't feel safe at work and are struggling to be their Authentic Self with their colleagues.

When I first started my work with organizations, there wasn't much data on psychological safety in the public sphere to draw upon. The data that I stumbled across, was delving deep into the catacombs of the archives, was largely unrelated and was being collated along with other employee or organizational data. There was a comment or two in the conclusion of these reports that alluded to issues with psychological safety – but without any real substantial evidence. Mostly the data referred to physical safety, physical and mental health, or issues surrounding team dynamics or effective collaboration.

Over the years, I have worked extensively with multinationals, public sector organizations and the third sector. I have listened to and collated many stories and anecdotes from employees that shared their lived experiences with me. From those stories, I can confirm that individuals at all levels in the business do not feel psychologically safe at work. This often results in them not being their Authentic Self, instead presenting a censored version of themselves. As a result, communication, relationships and team dynamics are negatively impacted. All this insight from organizations, on top of my lived experiences, put a fire in my belly.

I am fiercely dedicated to my mission: to create work environments where people thrive. Initiating a worldwide conversation on the transformative impact of psychological safety within organizations, I aim to challenge and transform workplace attitudes and outdated workplace cultures.

My vision reaches beyond organizational transformation – it touches the very fabric of society and the daily lives of people. I'm determined to drive legislative change by urging governments to embed psychological safety within

workplace legislation, which would lead to substantial changes and enhanced protection for employees.

It is these two pivotal workplace experiences that led me to create the world-renowned 5 Pillars of Psychological Safety. These transformative processes and methodologies have been meticulously crafted and refined through years of collaboration with multinational corporations. They come together to form a robust framework for cultivating work environments where people (and organizations) thrive, thereby creating fully inclusive workplaces. I would like to share those learnings with you.

In this book you will find invaluable insights and practical guidance to empower you to be your Authentic Self at work and take an active role in creating a psychologically safe environment for yourself and others.