

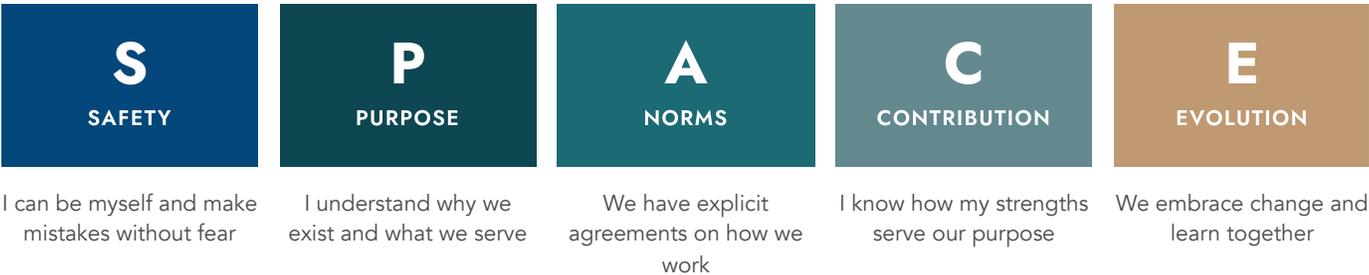
# Creating SPACE for Teams

A Leader's Guide to Building Team Health

## Executive Summary

Research consistently shows that team health—not individual talent—is the primary driver of engagement and performance. According to ADP Research Institute's Global Study of Engagement, workers on teams are **2.3x more likely** to be fully engaged, and those who trust their team leader are **12x more likely** to be engaged.<sup>1</sup>

But what makes a team healthy? After reviewing decades of research—including Google's Project Aristotle, ADP's engagement studies, and the work of Amy Edmondson and Daniel Coyle—we've identified five essential conditions that high-performing teams share. Together, they spell **SPACE**:



This guide explains each element, helps you recognize when it's present or missing, and provides concrete actions you can take as a leader. It concludes with a diagnostic tool to assess your team's current state.

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<sup>1</sup> ADP Research Institute, *Global Study of Engagement* (2019). Study of 19,000+ employees across 19 countries.

# The Case for Teams

Why team health is your highest-leverage investment

The most important unit in your organization isn't the individual. It's the team. The research is clear: how teams function together determines engagement, performance, and retention far more than individual talent or organizational initiatives.

## 2.3x

Workers on teams are 2.3 times more likely to be fully engaged than those working alone<sup>1</sup>

## 12x

Workers who trust their team leader are 12 times more likely to be fully engaged<sup>1</sup>

## 52%

Of workers on high-performing teams are fully engaged, compared to just 10% on struggling teams<sup>2</sup>

## #1

Psychological safety is the single strongest predictor of team effectiveness<sup>3</sup>

*"Who is on the team matters far less than how the team works together."*

— Key finding from Google's Project Aristotle

**The key insight:** Engagement isn't driven at the organization level—it's driven at the team level. Your team's health is largely within your control as a leader.

*But what makes a team healthy? After reviewing the research and working with dozens of teams, we've identified five essential conditions. Together, they spell SPACE—because healthy teams need room to breathe, grow, and do their best work.*

<sup>1</sup> ADP Research Institute, *Global Study of Engagement* (2019)

<sup>2</sup> ADP Research, *People at Work* (2025)

<sup>3</sup> Google, *Project Aristotle* (2012–2016)

# The SPACE Model

Five conditions for team health

Healthy teams don't happen by accident. They require intentional cultivation of five interconnected conditions. Each builds on the others—you can't have meaningful contribution without safety, and evolution requires shared purpose. As a leader, your job is to create the environment where all five can thrive.



## Safety

I can be myself, ask questions, and make mistakes without fear of punishment or humiliation.

## Articulated Norms

We have explicit, shared agreements about how we work together.

## Evolution

We embrace change and have established ways to learn and adapt together.

## Purpose

I understand why we exist and how our work serves something larger than ourselves.

## Contribution

I know how my unique strengths serve our team's purpose.

*When teams have SPACE, people bring their full selves to work.  
When SPACE is missing, even talented people hold back.*

# Safety — The Foundation

*Without safety, everything else crumbles*

**Psychological safety** is the belief that you won't be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes. It's not about being comfortable—it's about being able to take interpersonal risks.

## Why It Matters

- Teams with high safety learn faster—people report errors and problems early
- Innovation requires experimentation, which requires safety to fail
- Without safety, people manage impressions instead of solving problems

### ✓ When Safety Is Present

- People ask "dumb" questions freely
- Mistakes are discussed openly as learning opportunities
- Disagreement happens in the room, not after the meeting
- Team members admit when they don't know something

### ⚠ When Safety Is Absent

- Silence in meetings, followed by hallway conversations
- Problems hidden until they become crises
- People hedge, qualify, and cover themselves
- Ideas come only from senior voices

## Leader Actions

### 1. Go first with vulnerability

Admit your own mistakes and uncertainties. When you say "I don't know" or "I was wrong," you make it safe for others to do the same.

### 2. Respond to bad news with curiosity, not blame

Your reaction to the first person who speaks up determines whether anyone else will. Ask "What can we learn?" not "Who's responsible?"

### 3. Explicitly invite dissent

Ask "What might we be missing?" or "Who sees this differently?" Silence isn't agreement—it's often fear.

# Purpose — The North Star

Why this team exists and what we're building together

**Purpose** answers the question: Why does this team exist? It connects daily work to something meaningful—whether that's the customer you serve, the problem you solve, or the impact you make.

## Why It Matters

- Purpose transforms tasks into contributions
- It helps teams prioritize when everything feels urgent
- Shared purpose enables autonomy—people can make good decisions without constant direction

*Purpose has two dimensions: **Meaning** ("This work matters to me personally") and **Impact** ("This work makes a difference to others"). Teams need both.*

### ✓ When Purpose Is Present

- People can articulate why the team exists in their own words
- Decisions get made by asking "Does this serve our purpose?"
- Team members feel pride in what they do
- Priorities feel clear even when workload is heavy

### ⚠ When Purpose Is Absent

- Work feels like box-checking
- Competing priorities create constant confusion
- "Why are we doing this?" is asked sarcastically, not genuinely
- People show up but don't engage

## Leader Actions

### 1. Co-create purpose with your team

Imposed purpose doesn't stick. Facilitate a conversation: "Who do we serve? What would be lost if our team didn't exist?"

### 2. Connect the dots constantly

Regularly link daily tasks to larger impact: "This report helps leadership make better decisions about X."

### 3. Revisit purpose when priorities shift

Purpose isn't a poster—it's a living reference point that may need updating as context changes.

# Articulated Norms — The Agreements

Making the implicit explicit

**Norms** are the unwritten rules of how a team operates. *Articulated* norms make the implicit explicit—moving from "the way things work around here" to clear, shared agreements that everyone understands and commits to.

## Why It Matters

- Unspoken norms create confusion and conflict—people assume their way is *the way*
- Explicit agreements enable accountability—you can only hold people to standards they've agreed to
- Clear norms reduce friction—less energy spent navigating ambiguity

**Key areas for norms:** Communication (response times, channel usage) · Meetings (how we run them, decision-making) · Conflict (how we disagree productively) · Feedback (how we give and receive it) · Workload (how we signal capacity and ask for help)

### ✓ When Norms Are Articulated

- New team members can quickly learn "how we do things"
- Conflicts get resolved by referring to agreements
- The team revisits and updates norms as needed
- Expectations are clear and shared

### ⚠ When Norms Are Unspoken

- Recurring friction around the same issues
- Passive-aggressive behavior from unmet expectations
- "That's just how [person] is" becomes an excuse
- New hires struggle to fit in

## Leader Actions

### 1. Facilitate a norms conversation

Don't dictate—build agreements together. Ask: "What do we need from each other to work well?"

### 2. Write them down

A norm that isn't documented is just a hope. Keep agreements visible and reference them regularly.

### 3. Model accountability

When norms are violated—including by you—name it. "We agreed to X, and I notice we're doing Y. What's happening?"

# Contribution & Evolution

*Individual strengths and team adaptation*

## Contribution — How each person uniquely serves the team

Every team member brings unique strengths. **Contribution** means people know what they're great at, understand how that serves the team's purpose, and have clarity on what they need from others to succeed.

### ✓ When Clear

- People play to their strengths daily
- Roles and responsibilities are clear
- Team members know what they need from each other

### ⚠ When Unclear

- Duplication of effort or gaps in coverage
- People feel underutilized or miscast
- Requests get dropped or confused

**Leader actions:** Know your people's strengths through explicit conversations. Align roles to strengths where possible. Create "user guides" where team members share their working styles and what they need from others.

## Evolution — How the team adapts and grows

Healthy teams change. They learn from mistakes, adapt to new circumstances, and continuously improve how they work together. **Evolution** is the team's capacity for learning and growth.

### ✓ When Evolving

- Regular retrospectives on how the team works
- Failures lead to process improvements, not blame
- The team experiments with new approaches

### ⚠ When Stagnant

- Same problems recur quarter after quarter
- "We've always done it this way" shuts down ideas
- Change is imposed, not embraced

**Leader actions:** Build in reflection rhythms—monthly or quarterly, assess how the team is working, not just what it's producing. Celebrate adaptation. Model learning by sharing what you're working on and asking for feedback on your leadership.

# SPACE Diagnostic

Rate each statement: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree

## Safety

1. Team members feel safe to ask questions, even if the answer seems obvious.

2. Mistakes are discussed openly without blame.

3. People speak up when they disagree, even with senior team members.

## Purpose

4. Every team member can clearly articulate why our team exists.

5. Our daily work feels connected to meaningful outcomes.

6. When priorities conflict, our purpose helps us decide.

## Articulated Norms

7. We have explicit agreements about how we communicate and collaborate.

8. When someone violates a team agreement, it gets addressed directly.

9. A new team member could quickly learn "how we work here."

## Contribution

10. Each person understands how their unique strengths serve the team.

11. Roles and responsibilities are clear—people know who does what.

12. Team members know what they need from each other to do their best work.

## Evolution

13. We regularly reflect on how we're working together, not just what we're producing.

14. When circumstances change, we adapt our approach.

15. We learn from failures and apply those lessons going forward.

### Tally Your Scores

Safety:  /15 Purpose:  /15 Norms:  /15

Contribution:  /15 Evolution:  /15 **TOTAL:**  /75

### Interpret Your Results

**60–75 Strong:** Your team is healthy. Maintain, deepen, and share what's working.

**45–59 Developing:** Foundation exists but gaps are real. Neutral often masks uncertainty.

**30–44 Struggling:** Significant issues. Prioritize Safety—nothing else works without it.

**Below 30 Critical:** Urgent intervention needed. Seek facilitated support.