Building *Psychological Safety* among Teams during Defense Support of Civil Activities

by Adam T. Biggs

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Crisis response must prioritize saving lives, restoring essential services, and maintaining law and order during defense support of civil authorities (DSCA). These urgent scenarios create many challenges for interagency coordination that thwart several otherwise effective principles of team building. For example, psychological safety is often essential for teamwork and teams normally build psychological safety through effective communication while approaching failure as a learning opportunity. This context would seem to place psychological safety at odds with a crisis event that perceives mistakes in a very different manner. Nevertheless, developments in dynamic teaming provide the opportunity to build psychological safety among teams with fluid membership or fluid task assignment by focusing on procedures rather than cultivating psychological safety over time.

The specific procedures can be broadly categorized by linking four principles of psychological safety among dynamic teams to four essential procedural tenets: (1) willingness to help—visibility; (2) inclusion and diversity—ownership; (3) attitude toward risk and failure—accountability; and (4) open conversation—transparency. The discussion here first covers the core concepts of dynamic teaming and then identifies how to establish psychological safety among interagency disaster response teams. As such, the goal is to develop a psychologically safety environment among

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dynamic teams during crisis events through procedures rather than the typical methods used to build psychological safety.

Few scenarios require effective teamwork as much as crisis events. Disaster relief and humanitarian crises bring together diverse teams with urgent imperatives that require clear communication and coordination. This problem set is a persistent reality in DSCA mission activities, where multiple challenges arise when attempting to build an effective team. Although existing agreements and programs can help establish lines of communication and a chain of command, on-the-ground realities dictate that people who may have never met must work together efficiently to resolve a crisis. Specific to the context of team building, DSCA operations cannot utilize some of the classic techniques to create trust and communication among the team. For example, time is a critical challenge to team building as simply coordinating among dispersed teams imposes enormous communication challenges.[1] Moreover, DSCA operations have dual time-based complications in building teamwork. The combined team will have scant time to build trust, and once the mission is complete, the team will disperse. Temporary team membership further discourages people from building lasting relationships. Both aspects do not engage the normal processes by which organizational teams build teamwork and thus require some alternative methods to construct an effective team-based working environment.

Within the organizational psychology literature, there is one particularly effective construct in building effective teams—psychological safety. This concept describes the belief that an individual will not be punished, insulted, or denigrated for speaking up with concerns, questions, or ideas.[2] Psychological safety helps establish a working environment that fosters clear communication and innovation as individuals within the team willingly convey any problems or possible solutions. Trust becomes inherent among teams with high psychological safety and its impact has been demonstrated both in hybrid workplaces[3] and across various domains, including business,[4] healthcare,[5] and education.[6] Some aspects of building psychological safety focus on communication, such as approaching conflicting ideas as a collaborator rather than an adversary or replacing blame with curiosity.[7] Other ideas suggest avoiding the desire to create a "perfect" team—allow the team to make mistakes and celebrate their accomplishments.[8] Whatever the specific lesson, decades of research have provided enormous insights into the importance of psychological safety and how to create it among teams.

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Despite the well-established values of psychological safety in effective organizations, the problem remains that many of its tenets do not easily adapt to crisis scenarios in DSCA operations. However, the general purpose of psychological safety can be achieved and applied through different means. One development has been the dynamic teaming model that specifically addresses the process of working among groups with fluid membership.[9] The intent largely revolved around building teamwork across industries, functions, or even time zones, although the premise applies well to DSCA operations. According to dynamic teaming, psychological safety includes four key dimensions: (1) willingness to help, (2) inclusion and diversity, (3) attitude to risk and failure, and (4) open conversation.[10] Each aspect can be translated to DSCA operations through dynamic team-building procedures. That is, if the team has neither the time nor the incentive to build long-lasting relationships, then dynamic team

processes become the vehicle through which to create psychological safety. This approach can establish the conditions for effective teamwork even in an environment of uncertainty and shifting team membership.

The current discussion outlines the basics of dynamic teaming as an effective process for team membership in fluid scenarios. Next, the discussion shifts to four key principles that can build upon the four dimensions of psychological safety in dynamic teaming, including: visibility, ownership, accountability, and transparency. Each principle aligns with a dimension of psychological safety while providing tangible team processes to fully engage the dynamic teaming dimension. Furthermore, these dynamic team processes are adapted from informal recommendations and observations from U.S. Navy shipboard operations via the planning board for training. This touchpoint allows ship personnel to communicate effectively even as members rotate in and out of various assignments, and because the principles are aligned to procedures rather than personnel, they should adapt well to a fluid environment. Taken together, the goal is to provide guidance based on a combination of the psychological safety literature and naval operations that will enable effective teambuilding for DSCA operations despite the challenges of navigating team processes in emerging crisis situations.

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Dynamic Teaming

Dynamic teaming arises from "top management teams,"[11] which itself comes from the organizational psychological literature with a focus on senior executives. Top management team research originally focused upon how senior leaders managed teams in rapidly changing or challenging situations.[12] The central premise involves improving the organization by installing the right leadership in a top-down fashion, though the core premise itself became widely disputed.[13] Still, the dynamic nature of organizational management emerged as a critical factor that leadership could only control to a certain extent. This approach led researchers to explore how particular tasks and information management contributed an important part of the variance in the success of senior leadership.[14] Essentially, senior leader effectiveness depended not upon the innovation of a few senior leaders, but rather the role of leadership, management, small group processes, and negotiation in producing more favorable outcomes. As technology continues to evolve and team dynamics become more complex, these changes only emphasized the need for capable leaders who can adapt in the face of adversity and uncertainty. Thus, dynamic teaming does not seek to prevent fluid or ambiguous scenarios, but rather to develop teams capable of performing under shifting circumstances.

At its core, dynamic teaming embraces the reality that groups can be fluid in either membership, where the core members come from diverse backgrounds and settings, or fluid task requirements, where the team itself might approach their task with an imperfect understanding of its procedures and challenges.[15] This latter component highlights the difference between a traditional team and a dynamic team. Whereas a traditional team has regular workflow and rotations, a dynamic team will face different requirements and likely different staff every shift or performance cycle. An excellent example for each comes from routine dental work versus being rushed to the emergency room.[16] Routine dental work likely involves the same dentist, same hygiene team, and possible the same

patients—all planned by appointment with time to prepare. The team knows the skills and experience of its different members and allows them to develop trust and communication over time. Meanwhile, a dynamic team would be better represented by emergency room staff. These personnel will not know in advance how many patients they will have, what the injuries would be, and the specific team will be different every shift. Dynamic teams must therefore adapt to volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) challenges.[17]

When considering the DSCA mission set, dynamic teams are the expectation rather than the exception. The only consistency might be some familiarity among senior leadership and managerial personnel who have completed similar missions or know their counterparts in other organizations. For example, National Guard personnel may have worked with Federal Emergency Management Agency personnel on previous hurricanes that hit the Florida coastline. Nevertheless, every natural disaster will be different, unpredictable, and every situation requires so many personnel that some members will be new. DSCA activities list restoring law and order as doctrinal purposes in their execution, and so the expectation should be a fluid scenario where urgency places an emphasis on lives and essential services.[18] As such, leaders have limited time and opportunity to prepare teams in advance for DSCA activities. Furthermore, joint and interagency partners will be integral to mission success. Because teams will have interagency partners working together for short periods, possibly with little-to-no-advance contact among members who will be on-stie, there are significant challenges to building an effective dynamic team.

One possible solution is then to focus on dynamic team processes to install psychological safety rather than utilizing the slower dynamics of organizational culture and climate to cultivate psychological safety. The following principles can help align psychological safety in dynamic teams with team processes that can accomplish a similar purpose in the absence of the time to build solid fundamental teamwork. Each following dyad links a tenet of psychological safety among dynamic teams with a team process informally applied during naval planning and training: (1) willingness to help—visibility; (2) inclusion and diversity—ownership; (3) attitude to risk and failure—accountability; and (4) open conversation—transparency.

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Willingness to Help—Visibility

Psychological safety enhances team performance, in part, by mitigating obstacles to teamwork.[19] Dynamic teaming supports psychological safety foremost through the dimension of willingness to help. Essentially, personnel believe that asking for help is an appropriate action and colleagues will freely provide their help. In a DSCA mission, willingness to help could have a secondary meaning related to the purpose of each organization and its involvement in solving the crisis. For example, federal and state authorities are likely to interact in these situations, and local governments may feel as though their authority is being trampled upon by outsiders without understanding or long-term concern for their community. Local partners may then question why federal or state personnel are involved and what their full intentions might be. Interagency trust is a prominent concern in building an effective team from multiple organizations.

Without the time to establish interagency trust through teambuilding exercises, visibility is the first procedure tenet that can help foster

trust and psychological safety. Visibility simply means that individuals are seen and heard during interactions. For example, many reports will need to be given throughout the crisis to update current conditions. Where possible, reports should be given by the lowest level person who assembled the information and with the highest team visibility. Naval planning and training boards achieve this visibility by having the relevant person stand before the wardroom and brief the status of their program. Rather than pass the information to a training officer who assembles everything and gives a combined overview brief, the training officer acts as a process manager and coordinates the meaning. Each individual team member thus receives visibility for their assigned area of responsibility. This process is underscored by standing and speaking aloud rather than sitting because standing literally enhances visibility in a room full of seated personnel. Trust is created through visible interactions in content, atmosphere, and the briefing process.[20] That is, the potential for trust is enabled by visibility. Subsequent principles are needed to refine and optimize this impact, yet visibility first creates the potential.

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Specific to the DSCA mission, visibility can be achieved through reporting and updating. Teams will be too decentralized to have constant, regularly scheduled meetings with many personnel. Nevertheless, the reporting process allows an individual not only to gain visibility for their contributions, but visibility is achieved implicitly as they see the contributions of others. This latter point is how visibility becomes a compounding principle as visibility is achieved through both receiving visibility and giving visibility to others. Where possible then, reports can be given in small groups at the appropriate level in the chain of command with the upward flow of information used as a mechanism to achieve visibility. Downward flow of information, such as passing assignments from a coordinator to local personnel, does not achieve the same level of visibility as only the team leader is seen taking action. If improperly applied though, visibility could further exacerbate inequality in the types of orders and responsibilities assigned to different personnel. That said, leaders can help individual visibility when they assign specific actions to specific members in group meetings. This approach also helps reduce the diffusion of responsibility that can lead to confusion and inaction within group dynamics.[21]

Nevertheless, visibility is only an enabling function and not sufficient to develop psychological safety on its own. Its contribution is derived primarily from creating visibility of individual contributions and team interactions. Visibility implicitly establishes a teamwork dynamic because personnel can see for themselves the behavioral and communication expectations among the team. Leaders do not need to lay out a vision for dynamic team processes. Instead, team members see firsthand the expectations through procedures—individual visibility rather than leadership vision.

Inclusion and Diversity—Ownership

The next dimension, inclusion and diversity, helps build psychological safety by cementing how individuals feel about their contribution and role on the team. Note that the inclusion and diversity terminology is how dynamic teaming theory describes these concepts within the organizational psychology literature. Their application in a combined civilian-military environment requires some clarification. The

inclusion component describes the psychological perception that someone is a respected member of the team.[22] More importantly, this component can be developed through observable behaviors undertaken by leaders, such as accessibility and openness when interacting with subordinates.[23] A leader can further amplify this effect when demonstrating these behaviors in group settings. For example, in a DSCA mission, a military leader should visibly interact with state and local authorities while demonstrating the same respect when interacting with military personnel. This approach to leadership incorporates and values the relative contribution different backgrounds can offer. In this setting, the experiences and expertise of each team member also contribute to team success. A real-world application might be the federal official who listens to local authorities during a crisis about hazards in the surrounding area because the local authority knows the local area better. In practice, these ideas are akin to the high reliability organization principle of deference to expertise, where leadership incorporates relative expertise and skills when making decisions.[24]

Leadership further develops psychological safety in dynamic teaming by building upon the dimensions of willingness to help and visibility. Whereas visibility creates the opportunity for building trust, ownership is essential to cement psychological safety within the individual. Psychological ownership implies that an individual has feelings of possession regarding ongoing activities or organization.[25] This mechanism helps establish psychological safety because people feel responsible for a particular subset of the mission. After all, if the individual felt no responsibility for actions or problems, then there is no need to build trust since neither fault nor favorable result could be attributed to them. The DSCA implication would also be that the individual does not share any particular concern for a given area relative to the local population. Lack of ownership prevents a positive working environment because it discourages the action and initiative necessary in a crisis scenario.

Ownership can be established in dynamic teaming through how the team addresses problems. Foremost, individuals should brief current conditions at the lowest level possible to achieve visibility. This procedure enables ownership, but it does not establish ownership as individuals may fear a "shoot the messenger" mentality or otherwise brief without concern because the problem set is not theirs to fix. The ownership caveat is thus that an individual should only brief things for which they have direct responsibility for the outcomes. This element reinforces the idea that someone should be the first to act on the problem at hand. The potential benefit is more detailed attention to the problem set and clear responsibility, which enables both innovation and initiative.

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When conducting a briefing that includes a deficiency, ownership is further reinforced by how the team approaches the problem. If any individual has shared or limited responsibility for an issue, then the remainder of the team will assume responsibility and develop their own solutions. Alternatively, if the briefer has ownership, the team dynamic becomes focused upon getting the individual the right resources they need to solve a problem. Briefing a deficiency then reinforces ownership because negative reports do not immediately mean changed authority or responsibility. This process establishes that it is acceptable among the team to speak up about problems, which further underscores visibility and implicitly builds stronger psychological safety among the team.

In essence, team attitudes toward ownership should be asking the individual what help they need rather than seeking blame for problems or deficiencies.

Granted, there is negative potential in ownership as people can become territorial about their responsibilities and performance.[26] This possibility is especially common among interagency operations as existing authority becomes intermingled due to operational needs. Within the DSCA mission set, one solution is to create a sense of collective psychological ownership.[27] This approach creates a shared mindset for the wider mission and emphasizes that each individual is responsible for the ultimate outcome. Collective psychological ownership can facilitate team communication and allow individuals to feel responsible for the outcomes.

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Of course, ownership is primarily about leadership and team behaviors that reinforce the opportunity created through visibility. Psychological trust develops because the team enacts a healthy attitude toward individual responsibilities and team processes become supportive rather than attributional. This latter point does not mean a lack of accountability. In the moment, the attitude should be about finding solutions to problems rather than assigning blame. Especially in the context of a DSCA mission that involves an emerging crisis, this team attitude establishes ownership and leads to enhanced psychological safety.

Attitude to Risk and Failure—Accountability

Psychological safety regularly invokes how a team addresses—or worse, punishes—an individual for mistakes as a critical component of a psychologically safe environment.[28] The dynamic teaming principle is that psychological safety develops when mistakes and failures are considered acceptable for individual learning and experience.[29] Specifically, psychologically safe environments preserve the potential for learning as part of gaining experience.[30] Mistakes are seen as a natural and acceptable part of the learning process. When in a normal training environment, the dilemma is often that an individual risks exposing personal limitations or offending the instructor if they ask questions or dispute ideas.

Meanwhile, DSCA operations occur within a context that prioritizes saving lives, restoring essential services, and maintaining or restoring law and order.[31] Crisis scenarios are not learning events and there is limited continuity across interagency actions to establish a learning environment. As such, these operations are not prime opportunities to explore mistakes or use the scenario as a learning opportunity. This disparity would seem to place psychological safety at odds with a DSCA environment since these scenarios typically eschew learning through mistakes as an acceptable on-the-ground course of action. Nonetheless, accountability can be achieved and psychological safety preserved based on the attitude the team adopts during the crisis.

The adaptation occurs around how DSCA operations approach risk and failure either during a crisis event or before/after a crisis event. DSCA operations must shift the learning component to planned training evolutions or after-action reviews. Risks can be explored during planned training evolutions and failure can be addressed from case studies or during debriefings. In these scenarios, the application is no different

than other adaptations for dynamic teaming. During a crisis event, risks and failure cannot be acceptable consequences of learning. Risk mitigation techniques must remain prioritized, but the attitude toward failure is important. Leaders cannot seek to place blame in the moment. The emphasis should be upon problem solving rather than assigning blame.

For the individual, accountability becomes important through individual action in developing team psychological safety. In this sense, accountability is not leadership holding personnel accountable, but rather individuals holding themselves accountable for risk and failure. Accountability should be a natural extension of ownership while leadership intervention happens only as a last resort. If an individual truly accepts ownership for some component of a mission, then they should hold themselves accountable for failure and errors. Indeed, there are some definitions that align psychological ownership and accountability as highly related factors.[32] The reason for dissociating them here is to clarify how ownership and accountability differ when limited to procedural applications in DSCA operations. Ownership is a public demonstration where leadership allows an individual to take responsibility. Accountability is where the individual holds themselves responsible for their actions. This procedure involves clearly identifying roles and desired outcomes while allowing the individual to assume responsibility for the subsequent action.

Accountability is demonstrated in actions undertaken by the individual. If they fail at some assignment, then the individual must ask for help or admit that they do not have the resources to perform a particular task. Leadership can further enable accountability by asking the individual in a group setting what their plans are to hold accountability for any errors. This moment creates an opportunity for the individual to retain ownership in a visible way before the assembled team. Possible actions might include how they will address the shortcoming either immediately or after the crisis passes. If the individual refuses to admit what has become apparent to the team, then it is the responsibility of leadership to intervene and demonstrate for the wider team that standards and expectations must be met.

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The subtle difference between ownership and accountability warrants further restating. Ownership is a byproduct of leadership assigning clear roles and responsibilities that allow subordinates to assume control of some action, whereas accountability is the individual holding themselves responsible for actions that go wrong within their declared sphere of influence. Upon assigning ownership, leadership should also specify the expectations that an individual must meet or else risk being relieved or reassigned. This delicate balance is why psychological safety and accountability can sometimes appear at odds. Leadership must establish expectations for accountability as far in advance as possible, although there is one final caveat that can help preserve psychological safety. Growth-oriented accountability can emphasize that failure is not necessarily the end of all future possibilities, as might be expected in a zero-defect mindset. Instead, growth-oriented accountability would emphasize that the individual is not ready for a certain responsibility now—not that the individual will never be ready at some point in the future. If the organization can enforce a growth-oriented accountability mindset, then there is the possibility of achieving psychological safety and creating scenarios where an individual will accept responsibility for failure rather than

dodging responsibility.

Open Conversation—Transparency

Like the preceding dyads, open conversation and transparency augment the relationship between attitude toward risk and accountability. According to dynamic teaming, open conversation occurs when employees observe and receive candid feedback among teams where they may also freely contribute.[33] Subordinates could interject to respectfully raise critical points or offer helpful suggestions. The complication arises when leadership must pass important information or hand out assignments in a time-critical manner that does not permit open discussion. In these situations, leadership must make clear before opening the communication whether there will be an opportunity to contribute to the discussion or whether urgency does not readily permit a lengthy discussion. Psychological safety can still be preserved if the leadership identifies another time when open discussion about the topic will be addressed. Of course, leadership must then follow through with this promise, but the point is that open conversation remains intact whenever possible and limited only in situations of extreme urgency.

Ironically, transparency can still occur with restricted information if leadership explains in advance that some information might be restricted for security purposes and that higher headquarters will be responsible for those decisions.

The procedural implication is that open conversation depends upon transparency. Leader transparency impacts subordinate psychological safety, which augments subordinate ability to focus attention.[34] Partners and subordinates must believe that leadership is proactively sharing relevant information while remaining open to giving or receiving feedback. Thus, authenticity is a critical component underlying this relationship.[35] If the team believes that leadership or other team members are withholding information for some reason, then suspicion breeds distrust that thwarts psychological safety and impairs team performance.

In practice, transparency can be difficult to achieve. Individuals meeting for the first time will have difficulty ascertaining whether an individual is truly behaving in an authentic manner since they will have no baseline for comparison. As such, authenticity is not an ideal principle on which to build transparency in DSCA missions. Instead, the same purpose can be achieved in how leaders share information. Open conversation depends upon transparency in communication, and there will be rapidly updated information throughout interagency operations. If one partner organization refuses to share information, it could foster distrust among the interagency partners. However, the best procedure is to identify immediately what information has been authorized to be passed. Identify whether some information must be restricted for security purposes and let team members know up front if that possibility could arise. Ironically, transparency can still occur with restricted information if leadership explains in advance that some information might be restricted for security purposes and that higher headquarters will be responsible for those decisions. The immediate concern is psychological safety among the team with direct interactions. Likewise, leaders must be able and willing to say, "I don't know." Pretending to know more will come across as inauthentic and could also lead to confusion or misunderstanding. Crises will breed uncertainty, and leaders must feel comfortable sharing a lack of information with the team as much as they are open with the information that is shared.

Ultimately, transparency is the principle

that ties together all the preceding principles, but the link between accountability and transparency is especially important. Leadership should make it clear what the expectations and requirements are in fluid situations. If something is withheld—that is, leadership is not transparent about responsibilities or expectations—then accountability becomes difficult to achieve. The DSCA procedure most likely to accomplish transparency is in how leadership shares information. Promises, feedback, and placing blame all typically require more time than a DSCA mission has available to truly build psychological safety among the team. As such, leadership must ensure transparency in their communication through open conversation based upon how they share information during a crisis.

Summary

DSCA operations regularly involve supporting civil authorities to save lives, restore essential services, maintain or restore law and order, and more during a crisis event.[36] These activities will inevitably incorporate interagency partners across federal, state, and local authorities. Although each organization has the potential to contribute to DSCA operations in a meaningful way, the scenario itself likely creates multiple problems for building an effective team. Two time-critical aspects, in the urgency of the situation and the temporary nature of the team, actively work against most organizational psychological principles that would normally help establish an effective teamwork environment. However, if using dynamic teaming models, it is possible to build a psychologically safe environment through procedures rather than personal relationships and create effective, albeit short-lived team environments.

The discussion here combined the four elements of psychological safety in dynamic teaming (willingness to help, inclusion and diversity, attitude toward risk and failure, open conversation) and aligned them with four principles informally developed among the dynamic teamwork of naval planning and training (visibility, ownership, accountability, transparency). Notably, these ideas describe mutually reinforcing concepts. They build upon one another to take advantage of the opportunity created by the preceding concept. Visibility establishes a foundation for psychological safety because people will be seen and heard. Next, ownership allows the individual to take responsibility for certain actions while accountability reinforces the importance of a team holding an individual responsible. The ownership-accountability link in particular represents a distinction between the organization allowing the individual to assume responsibility and then creating an opportunity for the individual to hold themselves accountable before organizational leadership must intervene. Finally, transparency through leadership communication reinforces psychological safety because the team can be confident in the intentions, expectations, and decisions of their leaders. If applied in conjunction with the dimensions of dynamic teaming, it is possible to develop a psychologically safe environment among DSCA teams through procedures rather than through personal relationships. (see Figure 1, next page) – ***IAJ***

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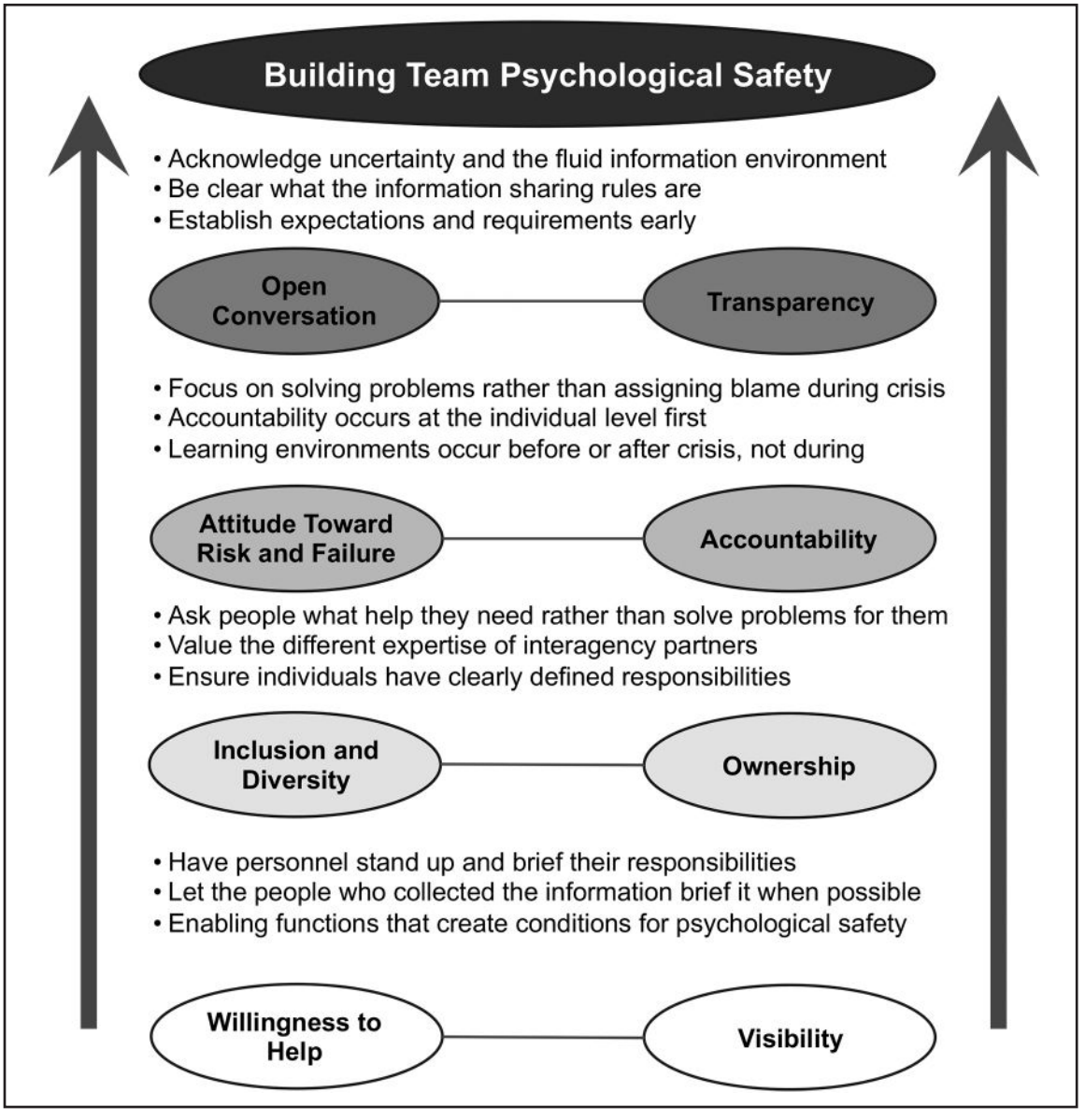

Figure 1. Graphic overview and simple guidance for building psychological safety among teams in defense support of civil authorities (DSCA) activities.

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