

How to foster psychological safety in organizations?

Interviews held with Julie Freeborn, Mari Järvinen and Marja Jeanson at the EAWOP WorkLab in Valencia, Spain November, 4th, 2023



JULIE FREEBORN



MARI JÄRVINEN



MARJA JEANSON

About the interviewees

Julie Freeborn is an Occupational and Coaching Psychologist based in the UK. She currently works in psychosocial risk management for the BBC where she develops strategies and interventions to support staff members across the world and also contributors to programmes. She has expertise in well-being, neurodiversity and assessment. Prior to working for the BBC, she worked with prisons, the police service and hardest-to-help job seekers. Julie is a current member of the British Psychological Society (BPS) Ethics Committee and has previously served as Division of Occupational Psychology (DOP) Chair, Neurodiversity and Employment Chair and member of the Practice Board.

Mari Järvinen is an organizational psychologist. She is the founder of Profounder, a consultancy agency dedicated to assisting growing companies in leadership and team development, psychological assessments and addressing various people-related challenges.

Marja Jeanson's career started in facility management, followed by a Master's degree in Work & Organizational Psychology. Since 2008 she runs her business Jeanson Consultancy in The Netherlands. Marja supports the board and management of several organizations on how to deal with change, conflict and performance issues. Also, she is a senior Keurings Instituut voor Waterleiding Artikelen (KIWA) registered confidential counsellor for bullying, (sexual) harassment and aggression in organizations.

Abstract

This article depicts three brief interviews with work and organizational psychology practitioners attending the EAWOP WorkLab focused on “Engaging leadership: Cultivating employee strengths and psychological safety in organizations” held in Valencia, Spain in November 2023. The three interviewees share their insights and key take-aways from the WorkLab.

Keywords: work and organizational psychology, psychological safety, destructive leadership, research and practice, WorkLab

Introduction

The 2023 edition of the EAWOP WorkLab was held in Valencia Spain, between November 2nd and November 4th. The main theme of the WorkLab centred around “Engaging leadership: Cultivating employee strengths and psychological safety in organizations”. The WorkLab was facilitated by a leading academic, namely Dr. Kimberley Brevarta, Associate Professor Leadership and Employee Well-being at the Erasmus University Rotterdam and a highly respected practitioner, namely Dr. Jessica Halgren, an experienced executive coach. The WorkLab was attended by 26 international delegates who spent a few days learning with and from each other how to create psychologically safe working environments. Colin Roth, an editor of InPractice, has interviewed three of the practitioner delegates, namely Julie Freeborn, Mari Järvinen and Marja Jeanson about their experiences during the WorkLab.

Who are our interviewees?

Colin: *This year’s topic at the EAWOP WorkLab is psychological safety in organizations. We have been talking about destructive leadership and how we can prevent that from happening. We have also created interventions that are aimed at creating an environment where people feel safe and where they can speak up. So far, we have had a lot of discussions in the group, on how to do that. I’d like to learn more about your individual experiences as practitioners on the topic and also your key learnings from the WorkLab.*

Colin: *First, would you like to introduce yourself?*

Julie: My name is Julie Freeborn, I'm a practitioner, and I work in the UK, in the media industry at the moment. I'm particularly interested in psychosocial safety and well-being.

Marja: My name is Marja Jeanson. I'm from the Netherlands and I'm a practitioner in organizational psychology. I've been working as a freelancer for about fifteen years now, and I work for several companies.

Mari: My name is Mari Järvinen from Finland. I'm also an organizational psychologist, a freelancer and I have my own company. I work for different kinds of companies on

many, many different kinds of topics: I do assessments for recruitment, consulting and trainings. I've been an entrepreneur now for eight years. Before that, I used to work at the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, where I did some research, but also very practical work in consulting companies. In recent years, I've worked a lot with start-ups and scale-ups. This is a term for when start-ups grow up, when they start hiring a lot of people and grow really fast. Normally in this phase they face challenges regarding how to keep the people side on track and how to build the basis for an organization set for growth. That's what I like to do the most and what I've been doing recently.

How can we deal with destructive leadership?

Colin: *Why is it so difficult to address this issue [of destructive leadership]?*

Julie: First and foremost, it's about awareness, the fact that we don't often talk about it. We often focus on more positive aspects of leadership, like transformational leadership or authentic leadership. We're trying to focus on how we develop those positive traits, there's less focus on these more destructive elements of leadership. And not being aware of where behaviour can be destructive to others. Because it means that we don't actually have any solutions in place for those employees.

But for me there's an element of good nature in this as well. That we don't want to believe that people want to harm other people. That they intend to do that. Therefore, when they have someone in front of them who is engaging in destructive behaviour, or even abusive behaviour, they want to improve the situation and assume a difference in intentions or misunderstanding of intentions. So, we often recommend mediation for example.

Furthermore, the bystander effect probably comes into it a bit. It's well researched in some areas, but we don't necessarily apply it to abusive behaviour in organizations. When you see abusive behaviour in an organization – let's say you're in a team meeting and somebody is abusing one of your colleagues – what can be done about that? A lot of people have that question, but no answer to it. So, they look at what everybody else is doing and they see that they are actually not doing anything. In this situation, they may conclude that maybe they just need to stay out of it, because it might have negative consequences for their own career if they addressed it.

Colin: *What are some other areas of weakness?*

Mari: Something that I've recently worked a lot on is diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging. And we have to be aware of the fact that we tend to look at this from a very privileged angle. As consultants, we come into the organization from the outside and there are so many layers to this issue that we might easily miss. For example, if you take me – I am a white woman coming from a higher educational background – I most likely don't see or face some of the things that a person of colour or somebody with a disability or an LGBTQ person in the workplace will be confronted with. If I don't see these things due to my background, it is likely that others in the workplace don't see these things either. If people don't face certain issues themselves, they might not understand them, which can inadvertently lead people who are in some way different from the majority to feel unsafe. Simply put: people may not intend to make anyone feel unsafe, but they may do it anyway and not realize it since they just assume that everyone is just like them.

Colin: *Coming back to the bystander effect you've mentioned earlier, things like a traffic accident can obviously be observed on the street, but destructive behaviour is something that is underneath the surface. So, how could I imagine a training tackling that issue?*

Julie: In the case of that traffic accident: What would be the things that would help us to do something? For example, if we'd had first aid training, we might understand what we needed to do. If we knew about calling one of the emergency service numbers, we might call them if needed. If you know that it's okay as long as someone is calling it in – whether it is you or someone else. As long as it's been reported – that's the most important thing. Those kinds of basic actions would be really helpful. So, signposting within the organization where people can report things, who they can report their concerns to would probably fall into the basics. But also helping them to understand what these abusive behaviours were.

I was reading some psychosocial risk assessment training recently, about the prevalence of bullying and the reported prevalence of bullying. It was interesting to see that the reports of bullying go up as soon as you include a definition of what bullying is. Because many people observe that behaviour, but they don't recognize that it is bullying behaviour. That would need to be a core component as well: What is abusive leadership, what do you need to look for.

Mari: I like to talk about leadership actions with teams. This is something that I've learned from my clients who don't have managers; they decided to have completely flat organizational structures and they are like a teal organization, where there are no managers, except for what the legal requirements of the company are, which is very little actually. And we talk about leadership actions because even though there's no formal leader, there is leadership. Leadership is always somewhere. We analyse what the leadership actions in this team are, what people do for the common good, for the good of the team, for the good of the company and so on. This could be anything from giving feedback, taking in feedback in a good way, coming up with initiatives, building processes. It could be almost anything that is for the good of the team; it could be asking someone: "Hey, are you feeling okay today?" Or: "How are you doing on that project – Can I help you?" Those are all leadership actions. And that takes away that notion that the leader needs to do everything.

Of course, there are certain things that they can do. If it's a traditional organization, they have certain powers, they can decide some things that other people can't. But that doesn't mean that everybody else can't also carry that leadership and also help that leader lead well by telling them: "Hey, this is what I need", and "This is what our team needs" – because they're not mind readers either. And if you're a more senior person, more experienced, you can take more of that role. But that doesn't mean that you are like a hierarchical leader to another person, you can also just help some juniors. That seems to resonate because it's easier to talk about it like that. And then, when teams start learning it, they start complimenting other people like "Hey, you did really well with that. Thanks for taking the initiative to do this", and these people are like, "Oh, yeah, I got praise" and then they do it again. It just becomes this nice little self-fulfilling prophecy.

Colin: *What are some of the actions that can be applied on an individual level to deal with destructive leadership?*

Julie: When we look at bullying behaviour, there has been some research that has shown that people are more likely to engage in that behaviour when they feel less competent or when they feel insecure. So, if they know, for example, how to run a meeting, feeling confident in themselves, they're less likely to become abusive in that situation.

Mari: One specific aspect stuck with me from the first evening when Jessica [Editor's note: Jessica Halgren] was talking about the transformative insights and how adults learn: There needs to be some sort of click in a person's head, where they realize the importance of something and they want to do something about it. For example, in the case of diversity, equity, and inclusion – I think it goes for the whole psychological safety angle. Just the realization of like, “Oh yeah, not everybody is necessarily safe in my organization – So what can we do about it?” It's already a huge step, because if you're just kind of blindfolded and you don't really know that there might be an issue with this, then you probably won't do much about it either.

Marja: Yeah, and also the importance of speaking up. And elaborating on your expectations and experiences. Not letting it grow to become a big problem, but doing something beforehand. And that's quite difficult, to get people talking about what they experience as unsafe.

Colin: *Are there any tools to foster psychological safety?*

Marja: Oh, there are several tools. For example, in The Netherlands, we have these “confidential advisors”; nearly every company has one. So, you can create an easy, low-profile procedure where people can approach this confidential advisor anonymously.

Colin: *Another example comes up to my mind: Think about our meeting situation, where someone is abusing another person – If you had a facilitator, a trained external or internal person – they can also stop the meeting for five minutes and talk to the leader. In a safe space, one-to-one. “Hey, what's going on with you? I feel like you were starting something that leads into a direction where you might be hurting someone else” or “This might lead into a direction of an ineffective meeting”. And then they could have a chance to breathe and realize: “Oh, you're right, I'm going in the wrong direction here”. This is what I sometimes experience in my job as a facilitator. So, I think the facilitator could be one element of structuring conversations.*

Julie: I'm reflecting on the conversation we were having just before, that people feel upset, but nobody supports them. But if the facilitator is recognizing that behaviour, is doing something about it, it automatically supports that person better.

Mari: Helping is obviously a big thing, but that's not always possible. For example, start-ups, they can't necessarily afford to have a consultant helping them with this. One of the

easier actions is to just write about this stuff, talk about it and make it seem normal to talk about psychological safety.

Colin: *What can we as organizational psychologists do to increase the level of communication amongst the employees and leaders?*

Mari: Helping leaders realize that them actually being vulnerable is one of the keys to helping everybody else be that way. Like, if they talk about their mental health issues, for example, or the burnout that they had, then suddenly the rest of the organization is like, "Oh, that person's human. I don't need to act like I don't have any issues either," and then it can become easier to have those things: "How do we support people here?", "And how do we talk about these things?". It can just be something that somebody reads or listens to a podcast. This is peer learning as well. If a successful start-up leader, for example, talks about these things, then it makes it okay for that peer group to think that this is something we could talk about. Or higher up, in bigger organizations, top executives, like, "I'm not a superhuman either, nor do you need to be one."

Colin: *All right, so again, it's the leaders that have a lot of responsibility as role models of vulnerability. We heard this term back and forth. There are smaller things to do, like offering communication in a safe space or training leaders to better understand their roles. Thus, leaders can do a lot of things to create a safe environment where people can speak up.*

There's one thing that I would like to add to this discussion: I'm always thinking about the importance of the group. What intervention might be helpful for a team to create a safe open environment?

Marja: I have an example of a small intervention, which we call 'a snack'. Normally, we apply this intervention during lunchtime with the team. The 'snack' we present consists of three or five situations describing conflicts or other difficult or tense work situations – presented briefly on cards. People pick out a card and then we let them reflect on it together. Because we create an informal situation with the group – during lunchtime and placing the leader within the group as an equal – things, well, might come up more easily. And this works very well, even in big companies. What we tend to create is that the leader will say, "I want to know more about it." Then there's a sense of urgency and a good basis for a training. And this training program is not two days. No, the training is an hour. It works because it is much more indirect and less threatening for everyone.

What we also see is that once you do one of these ‘snacks’ with the team, at some point, when the leader feels competent to do it on their own with their team, it tends to be embedded in that team. And also, you don’t need to invent new situations for the cards every time, simply reuse the old ones. That is mainly because people may think differently about the same issue after some months or after they have new experiences.

What are your most important insights from the WorkLab?

Colin: *What are the three most important things that you would recommend people to look at, more than maybe before you came here? Three new perspectives that you would offer them and say, "Look at this, talk about this, watch this."*

Marja: I have one thing that comes directly to my mind: That leaders these days are in a really difficult position. And we tend to blame them for all kinds of things, but we also need to give them credit and time and space. Analysing their experiences, their needs and the context in which they have to perform.

But my most important insight is that you can never think that you know everything. It is important to talk with each other and have a dialogue. I brought in a small case and it wasn't a complicated one, but I learned a lot just by talking about it. It's a complex topic and you can approach it from several directions. Therefore, my takeaway is that you cannot do it all alone. Talking about things with others makes your world bigger and your approach better. The understanding of the problem also grows and develops. For me, that's very important. This is a theme “you cannot do it alone”.

Mari: The systemic thinking view: it's not just one leader and one follower. There are so many factors playing a role and if a manager is ‘behaving badly’ it could be something that is pushed on them from above, or they don't have the means or the training. They might have never known how to be a good leader, nobody told them what a good leader is or they had no chance to kind of do well. It's a systemic issue that also needs to be addressed.

Why join the WorkLab?

Colin: *So, why are you here, and why would you recommend others to join?*

Julie: This is my third EAWOP WorkLab. I attended the one last year in Palma de Mallorca, and I also went to Riga. There is a benefit of warmer weather in November in Spain. But even in Riga, it was wonderful to be able to come to a different place, where you get a different perspective, naturally. And you get people from all over Europe and their various different understandings on some of the same issues that we are actually facing in different organizations. I see things from a UK point of view, and I can come here and talk to people from Germany, The Netherlands, Spain and all over Europe to gain ideas. These different understandings are a real benefit for me. In this particular edition, I've learned so many new things, fresh ideas. And to take in the latest research. You've got researchers here as well as practitioners, so you can get both sides of our profession, a bit from either side. For me, honestly, I'm looking for the practice, but I also love the connection with the research.

Marja: It's my seventh EAWOP WorkLab. I'm coming here because I like the dialogue – to give and take. I take new knowledge and new insights with me, but I also like to give my knowledge and my experiences to other people. Besides, I really like the atmosphere and the way we work. The group is not too large and we work pretty fast and on a good level. So, I take ideas home, inspiration for my work.

Mari: And my reasons for coming to Work Lab are basically the same. This is my third one, I really like that people bring different perspectives, different contexts from different countries; but then there's also some level of similarity, like I don't have to explain what an organizational psychologist is, unlike at a generic conference, where they're asking "What is that?". So, there's a common level and then there are differences that we can learn from and give and take.

What also was a really important part of it was when we split up in smaller groups because it brought even more angles to the discussion. When there's twenty-nine people in the room, you always have to think, "Okay, am I the one who should be saying something about this or, you know, giving room to everyone else?" But when it's a smaller group, it can be much more of a dialogue and kind of looking at something together and exchanging ideas, that's really important.

Colin: *Thank you so much for your time and the fruitful wrap up of the EAWOP WorkLab 2023 – I'm very much looking forward to seeing you next year at the EAWOP WorkLab in Lisbon.*