**The REALTOR® to REALTOR® Series – Season 3, Episode 9**

**Creating a Culture of ‘Psychological Safety’ in Real Estate**

[00:00:00] **MARKI LEMONS RYHAL:** You've heard the phrase, “If you see something, say something.” If agents at your brokerage saw something that made them uncomfortable in the workplace, would they feel safe enough to say something about it?

[00:00:11] **TRACEY HAWKINS:** Being able to speak up and voice our concerns is so important for the culture of our business, not just for brokers to agents, but also for consumers and agents.

[00:00:22] **MARKI LEMONS RYHAL:** You're listening to Drive With NAR: the REALTOR® to REALTOR® Series—powered by REALTOR® Magazine. Listen as real estate pros talk tools of the trade and share stories of inspiration. Get ready to step up your business. I'm Marki Lemons Rowell, and it is September, which means it's REALTOR® Safety Month.

When we talk about safety in real estate, we often focus on personal safety in the field. But psychological safety, both in the workplace and in our client relationships, is a growing conversation. What does “psychological safety” mean, and what should it look like in your brokerage? I'm looking forward to exploring this with two of the best in our business.

Tracey, “the safety lady” Hawkins is a familiar face and voice to our podcast audience. She hosts Drive With NAR: The Safety Series, our sister podcast, and she's a real estate safety educator, author and content creator. She's also a former agent and contributor to REALTOR® Magazine on safety and cybersecurity.

Hi, Tracey. Great to see you here.

[00:01:35] **TRACEY HAWKINS:** Hey, Marki. I'm happy to be here with you.

[00:01:38] **MARKI LEMONS RYHAL:** Brittany Wrenn is a broker with Coldwell Banker Realty in Oak Brook Terrace, Illinois. She's a thought leader regarding wellness for real estate professionals and is a contributor to REALTOR® Magazine on topics such as health and well-being and work-life balance.

Hi, Brittany. Thank you for being here.

[00:02:00] **BRITTANY WRENN:** Hi, Marki. Thanks for having me.

[00:02:03] **MARKI LEMONS RYHAL:** Let's talk about defining psychological safety. What does it mean in the context of our work as real estate professionals? Brittany?

[00:02:10] **BRITTANY WRENN:** I look at it as a top-down kind of starting point. So within the office environment, a real estate broker really sets the stage for their agents to then go out and work with their clients.

So I would say an open office environment and open office policy, which breeds open communication, inclusivity in the office, a culture that really breeds collaboration. Those are just a few of the baseline starting points that can yield a safer office setting, right? I believe that when a broker sets that stage and shows that to their agents and the agents feel that within their environment, then they're going to go out and hopefully the goal would be to treat their clients the same way. And then their clients, you know, feel comfortable and safe with them and want to continue working with them. And it kind of becomes a full circle environment where then they're using their broker or their agent again, and they're referring them business, which obviously then boosts productivity in the office. And also it's boosting retention in the office as well when the broker is forming that environment.

[00:03:24] **MARKI LEMONS RYHAL:** Tracey?

[00:03:24] **TRACEY HAWKINS:** First, let me start with the definition of psychological safety. Psychological safety means that you or anyone is comfortable speaking up, saying what they see, saying what they feel, without concern for retribution, retaliation, or punishment. So you know that when you speak up, that you will be heard. Your voice will be respected.

I came to psychological safety when the D.C. Department of Transportation said, “Hey, we need a program for our 1100 field workers, our 130 plus managers about field worker safety, and we want the topic to be psychological safety.” And I had to do some research, and then what I learned is that that is tied directly to having a field force, having, in this situation, real estate agents, even having consumers, clients, who if they see something, they feel uncomfortable. They feel like they can actually speak up.

And so in the real estate industry, being able to speak up and voice your concerns is so important for the culture of our business, not just for brokers to agents, but also for consumers and agents.

[00:04:31] **MARKI LEMONS RYHAL:** Instantly, I started thinking about psychological safety, not only inside of the brokerage but also as an avid volunteer.

When I'm thinking about serving on multiple boards, the ability, one, to always do what is right, but then to speak up when you see someone doing something that's wrong because we have a fiduciary responsibility. And oftentimes there is that fear, right? Which then means we're not acting on all of our members on their best behalf. And so I'm thinking of psychological safety well beyond just our brokerage, but also in our volunteer efforts, making sure that we can always point out what's wrong.

Why should brokers care about maintaining psychological safety in the workplace?

[00:05:18] **TRACEY HAWKINS:** What I see in the real estate industry and where I want brokers, especially to pay attention is that I see headlines. I see headlines about crimes against real estate agents that end up turning into lawsuits because the brokers were not available to hear the agents say “there is a problem.” So my whole concept is let's talk about culture. Let's talk about making sure that you have safe, a safe culture in your office. If you have a psychologically safe workplace, your agents will stay longer, you don't have to, you don't have to worry about retention and recruitment. And then your people will be happier and happier people. They're going to produce more.

[00:05:54] **MARKI LEMONS RYHAL:** So there is a direct correlation to psychological safety and the ability to earn more money.

[00:06:00] **TRACEY HAWKINS:** Definitely. And I, and that's kind of sad to say, but in the safety business, after an education director told me, “Tracey, what you do is important, but unless you're teaching agents how to make more money, I can't hire you.”

So that made me think every angle must have a way to not only work safely and protect the consumer, but also to impact the bottom line to build your business. So yes, a safe culture means a more profitable culture.

[00:06:25] **BRITTANY WRENN:** Tracey, you made some excellent points and to kind of piggyback off of what you're saying about tying everything to making more money, right? When I talk about the well-being of agents, which this encompasses that, if agents aren't operating, in their highest and best, right, then they simply won't be producing in the way that they could if they were caring for themselves, not only in their physical, mental and emotional well-being, but their psychological well-being and safety as well.

So when I look at how brokers operate in an office environment, I obviously, you know, said “relationships are the cornerstone of real estate and the open door policy is crucial.” But I also believe that, you know, mingling with your agents and getting to know them and being on the floor with them and being present in the office is a part of what creates camaraderie and a feeling of safety, trust and respect, right? So communication is one aspect, but I also believe that when brokers are engaging with their agents, allowing them to be vulnerable and share their struggles in the office and in their businesses, is important. And one way to do that would be maybe sharing some of their own vulnerabilities, some of their own past stories or some of their own struggles.

You know, when I worked in an office and I was working with the agents in those, those offices, I would relate back to my experience in sales in the field, you know, and say, “Hey, this was what I did and here's how I overcame it.” And I saw that visible change in the demeanor of those agents and would actually then open up and become more vulnerable and feel safe talking to me.

So I do believe that the communication, the trust, the respect, all of those things, really, they should be a baseline.

[00:08:23] **MARKI LEMONS RYHAL:** Sit tight for a quick word from our sponsor.

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September is Realtor Safety Month, and I'm excited to be joined today by Lamont Breland, 2024 chair of NAR's Realtor Safety Advisory Committee and broker-owner of Breland Group Realtors in Louisville, Kentucky.

Welcome Lamont. When you think of our member safety, what's the first thing that comes to mind?

[00:08:46] **LAMONT BRELAND:** Well hey Marki, good morning. Honestly, it's my daughters. We have three daughters, two of which work for me here at the Breland Group as agents. So that gives me a unique perspective and makes me hyper-aware of safety concerns.

Let's face it, working in real estate can be dangerous. We meet people we don't know in vacant homes, so it's not surprising there's risks involved. And as a broker, I feel responsible for helping all of our agents understand the risks and for providing tools to keep everyone as safe as possible.

[00:09:13] **MARKI LEMONS RYHAL:** I certainly understand why safety is so important to you, as a father and as a broker.

Can you update us on what the Safety Committee is working on to help safeguard members?

[00:09:24] **LAMONT BRELAND:** Absolutely. One key initiative is mental wellness for members, especially in light of the current challenging market. We've developed a robust mental wellness toolkit and are continually adding more webinars, videos, and other resources.

We're also updating the REALTOR® Safety Course and encouraging all state associations to take the REALTOR® Safety Pledge. In fact, over 80 percent of state associations have done that. So we're well on our way of having 100 percent committing to promote REALTOR® safety.

[00:09:53] **MARKI LEMONS RYHAL:** Sounds like the Safety Committee has been busy.

Any special programs for Safety Month you'd like to highlight?

[00:09:59] **LAMONT BRELAND:** Absolutely. We're excited that NAR is hosting a webinar called Essential Safety Tips for REALTOR®. It's led by safety expert Chris Garrett and myself, and that will be on September 18th at 12 p.m. Central time. But I just want to remind members to keep safety top of mind every day and take advantage of the amazing array of resources at nar.realtor/safety including webinars, training videos, articles, toolkits, and podcasts covering personal safety, but also cyber security, online threats, and much more.

[00:10:31] **MARKI LEMONS RYHAL:** Thank you, Lamont. Safety is a topic that's close to my heart, too. And I agree that all of us should educate ourselves and stay vigilant.

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Many people may think of psychological safety as a piece of brokerage culture, that the broker is responsible for creating and maintaining. But how can their agents contribute? Brittany?

[00:10:58] **BRITTANY WRENN:** All of what we're talking about here feeds into the areas of self-care, which there's multiple, right? And emotional, mental, physical, those are only a few of them.

There's roughly eight, but there's even more than that. Right? So the base eight is what we want to look at. And some of this, if we're not pouring into these areas and we're not really looking internally and saying, “how can I be better so I can do better?” than you're going to find yourself on that hamster wheel.

So I would say the first thing that agents really need to do is look at their business, look at their business plan. How are you operating? And Marki", I'm going to say one of my main sole missions in this industry is to remove the language of being available 24 seven.

[00:11:50] **MARKI LEMONS RYHAL:** Thank you.

[00:11:50] **BRITTANY WRENN:** I always say whenever I'm speaking on wellness and real estate, I say, “Remove that language from your vocabulary, from your marketing. It is impossible unless you're a robot and I don't know it.” Look at that to start, how does your business operate? What are your business boundaries? What are your hours of operation? What, what is your target market and how, how do you reach them? Just go through the standard business plan and then look at how you might prevent burnout in that business plan as you go.

That right there is to me a starting point. So if you're not looking within yourself and your business, you might show up frazzled to a client and then be projecting that energy onto them and say, “okay, why is this client not really supporting me as I move forward or why, why do they seem agitated when I'm with them?”

Well, how are you showing up? How are you operating? And are you creating a safe environment for them to feel like, “Hey, this is the biggest purchase of my life. I don't really even feel comfortable because I can tell my agent is stressed out. And so I don't want to stress them out even more by asking a million questions.”

So it all starts from looking at how you operate and then really making a plan from there. So you need to have processes and you need to have procedures that you're then relaying to your clients and saying, “here's how I operate.” That is all a part of creating a psychologically safe environment cause you're mentally preparing your client for what to expect.

[00:13:26] **TRACEY HAWKINS:** Okay, let's look at it in another way. So we're talking about the agent and the client, and we're talking about psychological safety in that relationship. So right now we're in the age of “show your value,” you know, build this value proposition and show your clients that you're worth it. So I am advocating that during that conversation that you're saying, “Hey, here's what's going to happen. I need you to come in and I want to talk to you about ways to work safely, what we're going to do to keep you and the transaction safe. Never respond to any email, always contact me first,” and, um, just those kind of safe principles. But here's what you're going to add. You're going to tell this client, “if there is anything that I am doing wrong, if I am not meeting your needs, if something just isn't working out, don't suffer in silence.”

Because what they'll do is they'll just mumble, grumble, suffer in silence, and then you'll look up and they're working with another agent. So you need to make it psychologically safe for them to come to you and say, “Hey, I don't like the way you did that. I don't like what you said to me today.” They need to know that you're going to hear them.

So that is a way for agents to inject the psychological safety conversation into their relationship.

[00:14:38] **MARKI LEMONS RYHAL:** So then there is a direct link between psychological safety and showing your value.

[00:14:45] **TRACEY HAWKINS:** Exactly.

[00:14:45] **MARKI LEMONS RYHAL:** Because it's made that client feel better if we're providing true value, provide a way for the client to provide feedback so that they feel psychologically safe inside of our real estate transaction.

[00:14:58] **TRACEY HAWKINS:** Exactly. And then big picture, you originally asked about brokers, how brokers can do it. So I already talked about how brokerages should all have psychological safety as part of the training in their office. Brittany mentioned processes, so if you have a rule that if there is a problem, come to us, that means you have to have a process in place.

You can have an anonymous dropbox, you can have an email that they need to be able to actually voice their concerns in a safe way where they, with someone that they feel comfortable doing so. But going even higher than the brokerage is the um, the association leadership. We need to make sure everyone's on board.

[00:15:36] **MARKI LEMONS RYHAL:** What action steps do you think real estate pros should take to become more aware of what is happening in their offices and with their clients, Brittany?

[00:15:46] **BRITTANY WRENN:** So with brokers, I would obviously encourage that open door policy, that building and forming of relationships. You should know your agents, but with that also hold regular meetings and events to boost engagement, to continue forming those relationships and building upon them. Agents are going to be more likely to stay. You're going to have higher retention. You're going to see boosted productivity as well. So on top of the regular meetings, I think it's important to provide learning and growth opportunities. And I would say also offer resources that support agent wellbeing so that agents have an overall feeling of being cared for and that they're in an environment that wants them to thrive. Do you feel comfortable? Can you communicate with your broker? If you can't to Tracey's point, you know, if there's not a suggestion box that you can anonymously submit concerns, who do you go to next? Right?

So if your broker has not provided that information for you, find someone that you do feel safe with so that you can have your go-to person should you need to see something and say something, right? And then of course, with agents having a solid business plan and burnout prevention plan so that you feel structured and have processes and can then relay those processes to your clients.

So all of that really would be just some action items and steps that you can start with to start forming and then also being in a psychologically safe environment.

[00:17:22] **MARKI LEMONS RYHAL:** You know what, Brittany, I actually forgot that I was burned out and took a two-year sabbatical from real estate and took a job in pharmaceutical sales and I wanted the ability to reset.

And I tell people it's okay to take that step away as long as you remain focused on the goal. And I mean, when I tell you I came running back, I was so elated, but I just needed that little break right to have a reset to be able to come back. And sometimes as a licensed managing broker, there's one agent in your office that can be an issue for all of your agents. And what I encourage brokers to do is you cannot allow one bad apple. That there needs to be an intervention plan put into place when you have multiple agents complaining about the behavior of one particular agent, we need to sit down, have discussion, come up with an action plan because you do not want to allow one agent to ruin all of your other agents.

But it generally is around psychological safety, things that that person is saying and doing that creates that unsafe environment. Tracey, what are your action steps?

[00:18:42] **TRACEY HAWKINS:** I love, love, love action steps. Because if we just talk about things, nothing happens. Every meeting, there needs to be a report about safety.

You know I'm going to get on my safety soapbox. Safety in the field, any concerns that you're seeing, anyone have any questions about safety, and then also share a safety practice. I don't say tip. Tip is kind of flip when we're talking about life-saving safety and data protection for consumers. So I say every one of these meetings that you're having, and you're having them, you need to have them, someone needs to report on safety.

If you have a safety committee, even better, if not a safety representative who will be the one who says, you know, here's the safety practice this week that we need to make sure we're working on. And for agents, here is your action step. You are now tasked with getting that prospective buyer to sit down with you.

We've already talked about the value you're going to bring to them. You're going to tell them how to avoid wire fraud, how to avoid scams and frauds that are targeted to this real estate industry. You're also doing that with sellers during your listing appointment. You're telling them, here's what you need to do to keep your house safe.

Plus you're having that conversation and you know I have to weave a little bit of AI in there, because cybercriminals, they're using deep fakes to trick us. Deep fakes of properties that don't exist. They're writing these perfectly grammatically correct phishing emails, and they could be the wire change instructions.

So your conversation with your sellers and your buyers is you're saying, “I need to keep you safe.” And then that way you're talking about it. You give them a reason to come into the office. One thing I say is that a 100% of every adult is concerned about safety, security, keeping themselves, their families and possessions safe.

So no one's going to say, “I don't want to hear what you have to say about safety.” So use that to open the door, to give you an edge, and then you can do that today.

[00:20:33] **MARKI LEMONS RYHAL:** Excellent. Psychological safety is real. If a person feels psychologically safe, they're going to be happier, they're going to produce at a higher rate, they're going to create harmony inside of your brokerage, and they will create a better transaction for all the clients.

Safety can be your value add in today's world of real estate. Thank you for tuning in. Thank you for joining us at Drive With NAR: REALTOR® to REALTOR® Series. Tune in every month to magazine.realtor/drive or subscribe wherever you listen to your podcast. Find more tips to boost your business at magazine.realtor.