



Gene Cotter

## How Psychology Transformed My Team.....and Me!

By Gene Cotter

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Is your door really as open as you say it is?

I have long contemplated this question myself.

When I first became a member of "the management team" (sinister background music), I professed to all who were listening that my door would be open to anyone who wanted -or needed- to speak to me.

I assured them I wanted and needed to hear their thoughts and ideas.

All of them!

I also let them know that I expected people to come to me with solutions and not just problems. That I was not going to fish for them but would teach them to fish.

Afterall, if they were coming to me with nothing but problems, and I was always serving in the capacity of the answer man, who was doing their job?

Perhaps more importantly, if I was doing their job, who was doing mine?!? Not to mention, they are far better positioned than I am at knowing what they need to do their job, or what their day-to-day work looks like.

Back to my original question. Is your door as open as you say it is?

I can say anything I want. But, if people are afraid, intimidated, or are not heard, or are not received well, my door slams shut in their face.

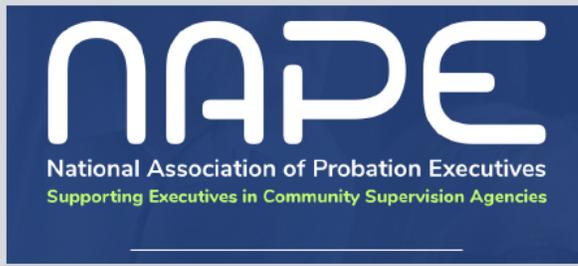
Several years ago, as I was in pursuit of my master's degree, I came across a video called "Greatness." The message delivered by retired Navy Submarine Captain David Marquet excited me as much as any message I had ever received. It put a name and concepts to what I had been in search of. It was, in my opinion, the instructions to the puzzle!

Marquet spoke out loud about ownership, personal responsibility and psychological safety. His message highlighted the importance of giving the people doing the work the keys to the car. (Or in his case, the nuclear submarine). Empowering them to do their jobs. Inviting them to claim an equal ownership share.

When I was tabbed as the chief probation officer in Nebraska's second biggest jurisdiction, I accidentally stumbled into a management style that seemed to work well for me. As I gave voice to the staff and empowered them to have a say in what they did and how they did it, they took ownership over our shared mission. Our outcomes soared. So too did job satisfaction. Meanwhile, our turnover dropped!

I had a boss tell me once that he did not promote me because I expected too much out of people. That you could only hold people accountable to minimum standards, and I expected way more than that.

When I told former NAPE president Ellen Brokofsky that shortly after she hired me as a chief probation officer, she warned me that she would come across the desk at me if I ever said that again. She promised me that, while it is



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true we can only hold people accountable to the minimum standards, people will also strive hard to meet the expectations set before them. What I discovered was, set the expectations then get out of the way!

Saying that is easy. Accomplishing it - not so much. But, as I explored Marquet's message more deeply, and in alignment with implementation science, giving the work back to the people who do it is the answer. Establish the expectations, then let those carrying out the mission have ownership over how it needs to be carried out.

For this to really work, people need to have tremendous feelings of psychological safety. One cannot just say, "my door is open" if, in reality, you're too busy, not receptive to input or ideas, intimidating, tone-deaf, scary or unapproachable.

Psychological safety is that reinforced belief that one can speak up, ask questions, admit mistakes, and express ideas without fear of negative consequences. Emerging research shows psychological safety is one of the strongest predictors of team performance and employee satisfaction.

Psychological safety is not about being comfortable or avoiding accountability. It is about creating an environment where people feel respected, supported, and free to take interpersonal risks and make mistakes.

It is about being authentic, vulnerable, transparent and trusting. It is about sharing ideas, asking for help, raising concerns, allowing for failing forward, and creating and fostering feedback loops.

When employees feel safe to engage, teams become more collaborative, innovative, and resilient.

The importance of psychological safety gained global attention after Google's Project Aristotle in 2015. After studying 180 of its teams, psychological safety was the number-one factor that distinguished high-performing teams from the rest.

In 2023 Gallup published a study showing that employees who felt psychologically safe were 76% more engaged because when people feel safe to contribute authentically, they are more invested in their work.

A 2022 Society of Human Resource Management study found 74% of employees said feeling heard at work improved their job satisfaction. Further, the American Psychological Association reported in 2023 that employees in low-trust environments were 40% more likely to experience burnout.

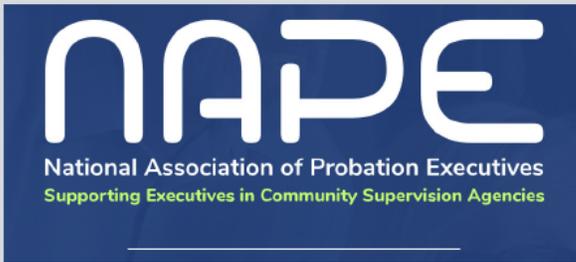
Psychological safety reduces emotional strain, allowing people to focus on meaningful work rather than self-protection.

The bottom line is, psychological safety is not a luxury. It is a necessity. Organizations that cultivate psychological safety see higher engagement, stronger performance, and greater innovation. Employees who experience it feel more satisfied, more connected, and more motivated to contribute their best work.

If people are waiting on those of us sitting in the big chairs to find - and implement - all the answers, they're going to be waiting a while.

We're stronger together, and there are certainly those out there that know WAY more than I do about what they need to be successful in keeping our communities safe and impacting positive behavior change. I say let them! Give them the keys. Afterall, they're the ones in trenches doing the work every day.

Let's be receptive to ideas and innovation. Let's hear people out and empower them. Let's be approachable and make sure our doors are truly, not metaphorically, open.



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