



Great Northern Fire Crew, a type 2 crew on the Flathead National Forest in Montana. Photo: USDA Forest Service.

Psychological Safety and The Big Quiet

Interview by Jim Gumm With Leslie Weldon and Holly Krake

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Jim Gumm: I have the privilege of talking to Leslie Weldon and Holly Krake about psychological safety in general and, in particular, an article that Holly led in writing called “The Big Quiet.” Leslie, let’s start with you: What comes to mind when we say psychological safety?

Leslie Weldon: I think about it in really personal terms. I started with the Forest Service in the summer of 1981, coming from Virginia Tech in southwestern Virginia. My first job was on the North Bend Ranger District of the Mount Baker-

Snoqualmie National Forest. I was extremely excited and ready for this great work in natural resources conservation. But I came as a 19-year-old Black female to work for the Forest Service, and I couldn’t have switched from more different worlds. And I was very concerned.

So when I talk about psychological safety, I want to reflect on the fact that I joined up with a reforestation crew and then a fire crew where I really felt like the people there wanted me to be there—that they were concerned about me. They wanted to make sure I could do my work well. They were nice to me—not just on the job but also living on the compound, making sure I was okay. And I look back on that now and realize how important it was for me to feel like the Forest Service was a place for me to be. And those relationships I had, that sense of care and belonging,

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encouraged me to know that I was making the right choice of career with the Forest Service.

So one way of talking about psychological safety is in terms of that sense of belonging, caring, and respect that you want to feel when you come to work with people. And it helped me to do my work better because I wasn't so worried that people were seeing me just as a Black woman coming from some place else or as a young person who didn't know anything. Having that sense of safety and well-being, from a psychological standpoint, really helped me to do my work well, and I think that's fed into my success for the rest of my career. So this thing called psychological safety is important, and I'm glad we're talking about it.

Jim: Excellent, thanks for sharing that. Holly, what do you think of when we talk about psychological safety?

Holly Krake: So when I think about psychological safety, much like Leslie, I start with myself as a human being and my various experiences in this agency—in fire camps, on interdisciplinary teams, on different leadership teams, and on crews that I've been a part of. And thinking about the ebbs and flows in terms of how psychologically safe people felt to bring their whole selves forward—that ability to successfully navigate and overcome traumas, uncertainty, disorder, and disruptions in their personal lives and their work/life balance and to overcome those things in healthy ways that protected and nurtured who they were as individuals.

And then, beyond ourselves as individuals, those relationships that were so fundamental to being able to meet our mission. So whether that's a botany crew, a budget office group, human resources, research and development, or a helitack supervisor—whatever our

role is in the agency, we can think of our relationships and think about those moments in time when we've been able to most effectively meet our mission and do our work.

And probably somewhere in there, you'll realize that you felt a high degree of psychological safety, self-esteem, self-worth, and self-awareness, both for yourself and for the folks around you.

Jim: Both of you are really touching on some significant points here. Leslie, I want to go back to you as a senior executive. Is there a business case for psychological safety? Is there a reason that this is really important to the organization, other than caring about our people?

Leslie: I think things have really evolved within the Forest Service. We've named safety as a core value and have been focusing for the past decade on what it means to bring that to life. We started with the idea of our physical safety and our belief that we should try to do everything in as safe a manner as possible—and, when we do have accidents, that we learn from them and we bring that learning forward for others.

As we got into that journey, we realized that things like trust, respect, and a sense of belonging were underlying aspects of why some of our accidents occurred. And we realized that we needed to pay attention to this thing called psychological safety just as much as delivering our work well and in a physically safe manner.

So the business case is really about ensuring that every one of us as employees can show up in as strong a way as possible to deliver this great mission, and that includes our psychological and emotional well-being and the quality of our relationships.

We're learning our way through this, and I'm glad that we're doing it in a way that's capturing what's been discovered in other parts of our organization.

Now we're acknowledging that it's critically important for us in relation to why we have a Code and Commitments. Those are all related to our interactions and our best practices to ensure that everyone is included, well respected, and cared for as we do our mission-related work. The bottom line is: It makes a difference in how well we're able to deliver our mission.

Jim: Holly, what compelled you to write your article on psychological safety, and why is it called "The Big Quiet"?

Holly: I was compelled to write this article together with a group of coauthors because 2020 happened, right? And while the coronavirus pandemic or racial injustice didn't cause this moment of reckoning, I think it really did rip off the proverbial bandaid and opened the door to a much-needed conversation: all of the sudden, the impacts of psychological safety issues and the needs that were always there for so much of our workforce were suddenly at everybody's doorstep. It wasn't just one or two people on the district or one or two people at the office, it was everyone. So it became high time that we started talking about it.

The name itself is a play on Mark Smith's 2016 essay "The Big Lie," and we settled on the title of "The Big Quiet" as the most apt description of our current culture around this particular aspect of safety. "The Big Lie" really shook up our collective understanding of physical safety, and we hope that "The Big Quiet" will shake us up and bring about awareness of needs related to psychological safety. It's there; it's always been there. We just need to normalize talking about this issue as one of the first steps towards changing our culture around it.

Jim: So, Leslie, I want to thank you. As we were getting into psychological safety issues, we came to you, and

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you found time for us. With your busy schedule, I'm not sure how. But you kept doing that for us, including holding this interview with us. So why did you do that? Why is this so important for a senior executive like you to find time in your schedule to work on this?

Leslie: Well, I've been hearing from people like Holly and many others who have dedicated themselves to improving our critical incident management as part of our facilitated learning. We're discovering something, and I've had some excellent conversations with a few other colleagues and with [Forest Service] Chief [Vicki] Christiansen, who said it's really time for us to get beyond hearing things on the side—to take this on as a central piece of learning and then act on it.

So we're in the perfect place, with everything that happened in this really incredible year we've been through, letting us be responsive to what our employees have been saying to us: that we need to focus on what it means to be personally effective and resilient. That has to do with our psychological and behavioral well-being, which we need to grow into, just like we have grown into what it means for us to physically deliver our work well. We're worldclass at that. Our work around our psychological and our emotional well-being in the context

of safely performing our work needs to get that same kind of attention.

So I'm really happy that there's been a group of people who've come together across deputy areas—from our safety shop, to work environment, to fire, to our Chief Financial Officer, to the Casualty Assistance Program—our colleagues are coming together to really dig into this, to ask the right questions, to listen and then listen some more so that we can begin to do like we do with other things that are important to us. We set an intention, and then we invest in people, time, and resources so that we can make that come to life.

So I'm looking forward to seeing what comes out of that, and I'm glad that I'm not the only executive who cares about this. It's something in which elements of our leaders' stance, like shared leadership and finding opportunity, are really coming into play now.

Jim: Holly, what do you want people to take away from "The Big Quiet"? What do you hope they take away and do, if anything?

Holly: I think this is really a moment to live out some of our core values, not only safety but also around interdependence and service. We are most interdependent and in best service to each other when we hear the implied

imperative here—that call to stop, think, talk, and then act. My greatest desire for this article is that it leads us, as individuals and as an organization, to pause a moment and reflect on psychological safety, to think about where we are with it, both as individuals and collectively. To talk about it with a friend, a crew member, your district, or your supervisory group. Just in talking and thinking about it, you're already acting and defeating "The Big Quiet" by no longer staying silent about it.

Jim: Leslie, what do you think our next steps are at the agency level? What do you see us doing next?

Leslie: I learned from someone I really respect that you can't change what you can't talk about. We're in a place now where we're learning from each other, we're hearing each other's stories, and we're interpreting what it means to focus on psychological safety in service to our very complex and challenging mission of providing benefits and caring for the land for all of our citizens.

So what comes next is the rest of this discovery and learning together, and I'm looking forward to seeing some real options that we can come together and talk about. I'm looking forward to getting more folks involved and making some choices about what we want to invest in by way of an intent for this agency. Then we need to back that up with the right kind of programs, the right kind of skills, and the right kind of expectations and outcomes.