

# The Neuroscience of Psychological Safety: Implications for Team Coaching from an Embassy Evacuation Exercise

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The author during a Marine-led embassy evacuation exercise from the Kuwaiti desert to an awaiting ship in the Persian Gulf.

The rise of team-based, collaborative knowledge work in the Post-Digital Age has, in turn, increased the challenges around effective team performance. Today's teams are frequently global and operate virtually, spanning multiple time zones. Consequently, organizations have increasingly sought team coaching to bridge team performance gaps and enhance team performance in increasingly VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) environments.

Before I became a full-time leadership growth consultant and coach with my own firm, I worked in the Middle East, first for USAID as a business communications instructor, and then as a clandestine CIA officer. My participation in a 1997 evacuation exercise from the US Embassy in Kuwait is memorable, in part, because of the psychological safety I observed and experienced with the Marine team to which I

was assigned. The Marine Security Guard (MSG) is responsible for securing U.S. embassies abroad and is trained to respond to VUCA situations: terrorist acts, fires, riots, and demonstrations. When the situation on the ground escalates, the MSG is charged with evacuating expats from the country. Exercises like these allow the Marines to practice in as realistic a context as possible. There, they can make mistakes, adjust, and maximize their performance when faced with an actual emergency.

In the late 1990s, the concepts of psychological safety and team coaching had yet to be clearly defined. In 2020, the International Coaching Federation (ICF) introduced their *Team Coaching Competencies* to drive team coaching consistency and to clearly distinguish team coaching from training, consulting, facilitation, mentoring, and development involving teams. The ICF defines team coaching as:

*“partnering in a co-creative and reflective process with a team on its dynamics and relationships in a way that inspires them to maximize their abilities and potential in order to reach their common purpose and shared goals.”*

Team coaching distinguishes itself from other team interventions in that the team is the owner of the process, not the coach. The growth area focus of team coaching addresses team goal achievement and sustainability of the team itself. Extending beyond the team itself, Peter Hawkins’ systemic definition of team coaching includes the broader system in which the team operates, and those relationships in the system:

*“enabling a team to function at more than the sum of its parts, by clarifying its mission and improving its external and internal relationships.”*

Both definitions highlight relationship improvement as a crucial component to achieving team coaching goals. In fact, ICF Team Coaching Competency 4 specifically identifies how team coaches must “cultivate trust and safety” by “creating a safe space for open and honest team member interaction.”

Since 1997, significant strides in the field of neuroscience have demonstrated key connections between the mind and the body’s nervous system in terms of emotions and feelings of safety. Physician and psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk speaks to the impact of social safety from a neuroscience perspective. Positive social relationships create powerful protection against being overwhelmed by stress. Being acknowledged, seen, and heard by people around us provides a visceral feeling of safety. When we believe we are safe in a team, the parasympathetic nervous system counteracts stress by relaxing the heart, muscles and breathing. This mind-body process occurs whether we find ourselves in the Kuwaiti desert or in our Monday morning team meeting.

Based on her research into how medical teams work together, Amy Edmondson of Harvard Business School distinguishes between trust and psychological safety in that **trust** exists in the mind of an individual and is focused on an ‘other’, a person or an organization. With trust, an individual has a specific target to whom they give the benefit of the doubt with regard to anticipated consequences. Even though it was a training exercise, I trusted the Marines to know what they were doing, to have practiced and trained sufficiently to get me out of Kuwait safely. **Psychological safety**, however, is a *learning behavior* that operates at the collective level (leader and team members, internal and external). Despite the team aspect, psychological safety is ‘self’ focused and relates to the individual team member believing they will be heard and acknowledged, and receive the benefit of the doubt if they ask for help, admit a mistake, or share a controversial point of view. On the day of the exercise, I was an external team member to the Marine team. Before the exercise started, I didn’t know what the expectations

were in terms of my contribution, if I was allowed to speak up, share a concern along the way, or point out a potential mistake during the exercise. Edmondson underscores that psychological safety is not the ultimate goal for an organization, but rather contribution and learning that leads to team improved performance and goal achievement.

On the evacuation exercise day, I received a message that an 'emergency' prompted an immediate expat evacuation, and I was to report to the pre-determined meeting spot by a certain time. All expats received information about what they could and could not bring with them, and how much luggage was possible to take per person. The other details were not disclosed as they wanted to make the exercise as realistic as possible. At the meeting point, I started to feel adrenaline shoot through my arms and legs as I pulled up in my car and saw the Marines waiting for me. My heart raced a bit, and I began to hold my breath as I realized I had no control over the situation from this point forward. Even though the situation didn't represent a real emergency, the uncertainty of the situation made it *feel* real.

Neuroscientist and 2019 Guggenheim Neuroscience Fellow Lisa Feldman Barrett researches the structural and functional organization of nervous systems and explores their role in the creation and construction of emotions. She hypothesizes that emotions do not drive the body's behavior, but rather the brain's interpretation of bodily sensations in relation to a situation lead to the creation of emotions. This kind of mind-body meaning-making is a predictive activity, basically guesses about what to do next, rooted in our prior experience and the sensory consequences of those guesses. As I pulled up to the meeting point and saw the Marines, I wasn't aware any particular emotion, but I was assessing the situation and trying to make sense of it based on previous experiences I'd had. My body was communicating to my brain that this situation was serious, I was no longer knew what was going to happen, and I would be in a position to trust strangers with my safety.

As I grabbed my bag and left my car behind, a Marine greeted me with a "hello ma'am", making purposeful, yet friendly eye contact, stating his name and asking mine. He then briefly described what would happen next, asked me if I had any questions or concerns, and then asked if he could help me with my bag. Although he had numerous things on his mind and basically needed to have his head on a swivel for security purposes, he connected with me personally and created the psychological safety foundations for me to speak up and share a concern as an external team member. My breathing and heart rate relaxed, as did the tension I was holding in my legs and arms.

Two Marine escorts then led me and two other expats via jeep through the desert to the coast of the Persian Gulf. A separate Marine team had created a path from the meeting point through the desert with flags to guide the way. Trying to understand the process and potentially be of use, I asked the Marine escorts to explain what we should be looking for. They could have replied, "please ma'am, can you just sit quietly and let us do our job." Instead, they described the different types of flags and the meaning of each one. When they couldn't see the next directional flag in the desert, they said so. I have excellent distance vision, so I put it to good use. Several times during the desert drive, I was the first to see the flags and I yelled out their position from the back seat. The MSG were neither annoyed nor flustered; they gladly accepted my help and complimented my vision. We arrived at the makeshift processing center at the coast without getting lost or having to backtrack. As my escort explained, we, the expats, were then transferred to hovercrafts that took us to an awaiting ship. The MSG demonstrated an impressive balance of situational awareness, team communication and mission focus. Most impressive was their ability to juggle that day's responsibilities while creating a sense of physical and psychological safety for with the expats being evacuated.

## Team Coaching Implications: Cultivating Trust & Safety

The Marines in 1997 remain in my memory as a powerful example of how a team demonstrated psychological safety. As team coaches, we can further develop the ICF coaching competency around cultivating trust and (psychological) safety in the following ways:

- **Lay the foundation:** Prior to a team coaching engagement, meet with the leader, each team member and stakeholders 1:1 to get acquainted and to identify concerns and expectations regarding the team coaching engagement. We as coaches can begin to develop trust with each participant. In doing so, we not only demonstrate how people develop trust, but we also lay the behavioral groundwork for psychological safety in terms of having participants share without judgment or negative consequences.
- **Structure for safety and contribution:** Co-creating team norms and rules is a key aspect of a team coaching engagement, exploring what it means to take risks, fail, be uncertain, be vulnerable and the perceived, actual, and desired repercussions of these actions. Ask team members what they need from the team in addition to what they can *contribute*. Shifting the question from needing to contributing can shift the nervous system to a more relaxed, less defensive/protective state. Participants shift their thinking to the skills/abilities they have to create an impactful team.
- **Leverage data:** The Fearless Organization, based on the work of Amy Edmondson, has begun certifying coaches in The Fearless Organization Scan, a tool which provides team level psychological safety scores in four domains: attitude to risk and failure, inclusion and diversity, open conversation and willingness to help.
- **Demonstrate situational humility:** Admit what you don't know: the volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments of knowledge work require coaches to acknowledge what they don't know.
- **Use processes:** Create forums for spontaneous team sharing, learning and support. Some team members may be happy to share, but are more inclined to write it down than speak up in a group. They may also want to capture and share reflections between coaching sessions.

## Resources

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International Coaching Federation (ICF) Team Coaching Competencies  
<https://coachingfederation.org/team-coaching-competencies>

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