

# FACING THE SILENT THREAT: DO NOT IGNORE THE IMPACT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

By Green-Jakobsen A/S



In the maritime industry, where working conditions are tough, and strict hierarchies exist, a ship creates its own unique work environment. Ensuring the psychological safety of the crew is essential. But what does psychological safety mean, and how can you and your company use it to improve ship operations and crew well-being?

## What is psychological safety? And why is there a silent threat?

Psychological safety describes the environment where individuals feel secure enough to give feedback, express their thoughts, and voice concerns without fear of negative consequences or judgment.

Ignoring the importance of psychological safety is considered a “silent threat”. Its absence is not always obvious and unlike physical dangers like a piece of broken machinery, issues with psychological safety often show up as subtle signs like stress, anxiety, and lack of engagement. These can be harder to notice but can greatly impact the crew’s performance and safety (Nembhard & Edmondson 2006).

When psychological safety is visible and felt, crew members are more likely to report safety concerns and near-misses. This proactive reporting helps identify and resolve potential hazards before accidents are caused.

## Fostering psychological safety on board

Creating a psychologically safe environment on a ship involves more than just fixing problems—it requires building a culture where crew members feel valued, heard, and secure. The unique conditions on vessels make communication critical for safety and performance. Leaders play a key role in ensuring psychological safety, as shown by survey responses and feedback from seafarers we’ve interviewed.

### #1 Leaders should set a psychologically safe atmosphere on board by modelling behaviours that promote openness and trust.

When leaders demonstrate empathy, actively listen, and provide constructive feedback while valuing crew members’ input and concerns, they can create an environment where everyone feels respected and heard.

To illustrate this point, consider the following insight from a Junior Officer: “I think having a harmonious relationship among the crew on board will greatly improve the ship’s safety culture. This starts with management and officers reaching out to lower ranks, regardless of nationality. Power distance often causes division, negatively affecting safety.”

**#2 Leaders must foster open communication by utilising daily opportunities, like during morning meetings and task discussions, allowing crew members to share concerns and ideas freely.**

This approach helps the team work together more effectively, leveraging everyone’s knowledge and insights. As a Rating puts it: “Listen to the crew on how to do a job because we know how to solve the problems and have good experience.”

**#3 Leaders must ensure that interactions across all ranks are respectful and that mistakes are viewed as learning opportunities rather than grounds for reprimand.**

Promoting inclusivity and a just culture helps maintain a supportive and safe environment for everyone. According to a Senior Officer: “Good friends and good team players are going to work well together. If the ship’s management team is good, it reflects on the crew; it’s an automatic reaction.”

**The importance of regular check-ins and surveys**

Regular check-ins and surveys are crucial for maintaining and improving psychological safety on board. These practices help assess how the crew perceive the work environment and reveal any hidden issues related to psychological safety.

At Green-Jakobsen, we have been closely following the factors that impact human performance, including psychological safety. This focus is reflected in the Crew Performance Diagnosis Survey, which serves as a vital tool for assessing crew performance. The survey results help determine

How would you rate the work atmosphere on board?  
 “How often is there a good work atmosphere on board?”

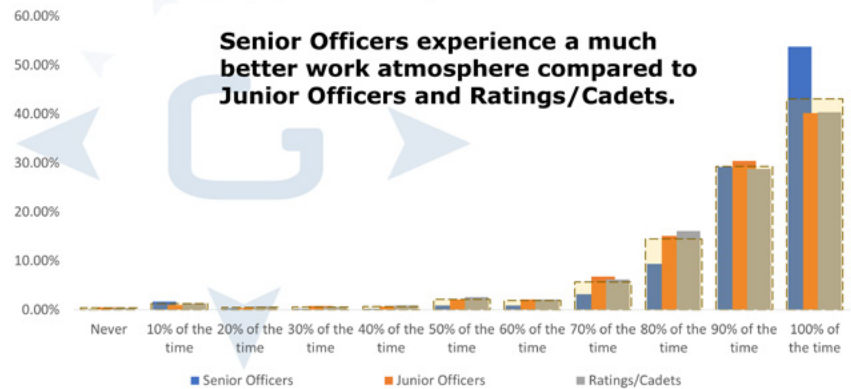


Image 1: Source: green-jakobsen.com/safety-delta/

how psychological safety impacts other performance factors and the overall performance of the crew.

One of the interesting findings from the performance survey responses is that when asked, “How often is there a good work atmosphere on board?”. Senior Officers indicate experiencing a much better work atmosphere compared to Junior Officers and Ratings/Cadets.

This could reveal some important factors affecting psychological safety, especially the gap between senior officers and lower-ranking crew members. Senior officers might not always notice or fully comprehend the concerns of their subordinates, which can mislead them into believing that communication and inclusivity are better than they actually are. This highlights the need for better communication and listening skills so that senior officers are more aware of the challenges faced by junior officers and cadets and are open to their feedback.

Regularly assessing psychological safety through surveys like this can help the crew spot trends and address problems early. This way, strategies can be put in place to improve the work environment, making psychological safety a practical part of crew performance and operational efficiency on individual vessels and across the fleet.

**Epilogue**

Advancing performance through psychological safety requires commitment from leadership, starting at the shipping company’s office and extending to vessels. Shipping companies should prioritise regular check-ins and anonymous surveys to monitor and improve psychological safety, both on board and ashore. By enhancing this environment, you can boost operational efficiency and crew well-being. We’re here to help you analyse data and understand the factors affecting psychological safety and overall human performance.



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