

Safe Spaces: Unlocking the Power of Psychological Safety



Empowering People & Organizations to Thrive

- **100+ years** helping organizations recognize and engage their people
- **Engagement solutions** that work, with the data to prove it:
- **Recognition & Rewards**
- **Surveys & Insights**
- **Physical & Mental Well-being**
- **Trusted by 40,000+ organizations** with millions of employees across industries



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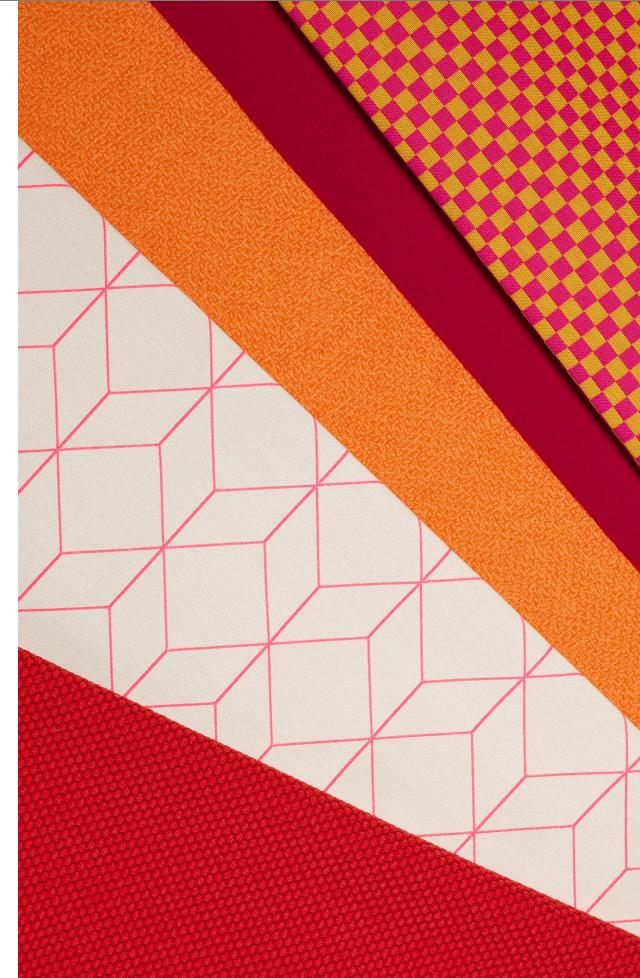
Redefining the Workplace Through Psychological Safety

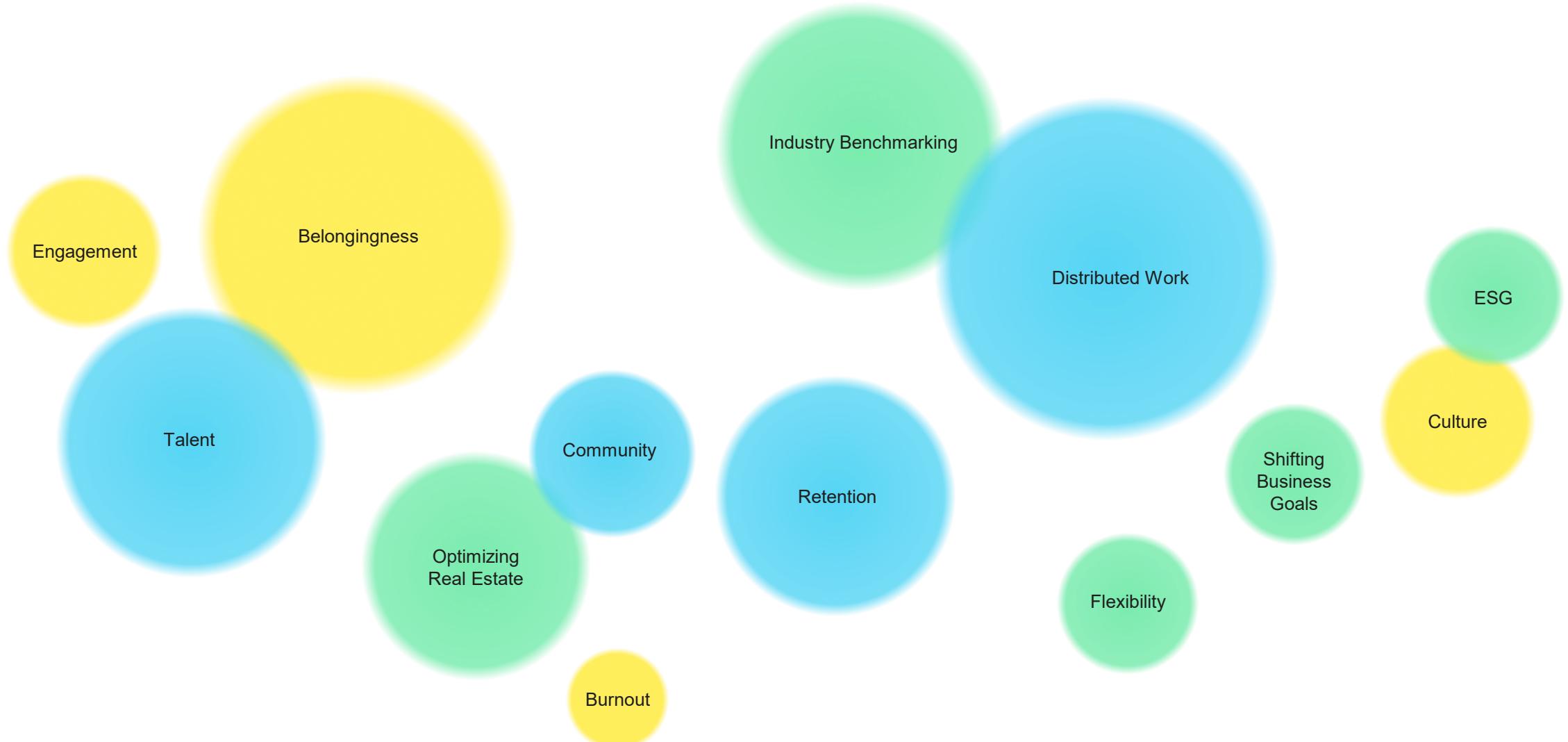
Rebecca Greier Horton, PG, WELL AP + Faculty

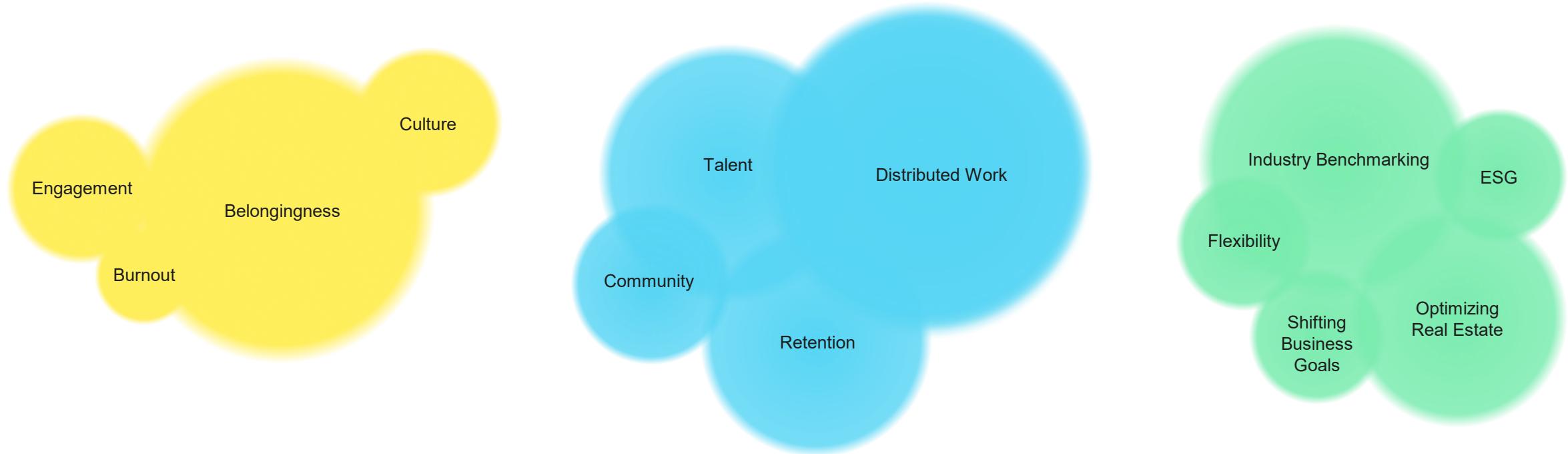
January 2026



What matters to employees and are we designing
to address their challenges?







Design with Impact

Wellbeing
Connection
Change





Redefining the Workplace The Power of Psychological Safety

The highest-performing teams have one thing in common: psychological safety — “Psychological safety at work means that...you speak up, knowing that your team has your back, and you have theirs.”



Season 4 Episode 10

“Safe to Fail”

Dr. Amy Edmondson
Author: The Fearless Organization
Right Kind of Wrong
Professor at Harvard Business School

Employee Wellbeing + Mental Health Matters

The global workforce is struggling

Gallup (2024) – *State of the Global Workplace*

Deloitte (2024) – *Mental Health & Employers*

McKinsey (2024) Nurturing employee mental health: A leader's guide

WHO (2025) – *From Loneliness to Social Connection*

Stress

Anxiety

Burnout

Loneliness

Basic Brain Function



Understanding Human Behavior – Basic Brain Function: The Amygdala

The amygdala's immediate impulse is not necessarily the best "office" response

- **Development:** Fully functional at birth which is why infants react emotionally – it's our "primal" or "lower brain"
- **Function:** Primarily responsible for processing basic emotions – fear, threat, survival
- **Response Time:** Non-conscious reaction is immediate to ensure physical safety



Understanding Human Behavior – Basic Brain Function: The Prefrontal Cortex (PFC)
The prefrontal cortex is the key to self regulation

- **Development:** Matures slowly, not fully developed until 20s which is why teens are impulsive - AKA "higher brain"
- **Function:** Involved in higher-order thinking skills like decision making, reasoning, impulse control, planning
- **Response Time:** Conscious reaction is slower, deliberate evaluating the consequences, and regulating emotions



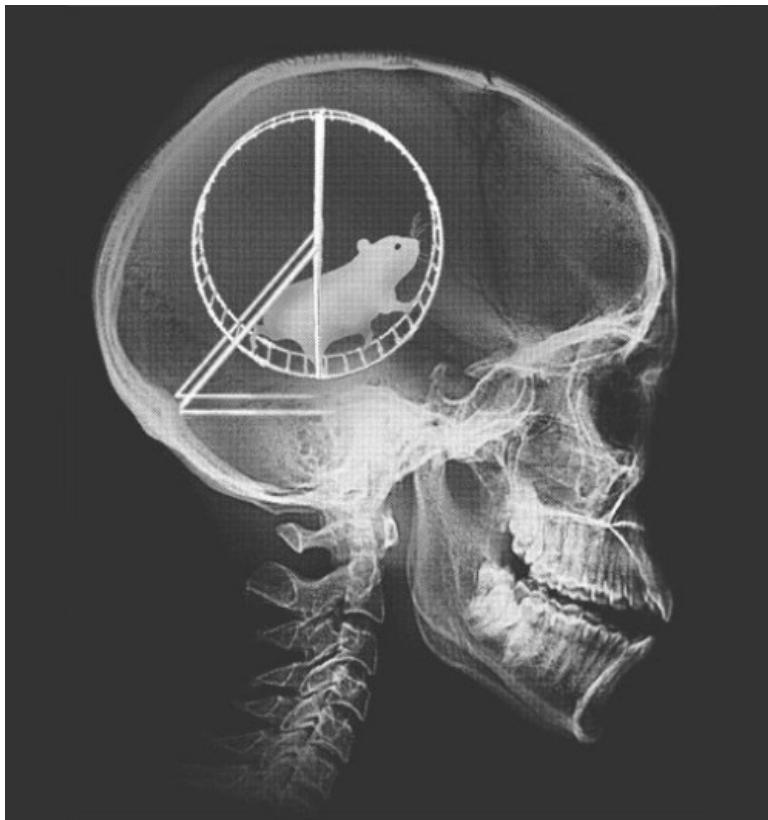
Understanding Human Behavior – Basic Brain Function

In simple terms, the prefrontal cortex can act as the amygdala's dimmer switch

- **Trigger:** The amygdala surges with emotion when we feel threatened
- **Response:** The prefrontal cortex can engage and regulate the impulse
- **Result:** By understanding brain function, we can tap into our higher-level functions and respond intelligently

Old Brain + New Environment = Distinct Challenges

Our non-conscious brain runs constantly



And takes shortcuts

Aoccdrnig to a rscheearch at Cmabride Uinervtisy, it deosn't mttaer in what order the ltteers in a word are, the only iprmoetnt thing is that the first and last ltteer be a the rghit pclae. The rset can be a total mses and you can still raed it wouthit porbelm. Tiss is bcusease the human mind deos not raed ervey lteter by istlef, but the word as a wlohe.

But the PFC acts as the brain's "regulator"



Voltage regulator maintains even voltage



Understanding Human Behavior – Basic Brain Function

Adopting healthy habits: ample sleep, proper nutrition, and exercise is the first step in managing excessive stress. Receiving professional coaching and adopting mindful practices can further foster brain health

- **Optimal stress:** The brain works best when it's slightly stressed, engaged
- **Too little stress:** The brain becomes disengaged, unfocused
- **Excessive stress:** Can cause the amygdala to remain engaged and dominant

The Language of Psychological Safety

Security

“Security seeking” brains want predictability, familiarity, clear details, and directions – no surprises



Triggered by the unexpected or lack of clarity

Autonomy

“Autonomy seeking” brains want independence, control, and personal choice – dislike being categorized by group identity



Triggered by overly prescriptive work or perceived micromanagement

Fairness

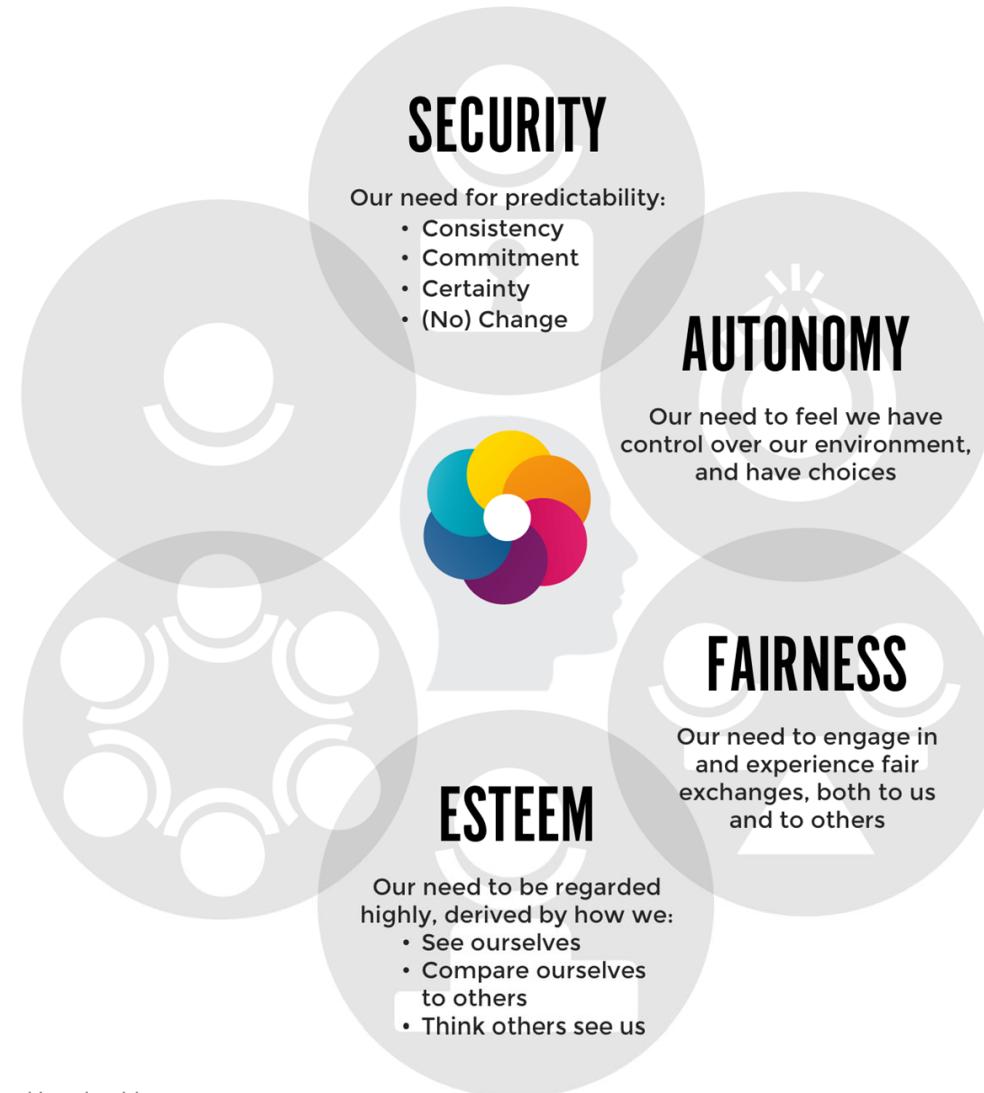
“Fairness seeking” brains want impartiality, equal opportunities for all team members, and transparency – no favoritism



Triggered by injustice, oppression



S.A.F.E.T.Y.™ MODEL



Esteem

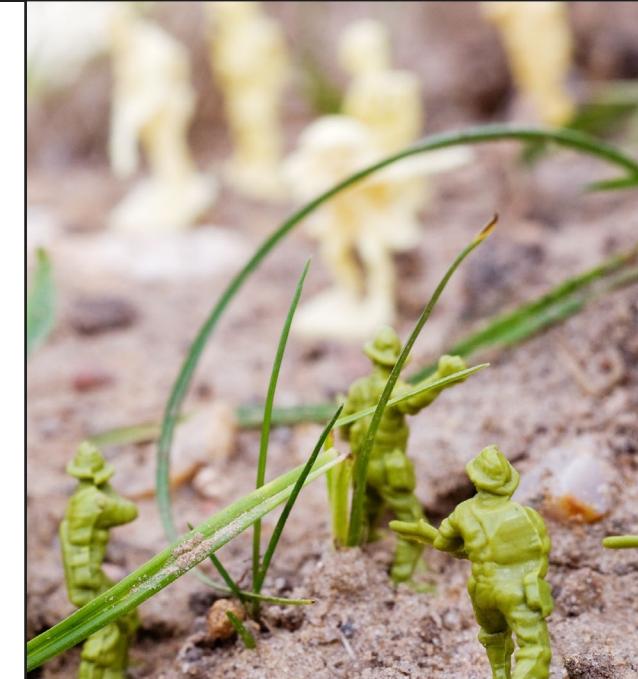
“Esteem seeking” brains want to be recognized for their tenure, experience, accomplishments, and skills – avoiding criticism



Triggered by being questioned, ignored, or worse, rejected

Trust

“Trust seeking” brains want strong team bonds, loyalty, and collaboration – avoiding “outsiders”



Triggered by vastly differing perspectives, the unfamiliar newcomer, or isolation



Understanding Human Behavior - YOU

The impact of this domain can outweigh all others so recognize this in yourself and in others..

● Life Stage - Life Demands

● Health

● Past Trauma



What draws people in?

Teamwork



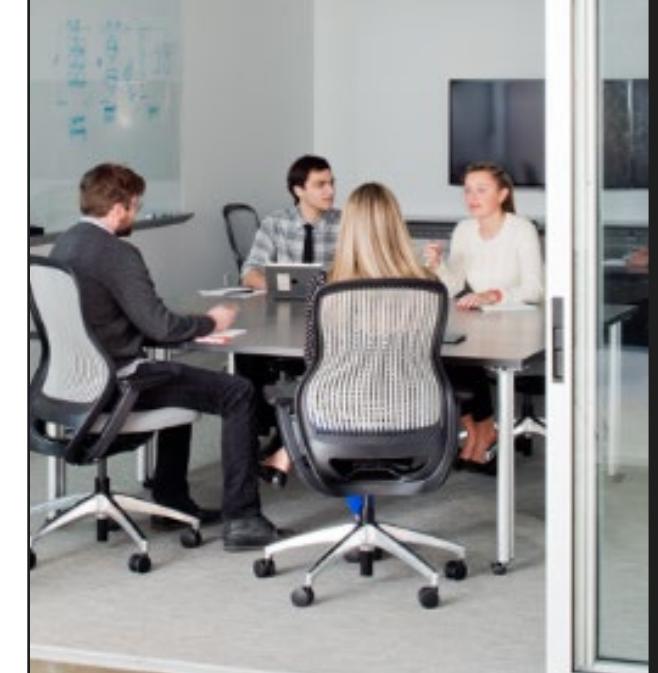
Socializing



Connection

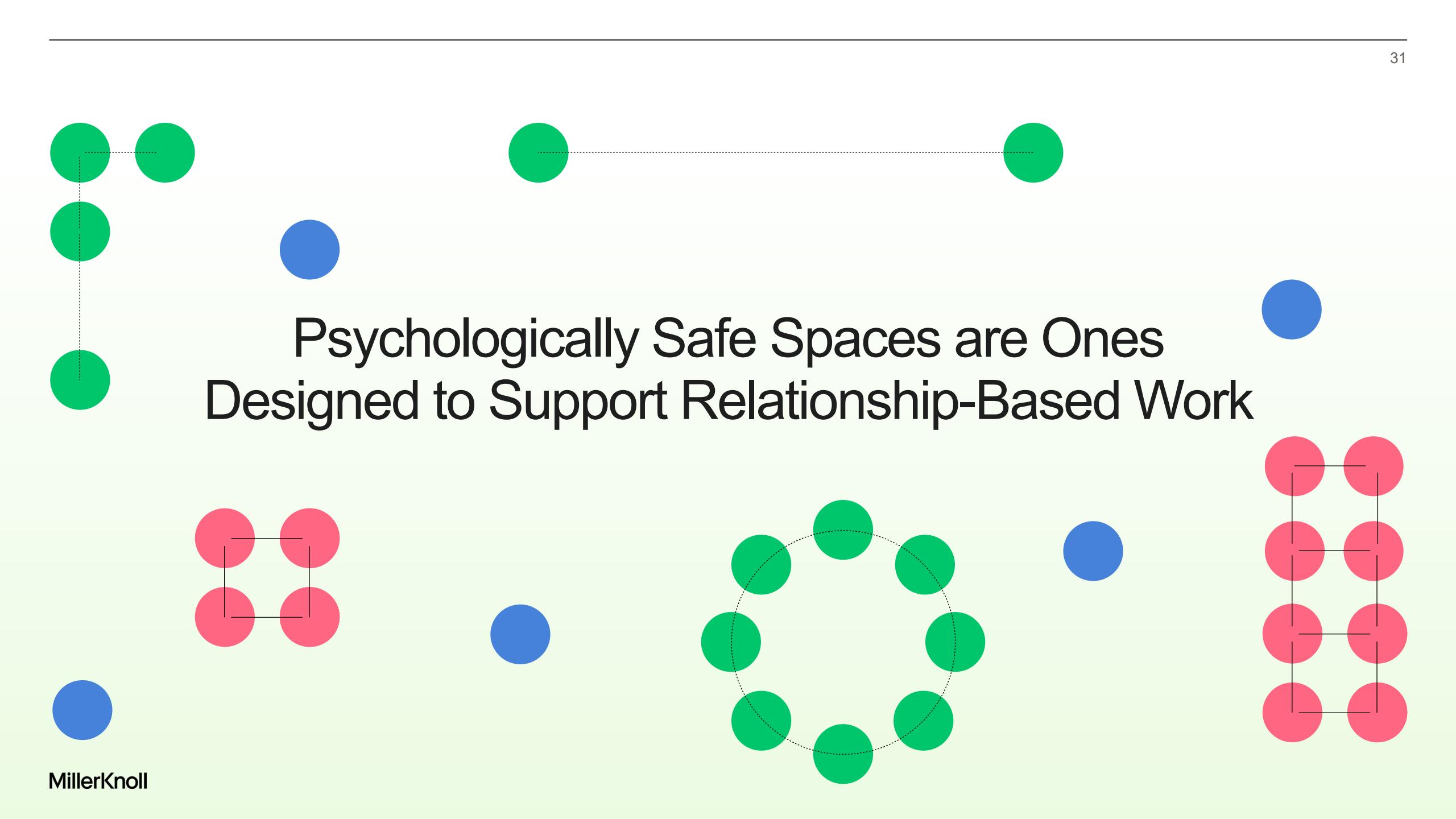


What keeps them coming back? Team psychological safety – and it's taught



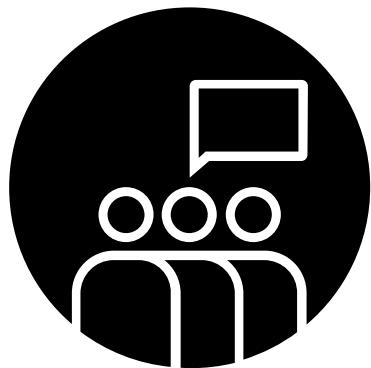
- If you make a mistake on this team, will it be held against you?**
- Are the members of this team able to bring up problems and tough issues?**
- Do members on this team sometimes reject other members for being different?**
- Is it safe to take a risk on this team?**
- Is it difficult to ask other members of this team for help?**
- Would anyone on the team deliberately act in a way that undermines efforts?**

Psychologically Safe Spaces



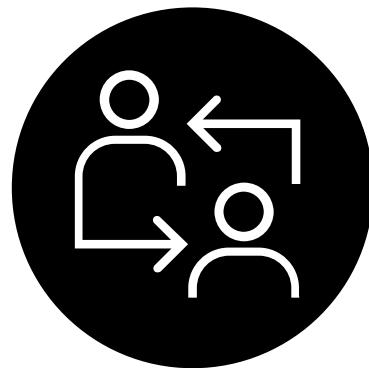
Psychologically Safe Spaces are Ones
Designed to Support Relationship-Based Work

Space Types Supporting Psychological Safety



Community

Exchange: Socialization
Produce: Assembly



Group

Exchange: Meeting
Produce: Collaboration



Individual

Reflect: Respite
Produce: Focus

Psychologically Safe Spaces: Individual



Individual Restoration - Spaces for respite, self-care, and reflection



Individual Focus - Spaces for individuals to produce/work without distractions



Respite Space
A semi-private setting designed to restore a sense of wellbeing

**Individual
Respite – Reflect**



Private Office

A fully enclosed room—often owned—designed for distraction-free focus

Individual Focus – Produce

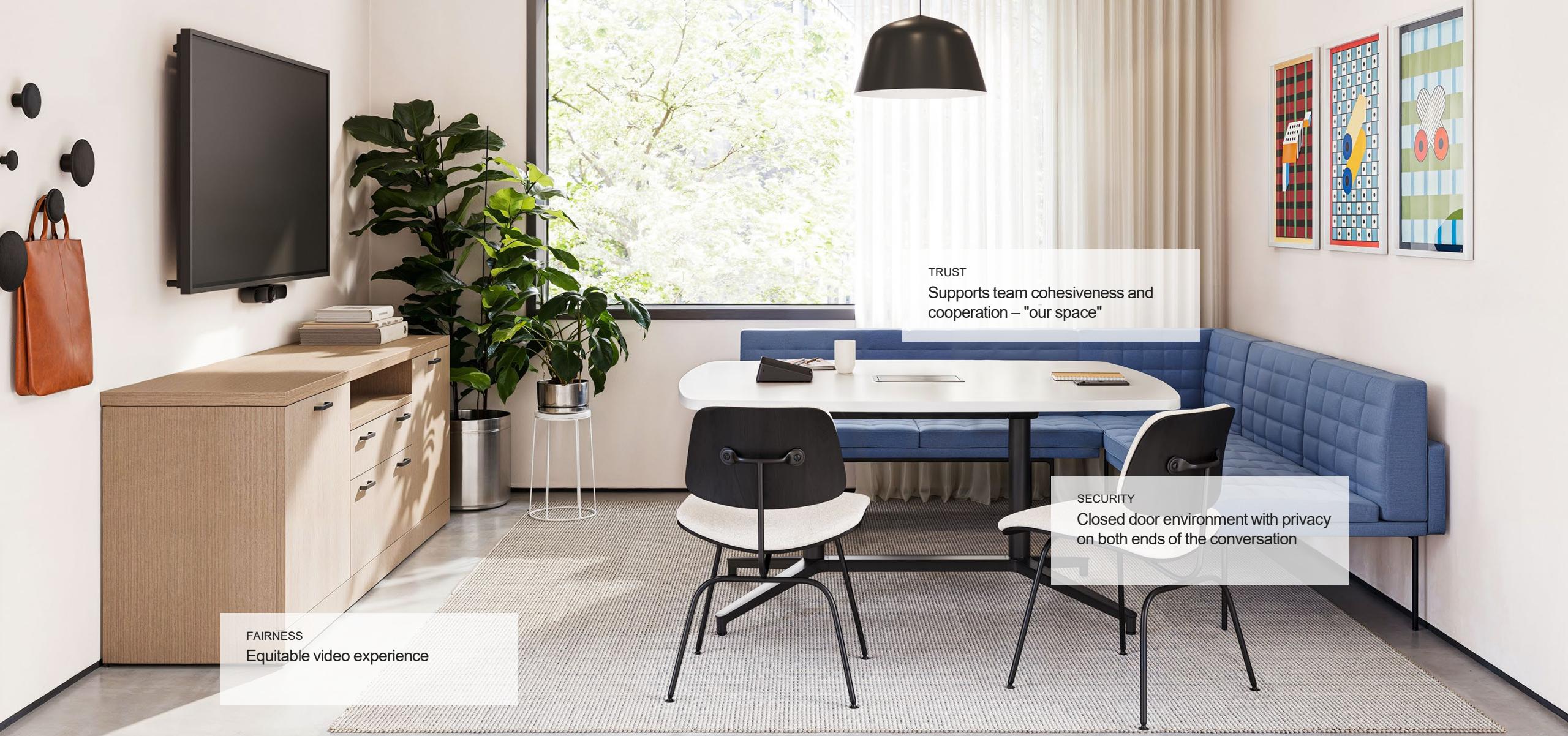
Psychologically Safe Spaces: Groups



Group Meeting - Spaces where people can connect and communicate as a group



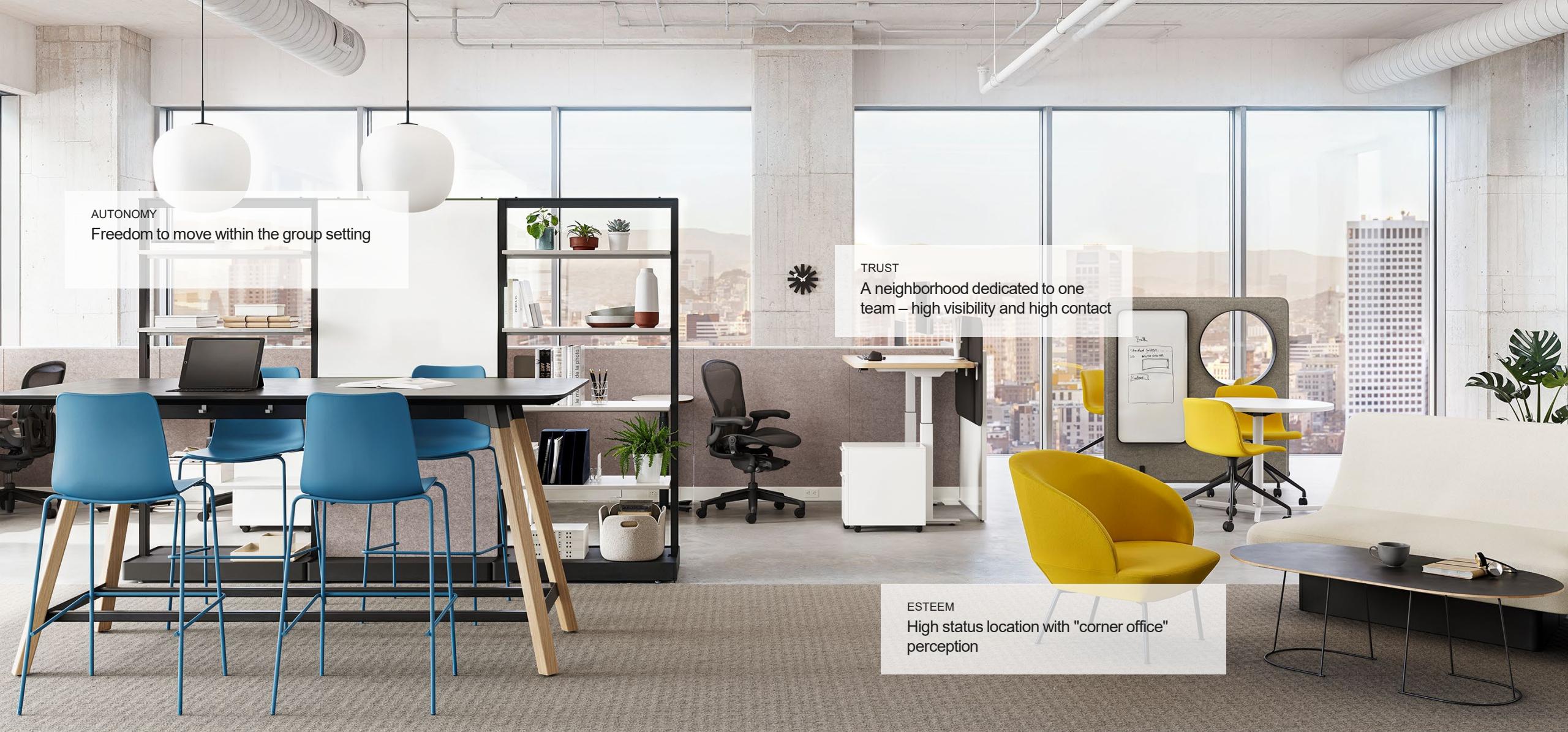
Group Collaboration - Spaces in which groups can cycle between working alone and together (Settings A and B)



Conference Room

A structured, distraction-free environment for information-sharing

Group Meeting - Exchange



Neighborhood A – Collaboration

A setting tailored for a group, where members can work alone or together

Group Collaboration



Neighborhood B – Focus

A setting tailored for a group, where members can work alone or together

Group Collaboration

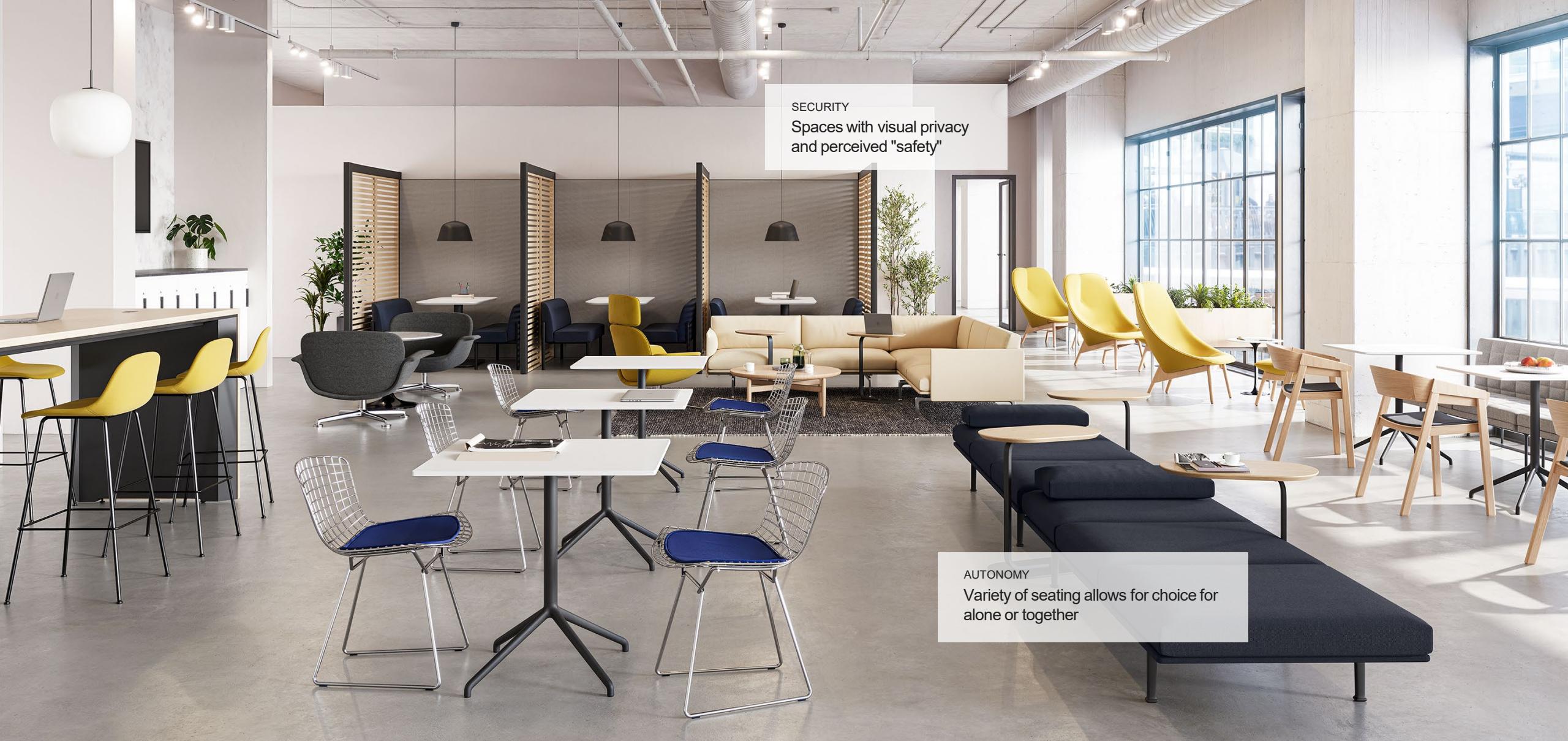
Psychologically Safe Spaces: Communities



Community Socialization - Spaces that strengthen community through informal interactions



Community Assembly - Spaces where people from different groups can work alone or together to produce



Plaza

Ideal for gathering or hosting, often around food or drink

Community Socialization - Exchange



Forum

Flexes to host everything from information sharing to networking events

Community Assembly - Produce



It's time to redefine the workplace and create spaces that honor employee wellbeing, foster human connection, and remain agile for inevitable change. Psychological safety is the key.

Thank You

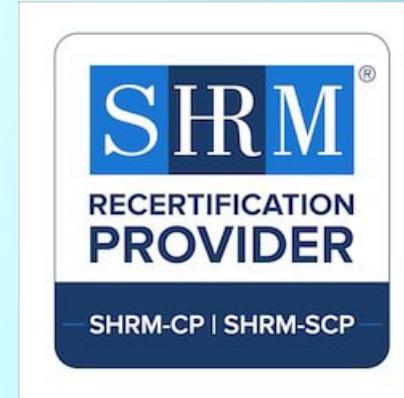
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Let's connect on LinkedIn



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Senior Insights Strategist, Americas – Global Research + Planning

MillerKnoll

Rebecca is a multidisciplinary strategist who has served our clients over the past decade by tending to their organizations' physical, social, and cognitive needs.

She is a licensed environmental geologist who formerly led the Fortune 50 corporate Environmental, Health, Safety, and sustainability teams at AT+T, UTC, and Bombardier Aerospace and Transportation.

She is an International WELL Building Institute WELL AP and IWBI Faculty member. She is also an accredited Psychological Safety and an IFC-certified coach. As a senior office ergonomic consultant, she represents MillerKnoll on the Office Ergonomics Research Committee.

Rebecca leads MillerKnoll's global ENABLED team and the newly formed Neurodiversity and mental wellbeing team, which advocates for inclusive, participatory design so individuals with physical and neurological challenges can thrive in an accessible workplace.

In her spare time, she teaches Pilates reformer in Frisco, Texas.

