Psychological Safety and Operations

John Looney

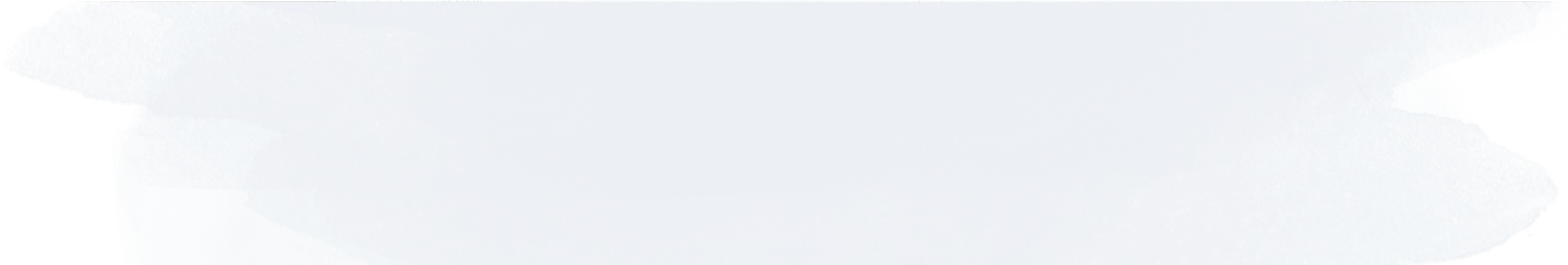# What are the determinants of a Successful Team ?

1. **Psychological safety:** Can we take risks without feeling insecure ?

2. **Dependability:** Can we count on each other's commitments ?

3. **Structure & clarity:** Are goals, roles, and plans on our team clear?

4. **Meaning of work:** Is our work personally important for each of us?

5. **Impact of work:** Do we believe that the work we're doing matter ?

How do you measure Psychological Safety ?

- *If I take a chance, and screw up, it will be held against me*

- *Our team has a strong sense of culture that can be hard for new people to join*

- *My team are slow to offer help to people who are struggling*

- *Using my unique skills and talents come second to the objectives of the team*

- *It's uncomfortable to have open conversations about sensitive issues*

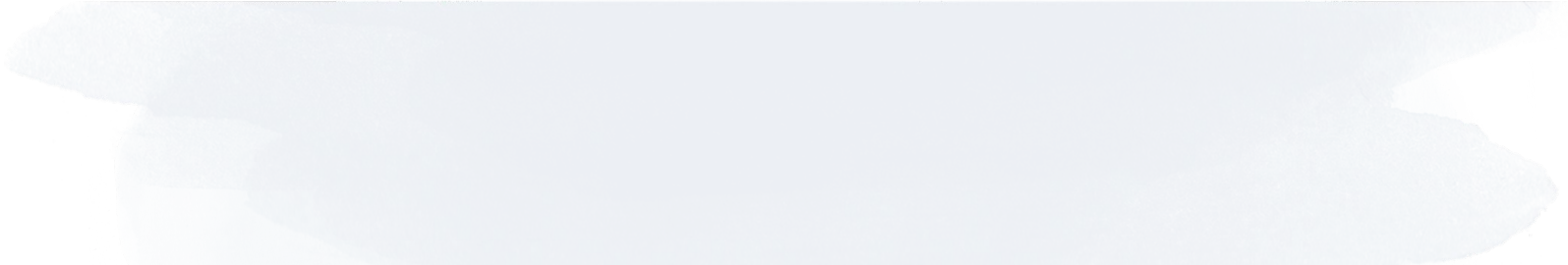# Try recall a bright young engineer...

One day, Karen made a mistake
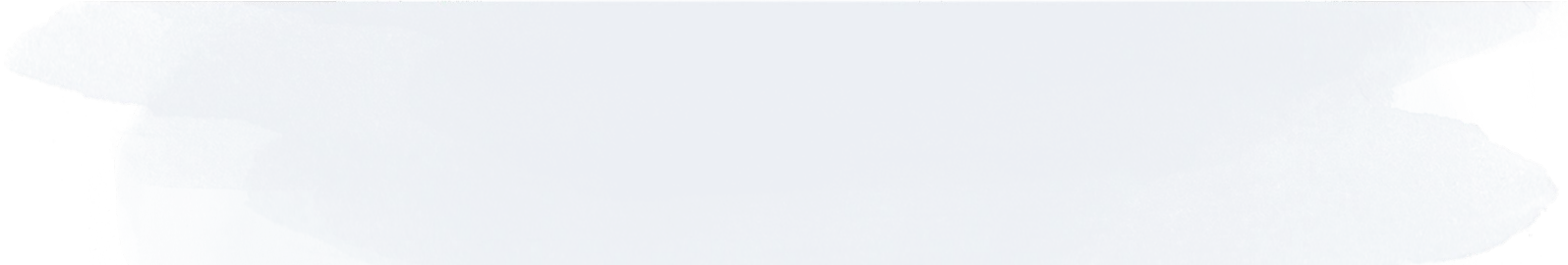
"If I take a chance, and screw up, it will be held against me"

"Our team has a strong sense of culture, and it's hard for new people to join"

"My team are slow to offer help to people who are struggling"

"Using my unique skills and talents come second to the goals of the team"

"It's uncomfortable to have open, honest conversations about our team's sensitive issues"

What helps across all roles ?

Respect

Innovate

Celebrate

Communicate

What's especially unsafe about being Operations ?

- **Interrupts**

- **Risk & Uncertainty**

- **On-Call**

- **Cognitive Overload**

- **Imaginary Expectations**

Interrupts

- **Humans suck at multitasking[0]**

- **Interrupts are low-importance, high-urgency tasks**

- **Check out 'Bad Machinery' by Dave O'Connor**

[0] "You Can't Multitask, So Stop Trying" - https://hbr.org/2010/12/you-cant-multi-task-so-stop-tr

Risk & The Information Gap

- **We manage Risk for our organisations**

- **When exposed to uncertainty, humans seek information[0]**

- **Information Overload reduces decision quality**

- **Uncertainty, Information Overload, Poor Decisions != Good**

[0] "The Psychology of Curiosity" - Loewenstein, 1994

On-Call

- **24/7 is not the problem - avoid small teams, long shifts**

- **More shifts == more likelihood of depression, anxiety[0]**

- **We are the maintenance crew at the fairground**

- **The expectation of having to act is the real strain[1]**

- **Incident Management Training and Drills reduce stress**

[0] "On-call work and health: a review"
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC539298/

[1] "Extended work availability and its relation with start-of-day mood and cortisol"
https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26236956

Cognitive Overload

- **Frameworks, designs and languages**

- **Monoliths; easy for devs, hard on Ops**

- **Mature Services stick like burrs**

- **Firehose of data from rapidly changing software**

- **Abstractions are actually quicksand**

Imaginary Expectations

- Where did those magic numbers come from ?

- Can our SLAs direct your team's efforts ?

- Are there good reasons for the process we follow ?

- Are we being watched ?

- Do we really have to fix all bugs logged against our team ?

How can you increase Psychological Safety ?

1. **Give your your team a short survey**

2. **Discuss what 'Safety' means to your team**

3. **Build a culture of respect & clear communication**

Where do we go from here ?

Hypothesis: We are biased against admitting we are stressed

What's special about Operations ?

- **A proud, strong Culture**

- **Tendency to specialize**

- **Operational stress**

- **We seek work we enjoy**

Where do we go from here ?

Let's talk about what makes us unsafe

- Do you worry about your reputation ?
- Can the team do without you ?
- How do you look after your team ?
- Would you be upset to unexpectedly find out you were on-call ?
- Does your weekly meeting start with the #1 most important topic ?