# COLUMNIST

## Andrew Thornton

# Creating a safe environment

**Stores thrive when teams can share ideas and problems freely, but creating this trust requires work and support**

The third – and I think most important – component of a 'heart-centred business' is safety. As a leader, if you want people to be themselves and practise authentic leadership, then you have to create a safe environment.

This will lead to a healthy and collaborative culture, allowing your business to thrive. For example, at Thornton's Budgens, we had a culture of experimentation, and everyone was encouraged to participate in this.

Ideas did not need to be signed off by me or the co-leaders – we did not have a store manager. We trusted that teams knew their purpose and were experts in their areas – after all, they were closest to our customers.

If, having encouraged this behaviour, I, or one of the others in the leadership team, reprimanded someone for trying something new, they wouldn't do it again.

Taking another example, a key part of being a 'heartful' business is the ability to show vulnerability. Having encouraged people to share what they were truly feeling – even if this was difficult – if I didn't listen properly to them when they did, or dismissed their experience as unimportant, it is unlikely they'd feel safe enough to repeat the experience.

In 2015, Google conducted an internal study looking at the differentiators that explained why some of their teams were so much more effective than others.

The number-one reason was psychological safety. This was defined as "being able to show and employ oneself without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status or career".

It can also be defined as a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking – with team members feeling accepted and respected. I'm not at all surprised by this, as it it has been one of the most important lessons we've learned from our 'heart work' at Thornton's Budgens.

There's no magic formula, but much of what I write about in my book helps to create psychological safety. It takes time, it's led by example, it's precious and it can be destroyed more quickly than it can be built. It's all about leadership from the top, and behaviour – people judge you by what you do, not by what you say.

I interviewed former Tesco CEO Dave Lewis for my book and he said: "You can't talk yourself out of something you behaved your way into," which is very wise.

Ask yourself how safe your colleagues might feel at work. How safe do you feel? If you fundamentally disagreed with your boss on something big, would you feel safe to say so – or would you just keep quiet? Does your team feel safe to challenge you? In difficult times, are you empathetic to the stresses and strains of your colleagues, or are you too focused on your own problems to support them?

Andrew Thornton's former team pictured outside Thornton's Budgens Belsize Park in north London

> **You can't talk yourself out of something you behaved your way into**

*Andrew Thornton is the former owner of Thornton's Budgens, founder of Heart in Business and author of 'Putting the Heart Back into Business', scheduled for release on 21 April 2022*

## ✳ Psychological safety works

**WHEN I SOLD** my Crouch End store back to Budgens, a team from the latter managed the process. Terry, the team leader, sat in on the internal briefings when the sale was announced to my team. Everyone led by me was in tears. Afterwards, Terry said he'd never seen anything like it and was very touched by what he witnessed. This is psychological safety in action. The level of trust we built with the Crouch End team over the seven years I owned the store had created enough safety for all of us to show our true emotions. Terry also shared that, in these situations, the store teams were mostly glad to see the back of the retailer, making our situation even more unique. Again, when I announced the sale of Belsize Park, there were even more tears, and emotions ran high. People felt even safer to share those emotions, knowing they would not be used against them at any point in the future.