

Session 4:

Rethinking Failure

How Great Cultures Turn Difficulty Into Growth

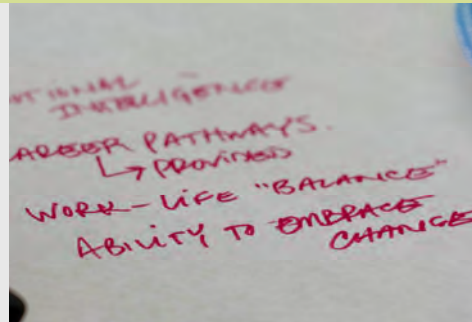
PRESENTED BY:



Welcome



Katie Kawczynski
Executive Vice President of
Professional Services
VJS Construction Services



Speaker Introductions

Moderator



Luke Harrison
Through Line

Leadership Panel



Keynote Speaker

Andy Vitrano
Baird

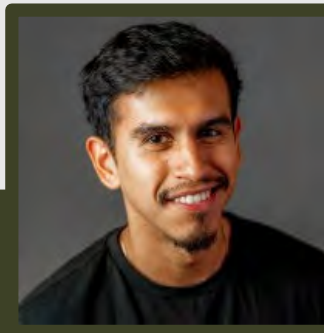


Shaba Martinez
United Community Center

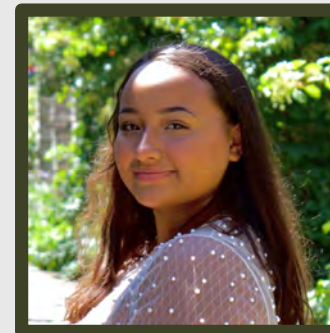


Dr. Stephanie Maney-Hartlaub
City Year Milwaukee

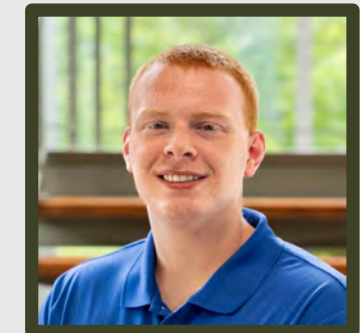
Emerging Talent Panel



Alex Mancilla
GE Healthcare



Lana Constable
City Year Milwaukee



Zach Kluge
VJS Construction Services



Table Introductions

How does your organization acknowledge and learn from failure?



10:00

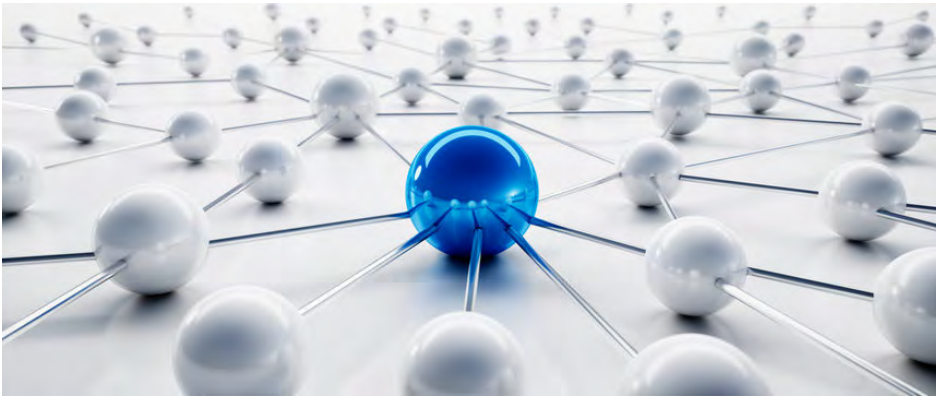


Productive Struggle: Building Cultures Where Talent Thrives on Challenge

June 18, 2026



Connection to previous sessions



Productive struggle is not chaos or sink-or-swim. It is challenge **with support**. Cultures that get this right hold high standards (clarity), create room to speak up and learn (trust and psychological safety), and reinforce “you belong here even when it is hard” (belonging).

The Struggle Gap



Think of the first time you did something new or difficult. What happened, what did you learn, how did you respond?

Productive Struggle



When people face meaningful challenge and can still think clearly, ask for help, learn from feedback, and try again. It is “both/and”: positivity and productivity together, not either/or

Comfort Zone
Routine work
Challenge: Too Low

Flow / "In the Zone"
Purposeful Practice
Challenge: Suitable

Zone of Proximal Development
Deliberate practice with a teacher/mentor
Challenge: Suitably High

Impossible Zone
Challenge: Too High

Non – Examples of a culture of productive struggle

Isn't about "performative toughness" or constant pressure with no support

It's not about protecting everyone from discomfort

Nor is it a permanent high-alert environment where people hide mistakes

Why “struggle” gets misread as danger

K12: a student shuts down when they fear looking dumb

Higher ed: a first-generation student avoids office hours because it feels like “I do not belong”

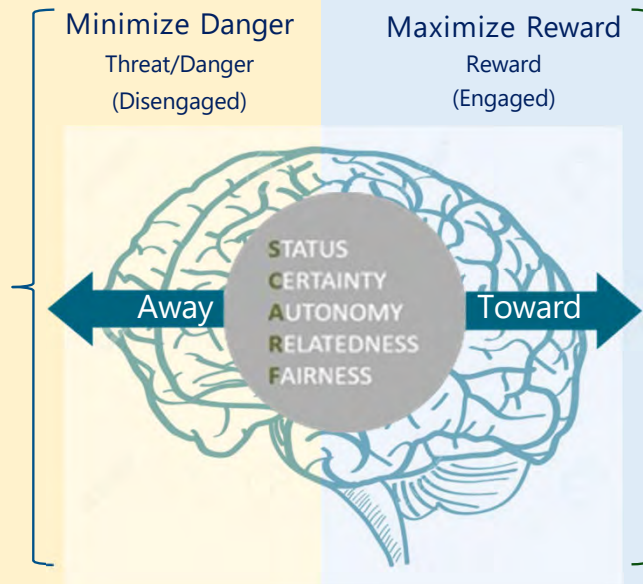
Industry: a new hire stays quiet in meetings because it feels unsafe to take a risk



S.C.A.R.F. & The Neuroscience Of Collaboration

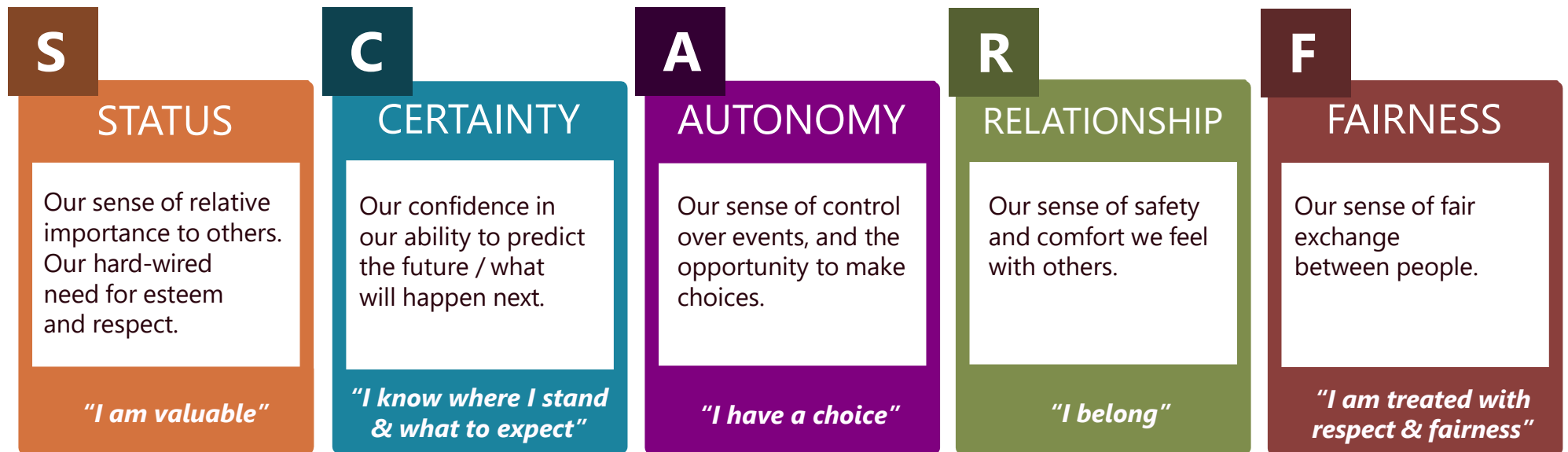
Minimize Danger (-) ← → **Maximize Rewards (+)**

- Shuts down high-level thinking
- Reduced working memory
- Protect
- Retreat
- Selective perception
- Narrow thinking



- Open - more cognitive resources
- More insights and innovation
- More ideas
- Fewer perceptual errors
- More curiosity
- Better able to manage complexity

The **S.C.A.R.F.** Model Describes Core Social Domains Driving Human Interactions



Your Role in Creating Psychological Safety

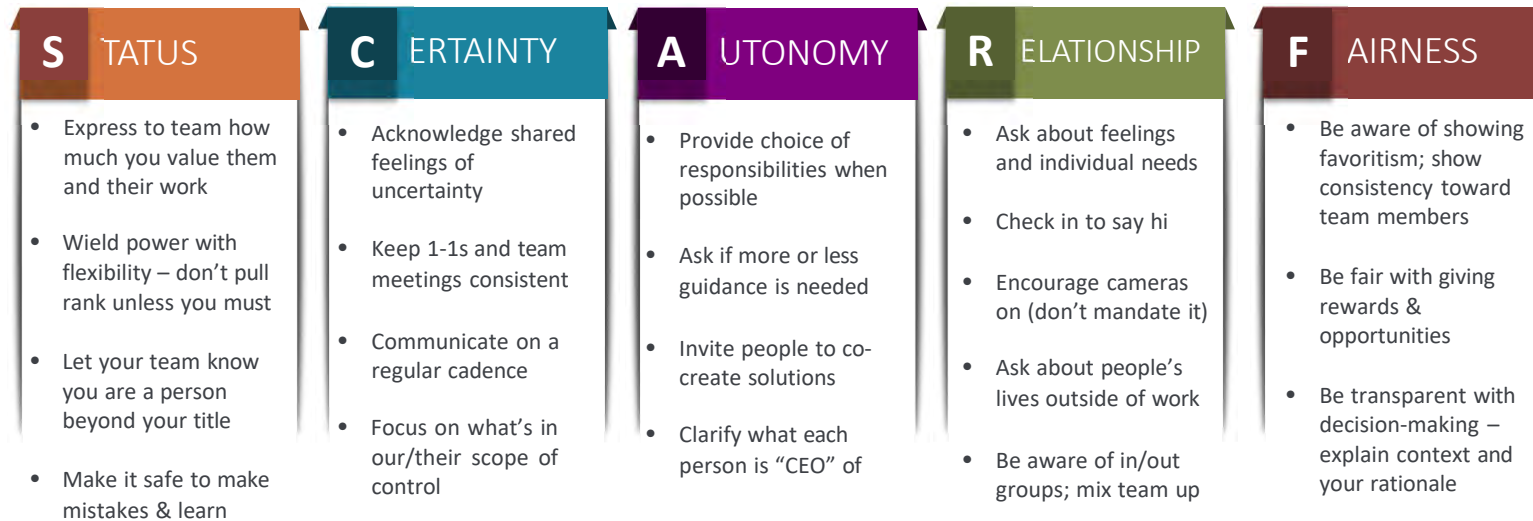


Nurturing Psychological Safety Involves Specific **Developmental Patterns**

ASK YOURSELF...

- Do you tend to habitually avoid conflict?
- Are you uncomfortable with uncertainty, risk, or showing vulnerability?
- How regularly do you try to take on the perspectives of others?
- How often do you admit your mistakes and/or apologize?**
- When you feel stressed, can you calm down or do you tend to transmit it to others?
- Do you feel threatened or insecure by the success/competence of others?
- Do you lead/live more from a mindset of scarcity or abundance?
- Are you a perfectionist? (Or have you been told you are one?)
- Do you think you need to be the “hero” when things go wrong?
- Do you gossip about others?
- Is your leadership based on social conditioning – e.g. male, stoic, unemotional?
- How authentically do you show up as you in your leadership role?

5 Years for Increasing Your Team's S.C.A.R.F. Experience What You Can Do:



Connection Point

If struggle feels like danger, people avoid it. If struggle feels like growth, people lean in.

Assessment: How Much Psychological Safety Exists on Your Team?

1. If I make a mistake on this team, it is not held against me.

2. Members of my team are able to bring up problems and issues.

3. People on my team sometimes accept others for being different.

4. It is safe to take a risk on this team

Strongly Disagree

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

Strongly Agree

5. It isn't difficult to ask other members of this team for help.

6. No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.

7. Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized.

GROWTH MINDSET

WHAT IS GROWTH MINDSET?



Growth Mindset – Intelligence can be developed. This leads to a desire to learn and therefore a tendency to...

Embrace challenges

Persist in the face of setbacks

See effort as the path to mastery

Learn from growth feedback

Find lessons and inspiration in the success of others

WHAT IS GROWTH MINDSET?



Fixed Mindset– Intelligence is static. This leads to a desire to look smart and therefore a tendency to...

Avoid challenges

Give up easily

See purposeful effort as fruitless or worse

Ignore useful growth feedback

Feel threatened by the success of others

Connection Point

**Think of
someone who
embraces
growth mindset**

**What impact do
they have on
the people
around them?**

Mindsets are just beliefs. They're powerful beliefs, but they're just something in your mind, and you can change your mind.

So where does that land us?



The Culture Formula

Leadership

Growth Mindset

**Organizational
Practice**

Consistency

What Google Learned In Its Quest To Build *The Perfect Team*

The differentiating factors for high-performing teams were not what was expected
— **NOT PERSONALITY or ROLE COMPATIBILITY**

The biggest factor was the existence of group norms —most importantly,
“PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY”
on the team, informed by:



Conversational turn-taking

Social sensitivity

Overall, a confidence that team won't embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up or being themselves

What Google Learned In Its Quest To Build *The Perfect Team*



Practical Leadership Strategies

1. Normalize learning and mistakes

“Make it safe to make mistakes and learn.” Model fallibility: admit when you missed something.

2. Share power where you can

Be inclusive with decision-making and share power when possible. Provide choice of responsibilities when possible

3. Create clarity so challenge is not confusion

Establish clear norms and expectations. Communicate on a regular cadence.

Practical Leadership Strategies

4. Stay emotionally available

Your emotional availability can support or erode the team. Simple self-checks: do you transmit stress to others, avoid conflict, struggle with vulnerability, or need to be the “hero”?

5. Ask better questions in the moment of struggle “What strategy could you try next?” “What would make this 10 percent easier?” “Who has done this before that you can learn from?”

6. Mentor THROUGH the mistake

Generational Challenges

- *Social Comparisons*
- *How they got here...*
- *Invisible Excellence*

Productive Struggle = Clarity + Safety + Mindset + Practice

As a leader, your greatest impact isn't just in what gets done, but in who people become. Lead with that, and you create a culture where people rise to challenges and truly thrive.

Which of the **four conditions** for productive struggle that Andy described — **Clarity, Safety, Mindset, Practice** — is either **most developed or most underdeveloped** in your organization. Why?

Leadership Panel



Andy Vitrano
Senior Vice President, Manager of
Coaching & Special Programs
Baird



Shaba Martinez
Chief Academic Officer
United Community Center



Dr. Stephanie Maney-Hartlaub
Senior Vice President, Exec. Director
City Year Milwaukee

The leaders described an area where they actively work to create an experience of challenge and learning. How does your organization proactively try to shape a culture where people struggle and grow?

Emerging Talent Panel



Alex Mancilla
Electrical Engineer
GE Healthcare



Lana Constable
Student Success Coach
City Year Milwaukee



Zach Kluge
Assistant Project Manager
VJS Construction Services

What did you hear from the emerging talent panelists that surprised you about their experience of struggle and thriving? What does that tell you about how to foster those conditions at your organization?

Reflection & Commitment

What is one idea that threads through the session today that you will take with you?

Consider your sphere of influence. What is one condition that you would like to help shift to make productive struggle feel more like growth and less like danger?

Beyond the Walls

EDUCATION
& INDUSTRY
FORUM

HELP SHAPE WHAT'S NEXT



PROVIDE FEEDBACK, SIGN UP FOR OUR CO-HORT !!