

Build an Innovator's Mindset

How emotional intelligence can
supercharge transformation

By Rich Hua, Worldwide Head of EPIC Leadership,
Founder of EQ at Amazon, and
Innovation Ambassador, AWS



The outsized impact of emotions

The need to drive innovation is a common refrain heard from today's business leaders, and there's no shortage of playbooks and best practices geared toward those ends. While much has been written about the tools, technologies, and mechanisms that foster innovation, much less attention has been given to the emotional side of innovation and the vital role played by how our people feel.

Innovation is not just a cognitive process, but an emotional one as well. Anyone who has tried to have a good workout at the gym after waking up on the wrong side of the bed can attest to the impact that emotions can have on one's mental and physical performance. It's little surprise that the same applies to work.

In fact, studies have found that elements such as grit, determination, and fearlessness contribute as much—or more—to innovation than pure intellect. [One study](#) from Daniel Goleman, a leading researcher in the field, shows that 67% of the abilities deemed necessary for superior performance in leaders are emotional competencies, and that emotional intelligence in senior executives is a better indicator of future success than previous experience or intelligence quotient (IQ). While the discourse around innovation often focuses on fun and creativity, the reality for most people is that innovation can be difficult and uncomfortable.



The EPIC Leadership Program

The EPIC Leadership Program trains leaders in emotional intelligence and interpersonal dynamics skills, enabling them to lead with greater Empathy, Purpose, Inspiration, and Connection:

Empathy means leaders recognize and value others' thoughts and feelings, understanding their struggles and dreams, and treating everyone with respect.

Purpose means leaders grasp the reasons for their actions, focusing on benefiting customers, the team, and the larger vision.

Inspiration is generated by leaders who foster a positive environment, valuing team contributions, setting ambitious standards, and motivating all to achieve.

Connection in leadership is about understanding people's core values and aspirations, being genuine, and fostering authenticity in the workplace.

Emotional intelligence, or a lack thereof, is directly reflected in today's business results. An oft-cited statistic is that [70% of digital transformation initiatives fail](#) because leadership doesn't build conviction throughout the organization about the importance of change, and their people don't buy in or adopt the right mindset. This is not a new phenomenon. [Similar studies](#) have been conducted since the mid-90s and demonstrate a consistent failure rate driven by the same human factors. The processes and technologies have changed dramatically over that time, but the constant throughout are people. Only by addressing emotional intelligence throughout an organization can leaders successfully overcome these time-tested obstacles to innovation.

In this ebook we'll explore:

- How emotional intelligence can be a potent contributor to innovation;
- The neuroscience of innovation, including how emotions affect us and ways we can better regulate our emotions to maximize our productivity and creativity;
- How leaders can build teams that are more innovative by fostering psychological safety and generative conflict.

Emotional intelligence: The secret ingredient to innovation

I was born in Taiwan and moved to the United States when I was three. As a socially awkward child who didn't speak English and had ADHD, I faced a lot of challenges, including bullying and racism. Early on, I learned I was actually pretty smart and began to focus on my IQ—leaving my emotions behind. I got straight As, achieved a perfect score on the SAT, and was accepted into every college I applied to.

After studying electrical engineering and computer science at UC Berkeley, my plans shifted: I got married and became a missionary in Asia. Inspired by my new role and new wife, I quickly realized that I needed to develop my emotional skills, especially empathy. I got to work reading, taking courses, and finding mentoring and coaching, and I dramatically improved in these skills over time. Eventually, I pivoted back to the corporate world, and discovered that my emotional intelligence, or EQ, helped me experience outsized success and have a greater impact, even more so than IQ.

I began sharing this knowledge and coaching many types of leaders—from C-level executives to new managers—and found that these skills were highly valuable to everyone regardless of experience, role, or background. Emotional intelligence became the secret to my success, and the success of tens of thousands of people I've coached and trained. Over that time I've seen that emotional intelligence can supercharge people's ability to innovate.

There's a common misconception that every innovation has to be galactic—"Innovations" with a capital "I". While we all would like to be responsible for the next extraordinary breakthrough, research shows that a continuous stream of small improvements—"innovations" with a



*Emotional intelligence
can supercharge people's
ability to innovate."*

lowercase “i”—can be even more significant. Imagine if everyone at your organization innovated *all the time*?

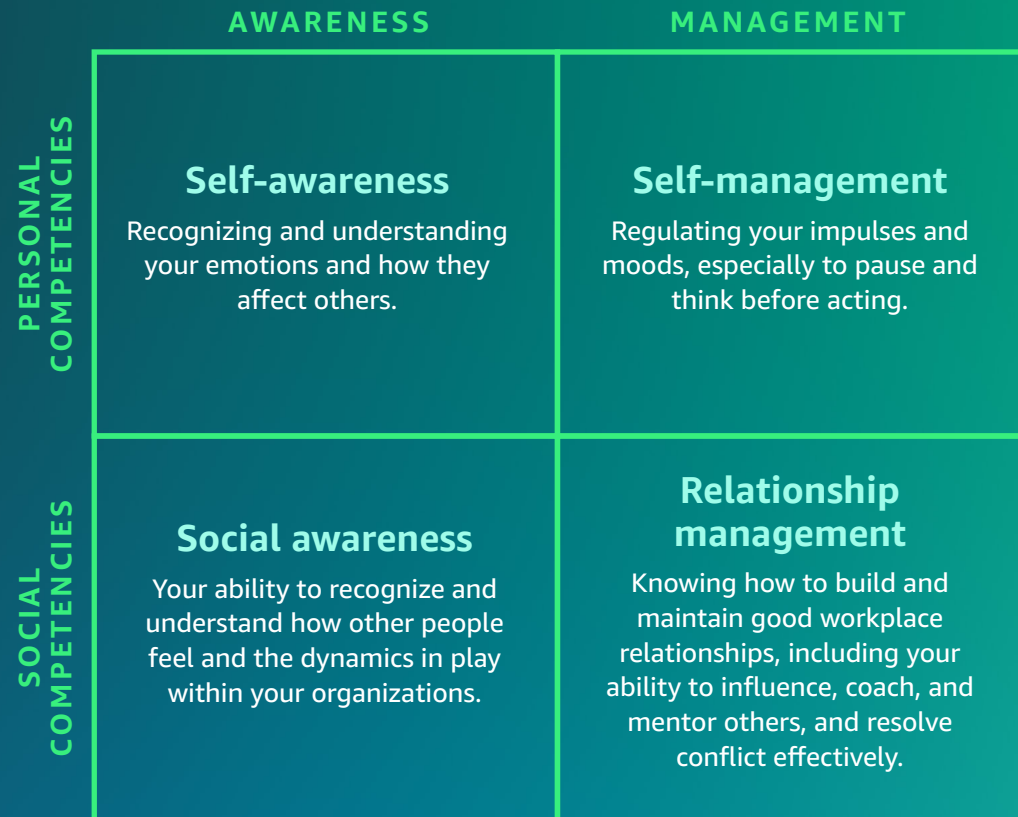
At Amazon, this is exemplified by one of our [Leadership Principles](#): Invent and Simplify. We believe that innovation is not only inventing incredible new solutions and customer experiences. Innovation is also about simplifying—making solutions and processes better, easier, and more efficient. In fact, our Leadership Principles actually have emotions embedded in them. Just listen to these words: to Earn Trust leaders are

vocally self-critical, even when doing so is **awkward** or **embarrassing**; leaders are obligated to respectfully challenge decisions when they disagree, even when doing so is **uncomfortable** or **exhausting**; and of course, we must lead with **empathy**. How could you possibly embody these principles successfully without EQ skills?

So, what are some actionable ways you can foster a culture that allows employees to innovate all the time while also improving your own EQ?

What is Emotional Intelligence?

Emotional intelligence—also known as EQ—is defined as the ability to understand and manage your emotions, as well as recognize and influence the emotions of those around you in a healthy and productive way. In short, it’s the intelligent use of emotions. The term was first coined in 1990 by researchers John Mayer and Peter Salovey, and was later popularized by psychologist Daniel Goleman. It can be broken down into these four domains:

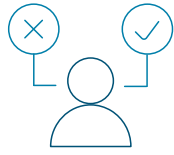


The neuroscience of innovation

People naturally assume a connection between cognitive intelligence, or IQ, and one's ability to innovate. The higher one's IQ, the more likely you are to be a great inventor, right? Perhaps, but emotions are also powerful contributors and impact almost everything you do. According to [Dr. Marc Brackett](#), director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, emotions impact:



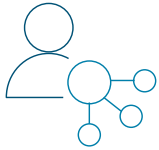
Your ability to pay attention



Your decision-making



Your performance and creativity



Your relationships



Your physical and mental health

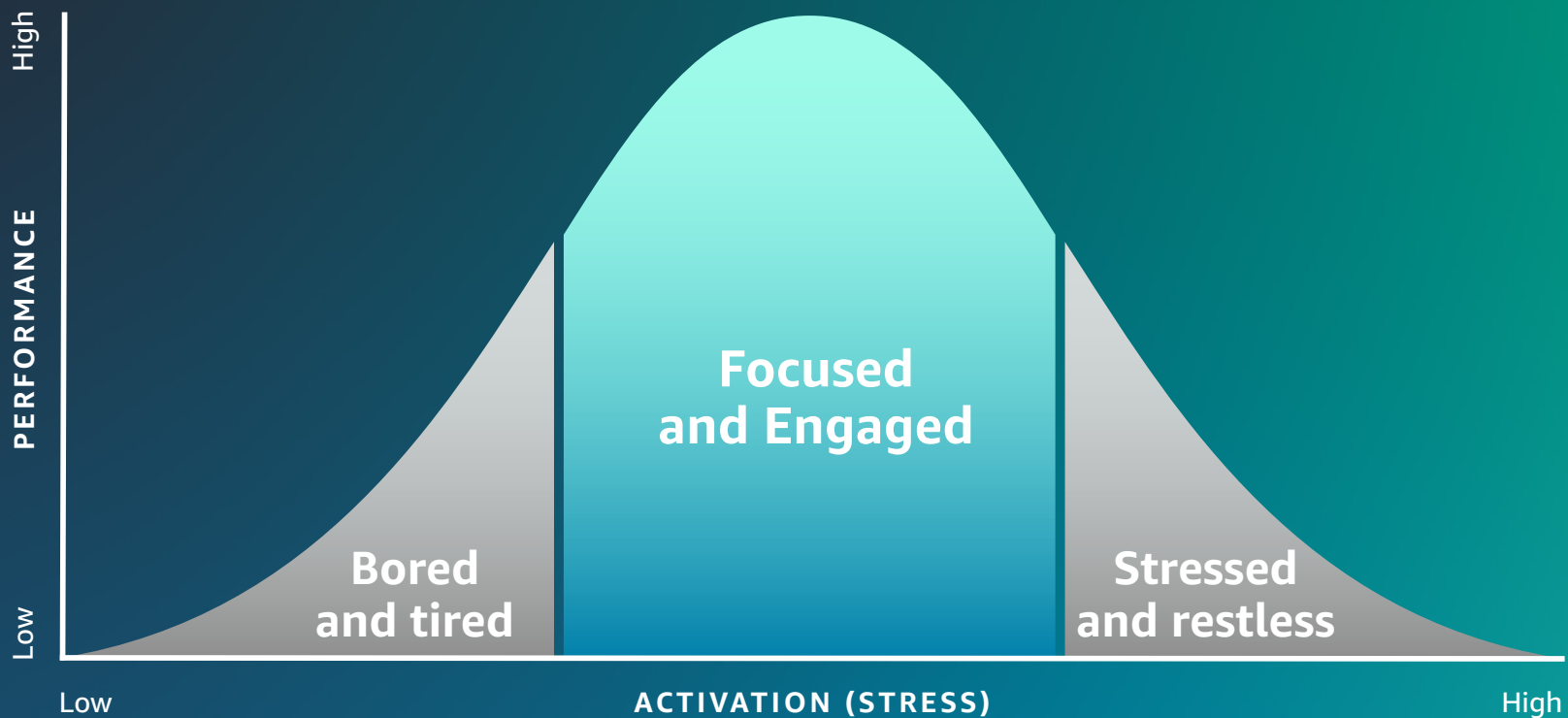
No matter your IQ, if you're limited in one of these areas it's safe to say that it will impact your ability to innovate.

Improving cognitive function by balancing stress levels

Research shows that we experience emotions during 90% or more of our work day. That means that during almost every interaction, task, or decision we experience some kind of emotion, and those emotions can either help or hinder us. Stress often falls into the latter category and can be a significant blocker to creativity, and in turn, innovation.



Stress and performance: The Yerkes-Dodson model



However, you can learn to manage it. One way to do so is by gauging and understanding it, then using it to your advantage.

[The Yerkes-Dodson model](#) contrasts stress levels with the ability to perform cognitively and be creative. If you have too little stress, you may be bored and tired, what is sometimes referred to as “the drone zone.” But too much stress can create restlessness or an inability to think clearly, sometimes referred to as “the freaky zone.” For top performance, you want to be in the

sweet spot—or what some people call, “the flow zone”—where you are focused and engaged.

As an executive, there is a low probability that you’ll have a work day where you experience too little stress. Instead, there are likely many days where you are on the verge of (or in) the freaky zone! Luckily, there is something you can do about it.

Boost personal innovation

With a better understanding of your emotions, you can improve your EQ and harness it for better productivity, creativity, and innovation.

Develop emotional agility

Emotional agility is the ability to understand what you're feeling and then make a decision about whether you want to stay or shift. For example, critical feelings may not be great for a brainstorming session but they might be helpful as you're trying to look at dense data and uncover potential mistakes. Finding the optimal emotion for the situation actually helps you achieve your goals and be more innovative.

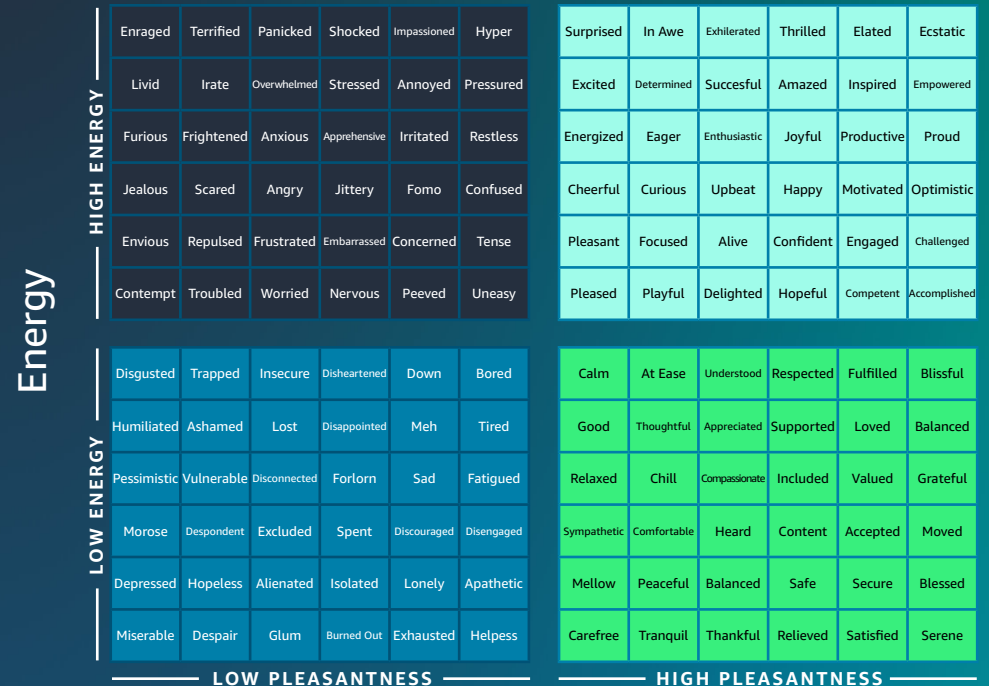
Identify your emotional state

Identifying your emotions is the foundation of EQ. Because humans are highly adaptable, we often acclimate to the massive amounts of stress in life without even realizing we're overwhelmed. Understanding and naming your emotional state is important not just for performance, but also your overall health and wellness.

[According to researcher Brené Brown](#), most people can only identify three emotions. And yet, research shows that if you can name more emotions, you're healthier, you're happier, you go to the doctor less during your lifetime, and you even spend fewer days in the hospital!

To help people better label the emotions they're experiencing, achieve better balance, and harness those feelings for top performance, Dr. Marc Brackett developed [How We Feel](#), an app that serves to increase emotional vocabulary. The app allows you

How We Feel: An app to identify emotions



Pleasantness

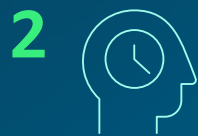
Breathe mindfully with the box breathing technique

Breathing mindfully can help lower the cortisol levels in your body while reducing your heart rate and blood pressure. Mindful breathing is used by executives, Olympic athletes, and elite military personnel to manage stress when it's at its highest, helping them achieve better levels of performance.

One highly effective technique is box breathing. It's simple to do:



1
Breathe in for a four count



2
Hold the breath for a four count



3
Breathe out for a four count



4
Hold it out for a four count



5
Repeat for approximately two minutes

to plot your pleasantness and energy on a scale to find your relative emotion.

Lower levels of pleasantness or comfort can result in a reduced ability to adapt, be open-minded, and take risks. Conversely, higher levels can enable more flexible thinking, confidence and creative output to solve bigger problems. While there's not necessarily a good or bad emotion, identifying your emotional state and corresponding emotions can help optimize for creativity and innovation. Bill Duane, an expert in EQ and innovation, says "Skillfully managing uncomfortable emotions related to ambiguity, fear, failure, and shame are vital for innovation."

Regulate your stress response

Understanding your moods and feelings is an important part of achieving balance. Some ways to reduce stress and other challenging emotions include:

- 1** Moving your body
- 2** Connecting with friends and loved ones
- 3** Breathing mindfully

Reframe to regulate emotions

Another way to effectively manage your emotions is by reframing. Reframing is the foundation of cognitive behavioral science and it empowers you to activate your prefrontal cortex to see things in a different way to manage emotions effectively,

which in turn changes how you feel. Some ways to reframe amid a challenge include:

Reinterpret: Remove the threat from the scenario, and assume positive intent. For example, “I can learn anything I want” vs. “I am not good at this.”

Reorder: Think about the value you are placing on the situation. Ask yourself, “How important is this really?”

Reposition: Consider the situation from another point of view. Pose the questions, “How can I be grateful? How can this make me better?”

Normalize: Acknowledge that other people are experiencing the same thing as you, and have some self-compassion. Tell yourself, “It’s okay to have bad days. I am a human after all.”

Reframing can be very useful for shifting your perspective and driving change. We all generate emotions based on scripts developed from life experiences, and these scripts may or may not be helpful for thinking or behaving in new ways. For example, “The last time I took a risk and tried something new, it turned out badly, so I feel anxious/resistant/angry.” Reframing lets you flip the script: “Just because it happened last time, doesn’t mean it will happen every time.” In this way challenging scenarios can be viewed as opportunities to learn, grow, and be creative.

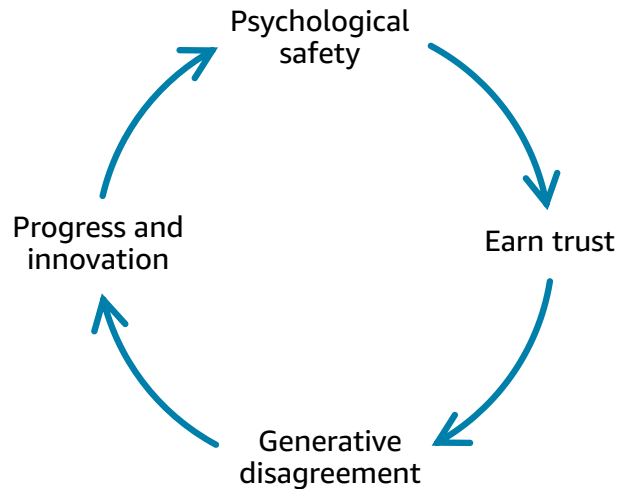
Sleep: An innovation booster

According to UC Berkeley sleep researcher, Dr. Matt Walker, there is 60% more activity in the amygdala, the emotional center of your brain, when you don’t get enough sleep. This can wreak havoc on your ability to think clearly and be creative. On top on that, lack of sleep also causes you to view other people as more threatening, which can certainly hinder collaboration and your receptivity to differing ideas.





Boost your organization's innovation capabilities



Even if leaders have high emotional intelligence to foster their own creativity and innovation, how can they help their teams do the same? Doing so requires the development of psychological safety, which helps earn trust among team members, enabling them to have generative disagreement, which fosters progress and innovation.

Research from Harvard found that the most important factor for high performance and innovation is a team quality called “psychological safety”—even more than high IQ of team members, functional fit, breadth of experience, or charismatic leadership.

Amy Edmondson, Harvard Business School professor and author of *The Fearless Organization*, coined the phrase. She defined psychological safety as a shared belief held by members of a team that it’s okay to take risks, to express their ideas and concerns, to speak up with questions, and to admit mistakes—all without fear of punishment. Edmondson found that teams with psychological safety are more innovative, higher performing (and able to sustain their performance), better at learning, and more fun to work on.

Edmondson first encountered the concept while studying the relationship between errors and teamwork in hospitals, expecting to find that more effective teams made fewer mistakes. What she found surprised her. The most effective teams were actually committing

more errors. When she dove deeper, she found something profound. It wasn't that the highly effective teams were making more mistakes but that they were more willing to admit their mistakes because they felt safe to do so, allowing their teammates to learn from them and not repeat them. In this way, psychological safety is the top characteristic of high-performing teams.

Moreover, when teams don't have psychological safety it can lead to negative impacts on employee well-being, including stress, burnout, and turnover, and overall poorer performance of the organization.

Viewed through the lens of innovation, which requires constant experimentation and iteration, and often necessitates many failures before a success is realized, one can see how psychological safety can be a boon to the team. When there's psychological safety, the pressure to always be right is eliminated, and teams are encouraged to be creative and experiment without fear of negative consequences should their efforts not work out.

Create a safe environment for conflict and disagreement

Conflict is another area that is fraught with emotions and can either be an opportunity or a challenge to innovation. It is helpful to understand that there are two main types of conflict: task conflict and relationship conflict. Task conflict tends to be productive because it refines and improves ideas. It allows for generative disagreement. Relationship conflict tends to damage trust and interpersonal connections. It gives rise to destructive disagreement. Not surprisingly, research has found that the highest performing teams have a high amount of task conflict and a low amount of relationship conflict.

As a leader, it can be tempting to avoid all conflict. However, what's needed is thoughtful management of conflict, working to encourage task conflict. At Amazon, we have a Leadership Principle called Have Backbone, Disagree and Commit, which means that we want people to say what they really believe, respectfully disagree (even if it's

TASK CONFLICT

Tension is intellectual
Challenge the idea
Tone is vigorous and feisty
Supporting a common goal
"How would that work?"

Generative disagreement

RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT

Tension is emotional
Attack the person
Tone is combative or aggressive
Protecting turf or ego
"That's a dumb idea."

Destructive disagreement

uncomfortable), and then commit fully to the decided-upon course of action even if it isn't theirs. In this way we strive to create an environment that encourages diversity of ideas and opinions where conflict is a path forward rather than an obstacle.

Evaluate your organization's psychological safety

How can you tell if your organization is high or low in psychological safety? The sidebar list from Wharton professor and author, Adam Grant, can help you determine where you have opportunities to learn and improve. If more features listed on the top of the list describe your organization, it's not just a sign that you're psychologically safe, it likely means that you're more innovative as well.

It's important to note what psychological safety is not. It's not where everyone feels comfortable all the time. Leaders often need to push their teams beyond their comfort zone. It is not being nice, as we sometimes need to have candid conversations that may not feel "nice." As Brene Brown puts it, "clear is kind." It is not lowering performance standards. We need to insist on the highest standards. And, as I mentioned, it's not where there are no disagreements. In fact, there should be a lot of generative disagreements.

Psychological safety: When you have it vs. when you don't



WHEN YOU HAVE IT

- See mistakes as opportunities to learn
- Willing to take risks and fail
- Speak your mind in meetings
- Openly share your struggles
- Trust in your teammates and managers
- Stick your neck out

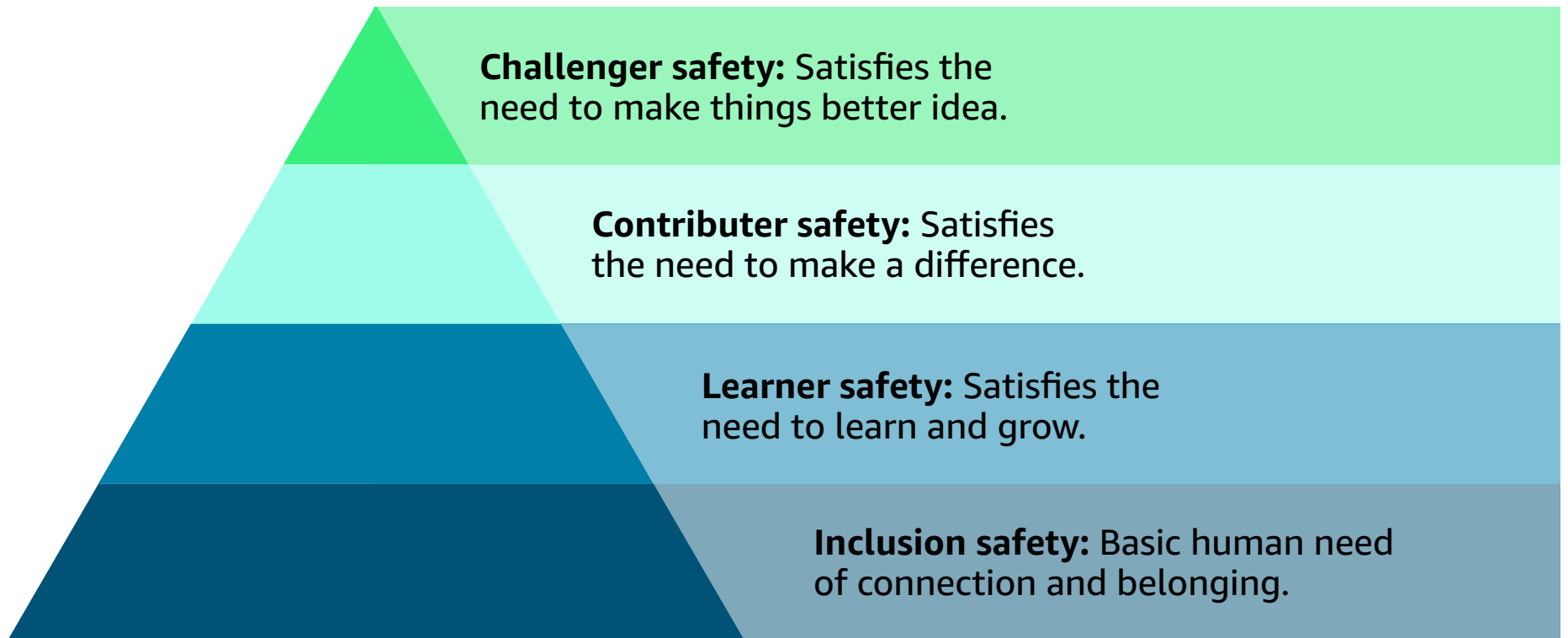


WHEN YOU DON'T

- See mistakes as threats to your career
- Unwilling to rock the boat
- Keep your ideas to yourself
- Only tout your strengths
- Fear your teammates and managers
- Have your neck chopped off

Source: [*Think Again* by Adam Grant](#)

What can you do as a leader to foster an environment of psychological safety? Take a look at the four stages of psychological safety from author and social scientist Tim Clarke. Where does your organization fall among these stages and how does it impact your ability to innovate and invent?



Not surprisingly, a team maximizes their innovation potential when they possess Challenger and Contributor safety. Ask yourself: Do we have contributor safety? Do we have challenger safety? Are people willing to speak up with an unpopular idea and respectfully debate it?

How to foster psychological safety in your organization

Teams perform at their highest levels when people feel it's safe to voice their ideas, questions, concerns, and even their mistakes. As a leader, you have an outsized impact on whether or not people experience this in your organization. Here's how you can move the needle of psychological safety:

- 1 Acknowledge your own fallibility as a leader.** For example: "I don't have all the answers." "This is uncharted territory for me." "I made a mistake." At Amazon, we call this being vocally self-critical.
- 2 Model curiosity and ask a lot of questions.** For example: "What am I missing here?" "Poke some holes in my ideas." We say Learn and Be Curious.
- 3 Frame the work as a learning problem—not an execution problem.** For example: "We've never been here before." "There is no playbook for this." "We will need to learn as we go." This is part of our Day 1 mentality.
- 4 Promote conversational turn-taking.** For example: "We need everyone's brains and voices." "Who hasn't had a chance to speak yet?" We say we should seek diverse perspectives.



Failure and invention are inseparable twins. To invent, you have to experiment, and if you know in advance that it's going to work, it's not an experiment."

Jeff Bezos
Amazon Founder and Chairman

Next steps to boost your organization's emotional intelligence

In our relentless pursuit of innovation, leaders tend to focus on strategies, processes, and technology, and while those are necessary, they are not sufficient. Innovation, by definition, requires change, and that often stirs up a host of emotions in our people. For leaders to rally teams and have people buy into their innovation efforts, they need to win **hearts and minds** (not minds and minds!). The importance of emotional intelligence for leaders will only become more pronounced as advances in artificial intelligence and machine learning

lead to dramatic changes in the way people do their work. Navigating that change and the discomfort it brings will require many of the emotional tools I've covered here.

AWS has long recognized the outsized impact that emotional intelligence has on innovation, and we have a number of proven resources to help you develop your emotional intelligence and that of your teams so you can adopt an innovator's mindset.

Continue the conversation, connect with AWS

- 1** Contact your AWS account manager for more information on this topic.
- 2** Mention your interest in engaging the Innovation and Transformation Programs teams, including EPIC, to learn more about Amazon frameworks, mechanisms, and workshops to accelerate your innovation efforts, and schedule an "EQ for innovation" session for your organization.
- 3** Most importantly, begin with a small step: Pick one EQ technique discussed here to boost your personal innovation or your team's innovation and put it into practice today.

About the author

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Rich Hua serves as Worldwide Head of EPIC Leadership at Amazon Web Services. He has spent decades training and mentoring leaders in emotional and social intelligence—from CEOs to new managers to young professionals. Before coming to AWS, he launched emotional intelligence programs at Amazon, Oracle, and multiple organizations around the world. Rich founded the EQ@Amazon community to enable Amazonians to practice, improve, and spread EQ skills. It now numbers over 50,000 people and is the largest employee-based community at Amazon. Over the past 3 years, Rich and his EQ team have trained over 300,000 Amazonians and 40,000 customers and partners in these skills. His emotional intelligence content is now an integral part of leadership, sales, and onboarding training for Amazon employees globally. Rich is a certified Innovation Evangelist for Amazon. He founded the San Francisco chapter of Amazon's Culture of Innovation program and his team has delivered talks on innovation to thousands of executives from around the world.

About AWS

For over 15 years, Amazon Web Services has been the world's most comprehensive and broadly adopted cloud offering. Today, we serve millions of customers, from the fastest-growing startups to the largest enterprises, across a myriad of industries in practically every corner of the globe. We've had the opportunity to help these customers grow their businesses through digital transformation efforts enabled by the cloud. In doing so, we have worked closely with the C-suite, providing a unique vantage point to see the diverse ways executives approach digital transformation—the distinct thought processes across C-suite roles, their attitudes and priorities, obstacles to progress, and best practices that have resulted in the most success.