The Tenth Annual Game Design Think Tank
Project Horseshoe 2015

Group Report: Creating Emotionally Safe Workplaces in Game Development

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Workgroup Objective

To explore what is meant by an emotionally safe workspace, show the benefits of such a workspace, and advise on how to achieve one in a game development context.

Problem Statement

The idea of an emotionally safe space is relatively new to workplace culture. The last 15 years has seen a significant increase in our understanding of group dynamics, motivation, and social structures. These learnings have begun to reveal the impact of social dynamics on a team's performance, particularly their ability to work and think creatively, as well as a group's ability to grow and diversify. There is growing evidence that establishing an emotionally safe workspace can increase efficiency, reduce turnover, and lead to more creative collaboration. While game development relies on creativity, collaboration, and the ability to adapt quickly, game development workspaces have been plagued by a bad reputation for hostility, homogeneity, and exclusion. We found an abundance of anecdotal evidence and work experiences in game development that indicates a lack of emotionally safe spaces in game development studios of all sizes and types. We surmise that game development leadership, and game developers themselves, have a poor understanding of emotionally safe spaces and how to construct them. This paper aims to establish a baseline definition of emotionally space workspace and offer instruction on how to create and identify such a space.

Introduction

What is an Emotionally Safe Workspace?

> *"I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."*
> **-Maya Angelou**

In the simplest terms an emotionally safe space is any place in which individuals are opened and vulnerable. This vulnerability is practiced without fear of social or professional punishment creating an environment of honesty and respect. Emotionally safe workspaces create within their members an ambient sense of belonging and empathetic connection. However, these spaces are not conflict or debate free. In fact, a key component of emotionally safety in the workplace context is the ability for team members to engage in constructive criticism and feedback. An opened sharing of ideas, even ideas on which team

members passionately disagree, without fear is essential. Emotionally safe workspaces allow for debate, conflict, and mistakes while still supporting open communication.

Why Should You Care?

> **The researchers found that informational diversity stirred constructive conflict, or debate, around the task at hand. That is, people deliberate about the best course of action. This is the type of conflict that absolutely should be engendered in organizations, says Neale. On the other hand, demographic diversity can sometimes whip up interpersonal conflict. This is the kind of conflict people should fear. "People think, 'I have a different opinion than you. I don't like what you do or how you do it. I don't like you,'" says Neale. "This is what basically can destroy a group."**
> https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/insights/diversity-work-group-performance
> http://web.mit.edu/cortiz/www/Diversity/PDFs/Jehn%20et%20al%201999.pdf

It can be easy to see why emotional safety is important for personal relationships but why should game developers care about it in the workplace? Game development is a collaborative, creative, and fast paced endeavor and game developers are passionate creators frequently pushing themselves and technology to the limit. Team productivity and creative success are of paramount importance to game development. Furthermore, as a burgeoning and competitive medium, game development must support a diversity of viewpoints in order to continue to grow and avoid stagnation. Successfully creating an emotionally safe workplace could have significant benefits for not just individual teams, but for the industry as a whole.

Finding ways to attract the best talent and creating an environment in which they can do their best work together is a high priority for game developers. Many companies spend large sums of money creating modern office spaces, offering food and comforts, and putting together compelling benefit offerings to achieve their goals. Yet the emotional health of game developers is rarely a focus despite the growing evidence from behavioral science that feelings of belonging and safety are key to performance. Studies have found that high performing teams share communication traits such as all team members talking in roughly equal measure, and team members talking directly to each other regularly (https://hbr.org/2012/04/the-new-science-of-building-great-teams) . This sort of high performance communication can only exist when there is trust and belonging. If one or more team members feels disconnected, or that communication with the team is a high risk action, the team's cohesiveness is lost and productivity suffers. Lack of belonging also leads to turnover. In fact, one study found that the lack of a sense of belonging was a key contributor to women exiting mathematics fields (https://www.asms.sa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/why-girls-opt-out.pdf).

Prospective and current game developers opted out of the industry all the time. The reasons most often given are dissatisfaction with working conditions, many of which stem from a lack of respect and belonging. On the surface this might seem like a good thing; e.g. if everyone that feels they don't belong leaves, we will be left with only those that do feel they belong and performance will increase. Unfortunately, homogeneity is the enemy of creativity and teams that fail to diversify, especially in high tech and other competitive industries, suffer significantly. Studies looking at gender diversity, inherited diversity, and acquired diversity (citations: 1 2) all showed tremendous benefits both financially and creatively for teams that had them. Subsequently teams that did not have diversity had lower project success, less profitability, and increased difficulty in reaching new markets. Both research and anecdotal evidence from game industry members make it clear; you need diversity and great communication and a proven way to foster these qualities is through an emotionally safe workplace that can grow belonging and trust.

How Can You Create a Safe Workspace?

"I feel sorry for anyone who is in a place where he feels strange and stupid."

— **Lois Lowry**, **The Giver**

As a team lead, discipline lead, or manager the practical work of creating an emotionally safe work environment rest largely on your shoulders. While a supportive executive team and HR team are important, the day to day management of teams and especially of their creative work is the biggest factor in determining if team members feel safe. The most important thing to remember is that as a leader in your organization, team members are looking at your actions and words to determine what is and is not okay. Model the behavior and ideals you want your team to display and correct behavior or language that doesn't align with those ideals quickly and consistently. Below are some practical steps you can take to create a safe work space.

- Foster a Culture of Inclusion. Through modeled behavior and guidance create a general sense of inclusion by continually reinforcing that all team members voices are valued and respected.
    - Make sure all team members have a chance to talk in meetings and brainstorming sessions.
    - Listen carefully when a team member is talking; do not interrupt and look at the person that is speaking. The team will mimic your communication style.
    - Avoid dismissive language and personal attacks when giving critique. Focus on feedback about the work not the person.
- Conflict Resolution. Conflict will arise and team members will be looking to you to understand how to resolve it.
    - Have a set of rules for how conflict will be resolved and make sure it is understood and consistent. The worst time to develop conflict resolution techniques is during conflict.
    - Use the same set of rules for resolving disagreements about the project to resolve interpersonal conflict. The more practice a team has using one set of conflict resolution techniques the better they will be at it and the more fair the resolution will see,.
    - If you cannot remain dispassionate and calm ask someone else to mediate a conflict for you. Having an outside perspective can also be helpful.
    - Here are some conflict resolution tools.
        - http://www.forbes.com/sites/mikemyatt/2012/02/22/5-keys-to-dealing-with-workplace-conflict/
        - http://www.mediate.com/articles/bermanlj3.cfm
        - http://www.amazon.com/Managing-conflict-workplace-Shay-McConnon/dp/1845284135
- Encourage Diversity of Opinion. Fight against "group think" and stagnation by challenging the team's preconceived notions.
    - Ask your team members to regularly go outside the group for feedback.
    - Communicate the value of different ideas and different perspectives.
    - Clearly communicate that consensus is not the ultimate goal; dissenting opinions, as long as they are communicated respectfully, are celebrated.
- Create a Safe Place to Give and Receive Criticism. Game development requires the giving and receiving of feedback. Make sure team members can work collaboratively without emotions running too high.
    - Set guidelines for how peers and managers will critique each other's work. Structure will make critique feel less personal and frightening.
    - Value the ability to give good feedback. If your team is not good at giving and receiving critique, get them training.
- Mindfully Construct Power Structures. Most game development teams cannot function as a democracy; someone needs to be in charge but power abuse can lead to a loss of trust.
    - Make sure additional power always comes with additional accountability. If acquiring more power allows a team member to shift blame, power abuse is hard to detect but will quickly erode the team's feelings of safety.
    - Make sure the ability to be heard or contribute is not determined by power status. Having ideas evaluated on their own merit is key to keeping communication flowing.
- Use the SCARF Model. SCARF stands for Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness.

You can learn more about SCARF and the science behind it here: http://www.your-brain-at-work.com/files/NLJ_SCARFUS.pdf

- ○ SCARF can be a great way to gauge how emotionally safe your team is. Ask yourself which interactions your team sees as a threat and which it sees as a reward.
- ○ Before engaging in a difficult conversation or activity with your team ask yourself how you can support their SCARF needs.

What about individual team members themselves? A team is, by definition, made up of the sum of its members so of course the actions of those members has a large impact on how emotionally safe a workspace can be. Most team members want to have a trusting and respectful relationship with their co-workers and many actively desire more diversity on their team. However, increased diversity and discussions of emotions in the workplace can be uncomfortable or even scary. The desire not to offend can lead to limiting communication or resentment. Below are some practical steps that individual contributors can take to creating and sustaining an emotionally safe workplace.

- Follow the Golden Rule. Don't be a jerk!
  - ○ If you are unsure if your language or actions will be inappropriate, ask yourself if you are being a jerk. Remember that your feels and opinions are not inherently more valuable than another person.
  - ○ Pop culture often rails against political correctness and sensitivity, and it can feel good to shock others, but ask yourself why you want to offend. Is your point valid or are you being defensive?
  - ○ Respect others and their truth. Persuasive debate is fine, but learn to accept differences of opinion gracefully and respectfully.
- Don't Treat Social Currency Like a Zero Sum Game. You shouldn't need to decrease a peer's social status to elevate your own.
  - ○ Using a teammate to enhance your social status might help you win an argument but it will erode the team's trust in you and make compromise more difficult in the future.
  - ○ Tearing others down and highlighting their weaknesses is called bullying. Bullying generally leads to more bullying but don't assume that because someone you bullied is now bullying someone else that they enjoyed the experience.
- Don't Be Afraid to Make Honest Mistakes. Working with a diverse team can be intimidating and it might be tempting to try and only work with those that are most like you. But, working with a diverse team offers many opportunities to learn and grow if you can accept that the road might not always be smooth.
  - ○ It is okay to say you are sorry. Whether you put your foot in your mouth, got too heated during brainstorming, or simply made a joke you didn't consider could be offensive, an honest apology goes a long way.
  - ○ You are allowed to ask questions of team member who have had different experiences or backgrounds from you; they are not required to answer to satisfy your curiosity. Simply saying "I don't know much about that" can go a long way in establishing context and breaking down walls.
- Face Differences Head On. Differences in background, experience, and beliefs can create conflict but don't run away from it.
  - ○ Don't be defensive. Acknowledge the conflict and try to work through it respectfully. If you can't discuss the issue calmly ask for a break.
  - ○ Think about what you want out of conflict. Is your only measure of success changing the other person's mind? Ask yourself how realistic that is and whether or not it is really important.
  - ○ Don't avoid working with those that are different than you. Be opened to learning something new even from conflict.

How Can You Identify a Safe Workspace?

"There is no one can convince you otherwise when you've finally found where you belong. The whole experience of belonging somewhere also gives a good sense of well being."
— **Euginia Herlihy**

One of the best ways to encourage an emotionally safe workplace in game development is for game developers to value it and take it into consideration when selecting a team to work with. But interview processes rarely allow a candidate to get a deep understanding of the company's culture. Below are some practical actions you can take to discover if the company you are considering has a safe workplace.

- Start by examining their recruitment materials including website, job listings, and ads. Things like gender inclusive pronouns and inclusive language might seem nitpicky but can point to an underlying culture. The aggressive use of slang or terms associated with a narrow subculture might indicate a desire to only hire candidates that will conform to the company's specific ideology.
- Studios often take on the culture of their audiences - consider whether you enjoy the types of games the studio makes, and the audience they serve.
  - You may hear: "We require everyone here to reach level 60 in our game." This can mean: "We value deep focus on our current franchise over creative thinking that could carry us into the future."
- Ask about diversity in the early stages. Professionals from the prospective company should be able to discuss the company's diversity confidently, beyond a "PR blurb;" they should have demonstrable numbers showing that their staff and leadership are diverse.
  - You may hear: "diversity is very important to us" without hearing any examples of how or why this is true. This means: "We know it's important to pay lip service to this concept in theory, but we don't have any tangible evidence that shows good practice."
- Reach out to your professional network to be put in touch with employees of a prospective company who you can ask to about the company's culture; ask those employees about:
  - Diversity in staff and leadership.
  - How comfortable they feel sharing ideas and with peers and management.
  - How disputes are settled.
  - How open management is to new ideas and suggestions and whether these are generally acted upon.
- During in person interviews, look for signs of diversity. Are you seeing a variety of people, backgrounds, and ideas? Or are all interviews fairly similar?
  - You may hear: "We really want some one that is a good cultural fit." This can mean: "We don't want to deal with the conflicts and disagreements that come from diversity. We're more focused on efficiency than creativity."
- If someone asks you a question you feel is inappropriate in an interview, ask them why this information is important to them. Their answer could tell you a lot about the team culture.

Identifying an emotionally safe work environment before accepting a job can be difficult but if emotional safety is important to you don't be afraid to ask about it.

Conclusion

"The desire to belong is in every mind."
— **Debasish Mridha**

The idea of emotional safety is nothing new, but its place in a work environment and specifically game development is still not well understood. This paper aimed to set a baseline definition for emotional safety in the workplace and offer practical suggestions for how to achieve and maintain one such environment in a game development team. This paper was the result of dozens of anecdotal experiences related to the authors at Project Horseshoe 2015, as well as our own decades of experience in the game development

industry as team members and managers. Our work was heavily informed and supported by psychology research, business research, surveys, books, and articles some of which are linked to in the paper itself. Below is further reading and resources on the topic for those that wish to go further.

Talks/Videos

- TED talk - Shawn Achor - the happy secret to working well
  - http://www.ted.com/talks/shawn_achor_the_happy_secret_to_better_work
- GDC Vault: Russ Pitts on how to depression-proof your studio
  - http://www.gdcvault.com/play/1020783/How-to-Depression-Proof-Your
- Monica Lewinsky: The price of shame
  - https://www.ted.com/talks/monica_lewinsky_the_price_of_shame?language=en
- Amy Cuddy: Your Body Language Shapes Who You Are
  - http://www.ted.com/talks/amy_cuddy_your_body_language_shapes_who_you_are

Books

- The Gentle Art of Verbal Self Defense by Suzette Haden Elgin
- Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen
- The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't by Robert Sutton
- Happiness Advantage: The Seven Principles That Fuel Success and Performance at Work by Shawn Achor
- Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers by Robert Sapolsky
- Good Boss, Bad Boss by Robert Sutton
- Drive by Daniel Pink
- The Best Place to Work: The Art and Science of Creating an Extraordinary Workplace by Ron Friedman

Online Articles

- SCARF Resource
- Essential Skills for Leadership Effectiveness in Diverse Workplace Development
- Five Warning Signs Your Employees May Lack a Sense of Belonging
- The Importance of Creating a Sense of Belonging in an Organization
- Why Belonging is Key in Today's Workplace
- Create a Sense of Belonging for Employees
- Why Girls Opted Out
- Creating Culture and a Sense of Belonging in Global Companies
- SIBL Lab
  - http://depts.washington.edu/sibl/index.html
- Why Women Aren't Crazy
- Diversity Drives Success
- Emotional Competence as Antecedent to Performance: A Contingency Framework
- 'The less I trust, the less I contribute (or not)?' The effects of trust, accountability and self-monitoring in social dilemmas.
- The Science of Making Great Teams