Influence of attachment and psychological safety on team performance

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Team dynamics and the relationship between the leader and his team members are influenced by our early and later attachment experiences. Attachment theory and its translation into practical situations in organizations provide a very rich resource for leaders and supervisors to understand team dynamics, examine team performance, and shape change therein

Author: Marnix Reijmerink
In this two-part series Marnix Reijmerink explores the themes of attachment and psychological safety in relation to successful team development. In this first part of the two-part series, we are introduced to Madeleine and her team, which is supervised by team coach Peter, and the influence of attachment on team performance is highlighted.

When he enters the room with the manager of the finance team of a large healthcare institution, the group is already waiting. A few team members look up, others keep their eyes on their screens. "I'd like to introduce you to Peter, the team coach I told you about," says Madeleine.

After years of experience as an executive in the banking sector, she very deliberately made the switch to healthcare. She longed to make a contribution to society. In her first week, she was welcomed with open arms. The start of the collaboration is promising. An open and inquisitive environment made Madeleine feel welcome from the outset.

In the months that follow, she notices how the team members approach her and one another with a great sense of familiarity. The atmosphere is relaxed and friendly. Everyone seems to share a lot about what's on their minds professionally and personally. However, Madeleine also notices that every time she makes agreements with her colleagues, they are not kept. She is hesitant about how to broach the subject, afraid that it will be at the expense of the positive working environment. When she does bring it up, the team members promise to improve. Madeleine is reassured on the one hand, but on the other hand she feels that something is not right. And indeed: in the time that follows, nothing changes. She asks team coach Peter for help.

Peter's curiosity is piqued. What is going on here? Why are people not honoring their commitments? Is this a safe space? Can you say you don't know something or find something difficult? How do people challenge one another? Are they willing to engage in conflict? What role does Madeleine play in this dynamic?

Perhaps the questions Peter asks himself are familiar to you as a team coach. The group that has its own dynamics, with its own written and unwritten rules. As a team coach, you bring yourself, your identity with associated experiences, beliefs and driving values into your coaching. In your role, you are a mirror for the group and the group for you. In that interaction, each person repeats their individual attachment patterns gained over the course of their lives. How do you recognize and acknowledge these patterns, and how do you make them the subject of research? As a team coach, you have a unique role. You have the opportunity to stimulate people to break old patterns in themselves and the group and encourage them to entrust themselves to each other.
 You can be the base from which this happens.
 Are you prepared to be that foundation from which the team can develop?
Attachment: learning to trust others
In the dynamics of a team, triggers are present that confront individuals with themselves and each other. In the encounter with others, we entrust ourselves based on how we learned to do so early in life. Initially more unconsciously with our parents or guardians, siblings, family members; then increasingly consciously with friends, classmates and colleagues.

That unconscious process of learning to entrust yourself to others we refer to as the 'attachment process'.

In group dynamics, our early and later attachment experiences are palpable and visible. The relationships between the leader and his team members are influenced by it. When we gain insight into our attachment patterns, we are better able to understand our own behavior and that of our team members. This understanding enables team members and leaders to improve team performance.

When children grow up, they irrevocably enter into the situation where emotions are present in their head, heart and body. When they express these emotions in their interactions with their parents or caregivers, they learn that their emotions evoke a reaction. This reaction determines the beliefs they develop that their emotions are welcome or not. Is it safe to show my emotions? Or is it unsafe and do I learn to keep emotions to myself, swallow them, or rather express them in vehemence and anger?

This attachment movement affects how people navigate in individual interactions and in groups. People who are (predominantly) securely attached will contribute positively to the group process. Their ability to entrust themselves to others will positively influence the dynamics in the group because in their actions, emotions do not hinder but connect. They will be more inclined to take risks when connecting with others, which will make further

growth possible. Conversely, people who are (predominantly) insecurely attached will have more difficulty trusting the group and others in the group. In a team, fundamentally the attachment style of each individual will always be triggered. The total composition of styles in the team determines the degree to which people in the team entrust themselves to one another. (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010).

Team dynamics

Individual attachment between children and their primary attachment figures (often initially the mother) has been extensively studied by John Bowlby (1988) - founder of modern attachment theory - and his colleague Mary Ainsworth (1978), who introduced the term *'secure base'*.

Overview 1. Attachment styles

Safe attachment
In this form of attachment, there is a natural exchange of emotions between child and parent. The child learns that its emotions are given space and that expressing and discussing emotions leads to a deepening of the mutual bond and to development and growth. The child learns that the other can and wants to be a mirror and that, vice versa, the child can also be a mirror for the other.

Unsafe attachment with excessive boundaries
Here the child who expresses emotions faces a parent who cannot or does not want to cope with these emotions. When these boundaries are persistent, the child learns in the long term that emotions cannot be adequately shared. As a result, emotions are swallowed or end up in places where they do not belong. The conviction can arise that connection with others is not necessary

to achieve development and growth. In the absence of another person to connect with emotionally, there is a chance that the child develops a low or negative self-image, combined with a fear that it will be (emotionally) abandoned.

Unsafe attachment with insufficient boundaries

Now, when emotions are involved, the child faces a parent who may have an ear and an eye for the emotions, but then lets their own emotions dominate. The child ends up in a situation where the discussion no longer seems to be about him, but about the other. This is confusing and in the long run will cause the child to keep his emotions inside, because he does not want to feel the confusion, and out of loyalty he does not want to put the parent in a situation where the parent is seemingly unable to handle the emotion. The child is less likely to rely on others emotionally.

Ambivalent attachment

A child who is ambivalently attached combines the two forms of insecure attachment mentioned above. The fear of abandonment is combined with a need for intimacy and connection with others. They have a more positive view of others than of themselves and are therefore less focused on themselves (and their own emotional well-being) than on others. They emotionally test others to see if they are available. If that availability is there, they often react dismissively or angrily to it. It is a pattern of attraction and withdrawal. Resulting in confusion for all involved.

The attachment styles (Overview 1) are described from the perspective of the child and the parent, and are a blueprint for any relationship that is entered into. The way people have learned to entrust themselves to others is always a mix of the styles described. No one is completely securely or insecurely attached. There are vast individual differences and nuances. As a coach of teams, it is important to delve into the styles of attachment because it helps you better interpret behavior of people in teams. It offers tools to manage behavior of and between team members (Van Wielink, Fiddelaers-Jaspers & Wilhelm). The influence of the individual attachment style on the performance of a group is large, but not all-determining. It turns out that people express their individual attachment style differently in different situations. Four facets play an important role in this regard in groups (Rom & Mikulincer, 2003).

1. How do I see myself and others?

An individual's self-image is based on the direct and indirect messages that a person - since birth - receives about himself from his environment. The interpretation of these messages determines how a person sees himself and how he, to a greater or lesser extent, entrusts himself to others. The degree of entrustment subsequently determines how he behaves, also in a group. People who are predominantly insecurely attached with insufficient boundaries often have low or negative self-esteem and feel they have little control over how relationships unfold. This usually keeps them from making (deep, emotional) connections, for fear of being abandoned if they do. In a team, people with this kind of attachment style will tend to maintain good contact with everyone and, above all, not do things that put pressure on the partnership. On the other hand, people who have a predominantly insecure attachment style with excessive boundaries do not have a negative view of themselves so much as they have a negative view of others. They do not trust others because they are convinced that they will prove to be either emotionally unavailable or unreliable. They

tend to keep others (emotionally) at a distance or stay at a distance themselves. In a team, these people focus on achieving the objectives set and establish relationships only where they are functional in achieving those objectives.

2. What are my experiences in groups?

We move in different groups throughout our lives. Our family of origin, our class, our sports team, our year club, and the team at work are just a few examples. The experiences we have in those groups largely determine how we move in other groups as well. Did I feel welcome in the group? What was my start in this group like? Did I feel supported when I or the group faced adversity? What did I learn in each group about vulnerability and emotions? People with predominantly insecure attachment with too little delineation tend to remember - also with respect to groups - mainly negative and painful experiences and let these guide their actions in relation to individual group mates and the group as a whole. People with an insecure attachment style that is predominantly characterized by too much separation are more likely to suppress such negative and sometimes painful memories and experiences. They will focus primarily on the goals that have been set rather than on social interaction with others. In contrast, those who experience attachment with too little delineation will be primarily concerned with keeping social relationships 'whole' and will do everything possible, so to speak, to avoid creating new, painful or negative social experiences. Neither one nor the other reaction contributes to a culture of excellence; a culture in which people encourage and challenge each other from a position of safety to learn from mistakes made and try new things (Van Wielink & Wilhelm, 2019). An orientation on merely achieving goals leads to dominance, performance drive and loss of the human touch. An orientation that is mainly aimed at keeping the mutual bond good leads to resignation and a wait-and-see attitude towards each other and the manager.

3. What do I expect from social interaction?

We are not always aware of it, but our interaction with others serves a purpose. Depending on the way we are fundamentally attached, we either seek affirmation, support, safety, appreciation and love in our contact with others (in the case of insecure attachment with insufficient boundaries) or we actually aim to use interaction with others to increase our individuality and our own fortitude by keeping ourselves and others emotionally at a distance (in the case of excessive boundaries). Our interaction is then functional and aimed at achieving an objective rather than at strengthening the contact and deepening the emotional bond. Thus, people in a team very often turn out to be quite pragmatic in their response to and cooperation with each other. The basic pattern from the way people have learned to attach and entrust themselves to others remains in place, but the individual objective that someone has in mind or the shared objective of the group has a significant influence on the final attachment movement that someone makes.

4. Which strategies do I apply?

The way we are attached influences the focus we have in interacting and working with others. When our expectations are focused on experiencing support, safety, appreciation, and love, we will seek closeness in interactions with others, make emphatic contact, and try to keep relationships "whole" (even at our own expense) thereby avoiding conflict necessary to grow as a team. On the other hand, when our expectations are much more focused on keeping our distance and not undermining our own fortitude or sense of self more than necessary, then we will be less focused on connecting with others and more likely to be goal-oriented and ensure that the tasks we have set ourselves as a group are met.

In Madeleine's team, Peter has an individual conversation with each team member. In these conversations, it becomes clear that a number of team members feel unsafe. Another few are disappointed in the organization. Several people miss their previous supervisor Esther who left unexpectedly due to illness.

And there is another group that feels that Madeleine is not vigorous enough, which is why they have given up.

So there are big differences between people. Because these differences are not openly discussed within the team, it seems as if people are connected, but agreements made are not honored and objectives set are not achieved. It seems safe within the team, but it is not. In fact, there is more of a false sense of security. Team members become inactive, start to lean back and adopt a mindset of avoidance and withdrawal. Peter enters into a conversation with Madeleine and reflects on the common thread of what he discovered in the conversations. She is visibly shocked. "What are you shocked about?", Peter asks. "That this is happening again. In my previous team it happened too and I didn't manage to turn the tide, no matter how hard I tried to do it right."

Continued

In Part 2 Marnix Reijmerink will show us how you, as a coach, can act as a secure base for the team and their leader(s), how you can enable people and teams to excel from a bed of psychological security, how dialogue is the most important gateway to team development, and what the power of rituals is. ■

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Team dynamics and the relationship between the leader and his team members are influenced by our early and later attachment experiences. Attachment theory and its translation into practical situations in organizations provide a very rich resource for leaders and supervisors to understand team dynamics, examine team performance, and shape change therein

In this sequel of second of a two-part series Marnix Reijmerink explores the themes of attachment and psychological safety in relation to successful team development.

In doing so, he leads us to discover how connecting, being a secure base for the team, engaging in dialogue and facilitating rituals form the foundation.
In this second part of the series, Reijmerkink shows us how a facilitator can be a secure base for the team and their leader(s), how a bed of psychological safety can enable people and teams to excel, with dialogue and rituals as the means.

Author: Marnix Reijmerink

Madeleine tells Peter how hard she is working. She tells him that in the team she often emphasizes that team members can always come to her and that the group is a safe space where they can discuss anything. Madeleine realizes that this pattern is repeated in her leadership. Her frustration with the lack of real change in the dynamic has caused her to try harder and harder to strengthen the connection. She knows this pattern well.
Even in her younger years, what she did never seemed good enough.

She tried harder and harder to please her parents. A self-fulfilling prophecy: she achieved exactly the opposite of what she was striving for. A pattern that repeats itself in her managerial role. Peter explores this old pattern with her to help her free herself from the suffocating desire to chase something she can only get from others when it gives to herself: love.

The team coach as a secure base: connecting and challenging
Two patterns are always visible in people's bonding styles: caring on the one hand, daring on the other. A secure base strives to achieve an optimal balance between these two movements. What is a secure base? It is a source that makes us feel welcome and which inspires and encourages us to face the challenges that life throws at us together (Jakob van Wielink, Riet

Fiddelaers-Jaspers & Leo Wilhelm). This source is caring because of the connection it makes and the trust and safety it provides. At the same time, it is also daring through the encouragement and challenge it gives to his people. The team coach can create the conditions to be close to one another in the team so that team members can get to know one another better. If this closeness leads to more understanding of and for each other, security increases and more risks can be taken. You could call this the magic of psychological safety. This psychological safety allows the team to excel and the team to learn, develop and innovate.

Figure 1. Window of Excellence: Klaartje van Gasteren, Marnix Reijmerink and Jakob van Wielink.

When caring and daring are not sufficiently balanced, team performance will suffer. Instead of excelling, the team, or individual team members, will enter into a mindset of avoidance, withdrawal or domination. They do this to keep themselves afloat in a setting where insecurity is present. It is up to the team coach to make the team members aware of which mindset they are inclined to adopt and which behavior they are inclined to exhibit when they and the team are confronted with change - and possibly additional high pressure. The team coach forms a bed in which he mirrors the behavior of team members. He facilitates self-examination of patterns. Because of this, people feel encouraged and challenged to experiment with different behavior.

With Madeleine and the team, Peter works with the team lifeline. An instrument that visualizes which impactful moments the individual team members have experienced since they joined the group and how these experiences influence their actions. By discussing it with each other, it becomes clear that much of the insecurity in the group is caused by the sudden disappearance of the previous manager who became ill. It was never really discussed in the group.

The conditions for psychological safety

Psychological safety is a term that is widely used in the modern counseling literature, but one that has old roots. In the 1960s, Edgar Schein and Warren Bennis (Schein, Bennis 1965) published evidence of this phenomenon in their research on people's fear of (organizational) change. In the 1990s, Amy Edmondson (Edmondson 2018) built upon this with a study regarding medical malpractice in hospitals. The key discovery she made was that successful (read: effective) teams made more mistakes than teams that performed less, were less effective, and were less likely to achieve set goals.

Making mistakes contributes to success. However, it is not making mistakes itself that brings success, but learning from those mistakes together. Being able to enter into dialogue with each other to examine what happened that caused it to go wrong and what you can jointly do differently in the future. This requires psychological safety within the team, where people can trust that they can say everything that needs to be said, without being judged for it.

The secure base coach can help to create this bedding from which both the individual and the group are able to embrace the experience, as it were, and weave it into their operations.

As a team coach, we have the important task of enabling teams to have a dialogue in safety about the desired change and how it will come about on an individual and team level (Van Wielink, Fiddelaers-Jaspers, Wilhelm 2020). To have this dialogue with each other, a few conditions are important, as Brené Brown also describes in her book Dare to Lead (Brown 2019).

1. Trust

First, team members need to feel like they can count on each other when it matters. When the pressure is on, are we there for each other? Do we judge each other for mistakes made or do we learn from the situation together? The reaction displayed by individuals - almost instinctively - when the pressure increases is linked to their early attachment patterns. Was he allowed to make mistakes in the past? How did his environment react then? Were the emotions he felt himself allowed to be there? Was learning paramount or were mistakes simply not accepted?

2. Clear roles

To experience safety, it must be clear what roles there are, who does what, what responsibilities are involved and what goals the team is pursuing. This clarity provides

structure, structure provides predictability, and this provides a sense of security. The leader or supervisor of the team must initiate and maintain the dialogue about this. Are we having the right conversation about these aspects of collaboration? Can we boldly exchange thoughts with each other about the different perspectives that live in our team? Do we dare to let the voice of the minority be heard?

3. Insight into significance
A third factor that determines psychological safety in a team is that the team members have insight into the meaning of what they do. Does what someone contributes in the team have value for himself and others? What value is that and what is its impact? These questions touch on the calling of the individual contributors, of the team and the calling of the organization as a whole. "The calling of an organization is formed by the identity and the purpose that the organization pursues" (Van Wierlink, Fiddelaers-Jaspers, Wilhelm 2020).

4. Ownership
A fourth aspect of psychological safety is ownership and responsibility (Willink, Babin 2017). Safety in a group increases when everyone is willing to take responsibility for what succeeds and also fails in the collaboration. When the leader demonstrates a willingness to take responsibility for any situation that arises, positive or negative, his team members will also develop that mindset. Holding each other accountable becomes easier because you are each other's example and experience that real change becomes possible when you feel you are on the same page.

5. The team as a place of healing
In a team where trust, outspokenness, the will to make a difference and ownership are at the core of the collaboration, psychological safety emerges (Van Wielink, Wilhelm 2019). Thereby, inclusion, the ability to make mistakes,

discuss them and learn from them, people are committed to each other and the goals set, and creativity and positivity grow and flourish like never before (Van der Loo, Beks 2020). The team then becomes a place where old beliefs, existing patterns and assumptions about how people respond to emotions and to conflict, for example, are challenged and can change. Healing can take place of old pain that people carry with them. Healing of pain and disappointment, frustrations or wounds that have developed over time (in the group). This is not the goal of the team in itself, but when it happens, it takes the performance of the team to the next level. Teams that share together can also heal together.

Dialogue as a gateway to team development
Dialogue is the most important tool we have at our disposal. Dialogue is the search of two or more people for a greater truth than they previously knew. Dialogue is characterized by mutual curiosity, acceptance and empathy (Van Wielink, Fiddelaers-Jaspers, Wilhelm 2020).

Acceptance does not mean blindly agreeing with each other, but a willingness at all times to listen to the other's perspective and to ask questions about it. It also means that you must be willing to engage in conflict with each other when necessary. Conflict, at its core, is about differences between people. Conflict takes place in connection with each other and distinguishes itself from a struggle or a fight, in

which everything is aimed at 'winning' from the other at any cost. In a team where everyone listens, checks whether what has been heard is correct and then continues to ask questions, there will be more understanding for each other. More understanding leads to more connection. More connection leads to safety. More safety leads to growth.

Engaging in dialogue with the team opens a field in which collectively a new truth can emerge in the minds and hearts of the team members and the group. To help team members open to each other mentally and emotionally, we need smaller and larger moments of questioning, being quiet, listening to each other. By checking in at the beginning of each meeting and giving space for each person to say what there is to say, we welcome ourselves and others into the moment. This increases connection and safety. Another way can be by reflecting upon successes together, learning from them and celebrating them. But also reflecting upon moments of failure or disappointment can in a similar way increase connection and safety. Learning together from mistakes made is a flywheel for development. Creating smaller and bigger moments that form a transition from one moment to the next, from one reality to another reality. That is the power of rituals.

The power of rituals
Rituals can put people in touch with their own inner resources.
Rituals are like a door that can be opened and closed (Van Gasteren, Reijmerink, Soeters, Van Wielink 2020). They help us in daily practice to mark the beginning and the end of everything we do. Through rituals, the leader contributes to the peace and security of a team.

The members can thus experience that they really belong and matter, and they can realize goals together from that base. Being seen motivates.

Rituals contribute to the psychological safety in the group through the structure they provide. By pausing at important moments, birthdays, anniversaries, changes, successes and moments of failure or disappointment, everyone has a chance to reflect, to open the door to the future and to weave what was into daily reality. As a supervisor of teams, you can play an important role in these marking moments. By thinking about a ritual with the team and with the leader of the team, you help to give meaning to change and thus make transition possible.

Peter, together with Madeleine and the entire team, devises a way to reflect upon Esther, who had to leave the team and the organization due to illness. The chairs in a circle. An empty chair with a candle for Esther. One by one, everyone gets a chance to say something about Esther. Some share a memory of the moment Esther had confided in them and told them about her illness. Others share about how they had noticed she was getting worse and they had found it difficult to talk to her about it. Still others told of how proud they were when, under Esther's leadership, they had successfully completed a very large and important project. Someone told of how he misses Esther and why. A ritual of sharing, of reflection, of saying goodbye. Everyone looks at each other. They look at Madeleine. She sits with tears in her eyes listening and watching her team. "I am so happy that you are all sharing this. I realize how important she was to you and how much you miss her. I feel proud for the privilege of filling her shoes. Will you help me do this the very best that I can?"

With rituals, we interweave what was with the reality that is now. By reflecting with others on changes, on loss, on farewells and on the emotions associated with them, the space is created to integrate the events into everyday life. Not to never talk about it or think about it again, but to think back together from time to time with gratitude and connection. So that

the memory remains alive and a new reality becomes possible.

As a supervisor of teams you have a special role. It brings responsibilities, but also offers a unique opportunity to initiate real change in people and groups. By being a source, a secure base, you can help people in a team connect (again) (more deeply) with themselves and their colleagues. You have the opportunity to stimulate people to break old patterns in themselves and the group and encourage them to entrust themselves to each other. You can be the base from which this happens. Are you prepared to serve as that base from which psychological safety can emerge and the team can develop? ∎

Marnix Reijmerink is a partner in *The School for Transition.*

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