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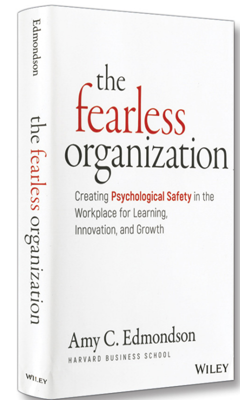
The Fearless Organization

Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation and Growth

by **Amy C. Edmondson**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

The traditional culture of "fitting in" and "going along" spells doom in the knowledge economy. Success requires a continuous influx of new ideas, new challenges and critical thought.

The Fearless Organization offers practical guidance for teams and organizations who are serious about success in the modern economy. Author Amy C. Edmondson explores the culture of psychological safety and provides a blueprint for bringing it to life. People must be allowed to voice half-finished thoughts, ask questions from left field and brainstorm out loud. This creates a culture in which a minor flub is no big deal, where actual mistakes are owned and corrected, and where the next left-field idea could be the next big thing. Informative scenario-based explanations provide a clear path forward to constant learning and healthy innovation.

Shed the "yes-men" approach and step into real performance. Fertilize creativity, clarify goals, achieve accountability, redefine leadership and much more. ***The Fearless Organization*** helps you bring about this most critical transformation.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The connection between psychological safety and high performance.
- To nurture a culture where it's safe to express ideas, ask questions and admit mistakes.
- To use a tool kit that helps to establish psychological safety in teams and organizations.
- Compelling, real-life stories of organizations that got it right — and those that learned the hard way.

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PART I: THE POWER OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

The Underpinning

The tiny newborn twins seemed healthy enough, but their early arrival at only 27 weeks' gestation meant they were considered "high risk."

Fortunately, the medical team at the busy urban hospital where the babies were delivered included staff from the neonatal intensive care unit: a young neonatal nurse practitioner named Christina Price and a silver-haired neonatologist named Dr. Drake.

As Christina looked at the babies, she was concerned. Her recent training had included administering a medicine that promoted lung development as soon as possible for a high-risk baby. But the neonatologist had not issued an order for the medicine, called a prophylactic surfactant.

Christina stepped forward to remind Dr. Drake about the surfactant and then caught herself. Last week she'd overheard him publicly berate another nurse for questioning one of his orders. She told herself that the twins would probably be fine — after all, the doctor probably had a reason for avoiding the surfactant. Besides, he'd already turned on his heel, off for his morning rounds, white coat billowing.

Like most people, Christina was spontaneously managing her image at work. As noted sociologist Erving Goffman argued in his seminal 1957 book, ***The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life,*** as humans, we are constantly attempting to influence others' perceptions of us by regulating and controlling information in social interactions. We do this both consciously and subconsciously.

In one study investigating employee experiences with speaking up, 85% of respondents reported at least one occasion when they felt unable to raise a concern with their bosses, even though they believed the issue was important.

The problem with sitting on our hands and staying within the lines rather than speaking up is that although these behaviors keep us personally safe, they can make us underperform and become dissatisfied. They can also put the organization at risk. In the case of Christina and the newborns, no immediate damage was done, but the fear of speaking up can lead to accidents that were in fact avoidable.

Airplanes have crashed, financial institutions have fallen and hospital patients have died unnecessarily because individuals were, for reasons having to do with the climate in which they worked, afraid to speak up. Fortunately, it doesn't have to happen.

Psychological Safety

Most of us have been exposed to, and internalized, the figure of a villainous boss who rules by fear. Worse, many managers still believe in the power of fear to motivate. They assume that people who are afraid (of management or of the consequences of underperforming) will work hard to avoid unpleasant consequences, and good things will happen. But for jobs where learning or collaboration is required for success, fear is not an effective motivator.

Research in neuroscience shows that fear consumes physiologic resources, diverting them from parts of the brain that manage working memory and process new information. This impairs analytic thinking, creative insight and problem solving. This is why it's hard for people to do their best work when they are afraid. As a result, how psychologically safe a person feels strongly shapes the propensity to engage in learning behaviors, such as information sharing, asking for help or experimenting.

Psychological safety is the belief that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk taking. The concept refers to the experience of feeling able to speak up with relevant ideas, questions or concerns. Psychological safety is present when colleagues trust and respect each other and feel able — even obligated — to be candid.

In psychologically safe environments, people believe that if they make a mistake or ask for help, others will not react badly. Instead, candor is both allowed and expected.

The Paper Trail

In today's organizations, psychological safety is not a "nice to have." It's not an employee perk, like free lunch or game rooms, that you might care about so as to make people happy at work. Psychological safety is ***essential*** to unleashing talent and creating value.

In any company confronting conditions that might be characterized as volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA), psychological safety is directly tied to the bottom line. This is because employee observations, questions, ideas and concerns can provide vital information about what's going on — in the market and in the organization.

Add to that today's growing emphasis on diversity, inclusion

. . . even the extremely smart, high-powered employees at Google needed a psychologically safe work environment to contribute the talents they had to offer.

and belonging at work, and it becomes clear that psychological safety is a vital leadership responsibility. It can make or break an employee's ability to contribute, to grow and learn, and to collaborate.

Over the past 20 years, scholars, consultants and company insiders have published dozens of rigorous studies showing effects of psychological safety in a variety of industry settings. Here are some of the highlights, with groups of studies divided into five categories.

1. An epidemic of silence. Collecting and analyzing data from interviews with employed adults, studies have investigated when and why people feel unable to speak up in the workplace. This work shows, first and foremost, that people often hold back even when they believe that what they have to say could be important for the organization, for the customer or for themselves.

In one early study of workplace silence, the two most frequently mentioned reasons for remaining silent were fear of being viewed or labeled negatively and fear of damaging work relationships. As later research demonstrated more systematically, people at work are not only failing to speak up with potentially threatening or embarrassing content, they are also withholding ideas for improvement.

2. A work environment that supports learning. A growing number of studies find that psychological safety can exist at work and, when it does, that people do in fact speak up, offer ideas, report errors and exhibit a great deal more that can be categorized as "learning behavior." For example, in a study of nurses in four Belgian hospitals, a team of researchers led by Hannes Leroy explored how head nurses encouraged other nurses to report errors, while also enforcing high standards for safety. They found that psychologically safe teams made fewer errors and spoke up about them more often.

3. Why psychological safety matters for performance. With routine, predictable, modular work on the decline, more and more of the tasks that people do require judgment, coping with uncertainty, suggesting new ideas, and coordinating and communicating with others. This means that voice is mission critical. And so, for anything but the most independent or routine work, psychological safety is intimately tied to freeing people up to pursue excellence.

A multi-year study of teams at Google, code-named Project Aristotle, found that psychological safety was the critical factor explaining why some teams outperformed others, as reported in a detailed feature article by Charles Duhigg in the ***New York Times*** Magazine in 2016. They discovered that even the extremely smart, high-powered employees at Google needed a psychologically safe work environment to contribute the talents they had to offer.

4. Psychologically safe employees are engaged employees. A study in a Midwestern insurance company found that psychological safety predicted worker engagement. In turn, psychological safety was fostered by supportive relationships with co-workers. Another study looked at the relationship between employee trust in top management and employee engagement. With survey data from 170 research scientists working in six Irish research centers, the authors showed that trust in top management led to psychological safety, which in turn promoted work engagement.

5. Psychological safety as the extra ingredient. In these studies, psychological safety has been found to help teams overcome the challenges of geographic dispersion, put conflict to good use and leverage diversity. For example, an ambitious study of 14 innovation teams with members dispersed across 18 nations showed that with psychological safety, team members felt less anxious about what others might think of them and were better able to communicate openly.

PART II: PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AT WORK

Avoidable Failure

In May 2015, the Volkswagen Group had every reason to feel proud. It had sold over 10 million vehicles the previous year, thereby laying claim to the title of world's largest auto maker. One of the largest employers in Germany, the com-

pany was credited with helping the country recover from the global financial crisis of 2008.

Ironically, as it would turn out, its Jetta TDI Clean Diesel won the Green Car of the Year at the 2008 Los Angeles Auto Show. A firm with a 78-year history in Germany, made famous by the iconic Beetle of the 1960s, and with a pristine reputation for engineering prowess, Volkswagen's star shone bright enough to be blinding.

As the saying goes, pride cometh before the fall. Merely months later, Volkswagen, the world's largest automotive company, was facing unimaginable scandal. The clean diesel engines that had anchored its impressive U.S. sales were discovered to have been — essentially — a hoax.

In the following years, prosecutors in the United States and Germany would identify more than 40 people, "spread out across at least four cities and working for three VW brands," involved in an elaborate scheme to defraud government regulators. "Dieselgate," as the scandal was dubbed, referred to VW's deceptiveness in complying with the regulations required by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to sell automobiles in the United States.

Unreachable Goal, Culture of Fear

How could this have happened? CEO Martin Winterkorn had taken the helm in 2007, and he'd set a goal that was both precise and ambitious: to triple the company's U.S. sales within 10 years, thereby surpassing rivals Toyota and General Motors to become the world's largest automobile maker. The company's so-called clean diesel vehicles, touted for their high performance and excellent fuel economy, were essential to this strategy. There was only one problem: Diesels produced more nitrous oxide than gasoline engines and would not pass the United States environmental regulations.

Somewhere in the millions of lines of software code the engineers wrote for what became the "clean diesel" vehicles, they embedded instructions that would enable the cars to pass the strict U.S. emissions tests. Soon enough, the "defeat device," as the instructions were called, came to light. For the next two years, the U.S. environmental agencies presented their findings; VW denied, covered up and finally confessed.

How could this failure have been avoided? Martin Winterkorn is certainly a good candidate to be cast as the villain. He had a reputation as an arrogant, perfectionistic martinet with an obsessive attention to detail. But Winterkorn's leadership was not born in a vacuum.

The root cause of VW's Dieselgate scandal in 2015 cannot be located in the personality or leadership of any single person or small group. Perhaps one could say the failure was caused by holding fast to an outdated belief about what motivates workers.

Perhaps most stunning about the VW emissions debacle is that it's by no means a singular event. The same script — unreachable target goals, a command-and-control hierarchy that motivates by fear, and people afraid to lose their jobs if they fail — has been repeated again and again.

Volkswagen, and other organizations that have experienced such crises, boasted deep reservoirs of expertise, driven, intelligent leaders and clearly articulated goals. They didn't lack capable employees in any of the relevant fields required for the organization to succeed in its industry. In short, they had talent. What they lacked was the leadership needed to ensure that a climate of psychological safety permeated the workplace, allowing people to speak truth to power inside the company.

Dangerous Silence

More than just business failure is at stake when psychological safety is low. In many workplaces, people see something physically unsafe or wrong and fear reporting it. This reticence unfortunately can lead to widespread frustration, anxiety, depression and even physical harm.

On February 1, 2003, NASA's Space Shuttle Columbia experienced a catastrophic re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere. All seven astronauts perished. Although space travel is obviously risky and fatal accidents seem part of the territory, this particular accident did not come "out of the blue."

Two weeks earlier, a NASA engineer named Rodney Rocha had watched launch-day video footage, a day after what had seemed to be a picture-perfect launch on a sunny Florida morning. But something seemed amiss. Rocha played the tape over and over. He thought a chunk of insulating foam might have fallen off the shuttle's external tank and struck the left wing of the craft.

To resolve the ambiguity, Rocha wanted to get satellite photos of the Shuttle's wing. But this would require NASA higher ups to ask the Department of Defense for help.

Rocha emailed his boss to see if he could get help authorizing a request for satellite images. His boss thought it unnecessary and said so. Working with an ad hoc team of engineers

to assess the damage, he was unable to resolve his concern about possible damage without obtaining images. A week later, when the foam strike possibility was briefly discussed by senior managers in the formal mission management team meeting, Rocha, sitting on the periphery, observed silently.

A formal investigation by experts would later conclude that a large hole in the shuttle wing occurred when a briefcase-sized piece of foam hit the leading edge of the wing, causing the accident. They also identified two, albeit difficult and highly uncertain, rescue options that might have prevented the tragic deaths. Reporting on the investigation, ABC News anchor Charlie Gibson asked Rocha why he hadn't spoken up in the meeting. The engineer replied, "I just couldn't do it. I'm too low down [in the organization]…"

> Having something to say yet feeling literally unable to do so is painfully real for many employees.

The psychological experience of having something to say yet feeling literally unable to do so is painfully real for many employees and very common in organizational hierarchies, like that of NASA in 2003.

Many who analyze events leading up to tragic accidents such as this cannot help pointing out that people should demonstrate a bit more backbone. Courage.

Exhorting people to speak up because it's the right thing to do relies on an ethical argument but is not a strategy for ensuring good outcomes. Insisting on acts of courage puts the onus on individuals without creating the conditions where the expectation is likely to be met. For speaking up to become routine, psychological safety — and expectations about speaking up — must become institutionalized and systematized.

The Fearless Workplace

A growing number of organizations are making the fearless workplace an aspiration. Leaders of these organizations recognize that psychological safety is mission critical when knowledge is a crucial source of value.

When people speak up, ask questions, debate vigorously, and commit themselves to continuous learning and improvement, good things happen. Workplaces where employees know that their input is valued create new possibilities for authentic engagement and stellar performance.

Making Candor Real

If you were over the age of three in 1995, chances are you were aware — or would soon become aware — of a movie called ***Toy Story***, the first computer animated feature film released by a company named Pixar. That year, ***Toy Story*** would become the highest grossing film and Pixar the largest initial public offering. The rest, as they say, is history.

Pixar Animation Studios has since produced 19 feature films, all of which have been commercial and critical triumphs. This is a remarkable statement in an industry where hits are prized but rare, and a series of hits without fail from a single company is all but unheard of.

How do they do it? Through leadership that creates the conditions where both creativity and criticism can flourish. Pixar co-founder Ed Catmull credits the studio's success, in part, to candor.

Catmull encourages candor by looking for ways to institutionalize it in the organization — most notably in what Pixar calls its "Braintrust." A small group that meets every few months or so to assess a movie in process, provide candid feedback to the director and help solve creative problems, the Braintrust was launched in 1999, when Pixar was rushing to save ***Toy Story 2***, which had gone off the rails.

The Braintrust's recipe is fairly simple: A group of directors and storytellers watches an early run of the movie together, eats lunch together and then provides feedback to the director about what they think worked and what did not. But the recipe's key ingredient is candor. And candor, though simple, is never easy.

As Catmull candidly admits, "… early on, all of our movies suck." In other words, it would have been easy to make ***Toy Story*** a movie about the secret life of toys that was sappy and boring. But the creative process, innately iterative, relies on feedback that is truly honest.

Pixar's Braintrust has rules. First, feedback must be constructive — and about the project, not the person. Similarly,

the filmmaker cannot be defensive or take criticism personally and must be ready to hear the truth. Second, the comments are suggestions, not prescriptions. There are no mandates, top-down or otherwise; the director is ultimately the one responsible for the movie and can take or leave solutions offered. Third, candid feedback is not a "gotcha" but must come from a place of empathy.

Braintrusts — groups of people with a shared agenda who offer candid feedback to their peers — are subject to individual personalities and chemistries. In other words, they can easily go off the rails if the process isn't well led. To be effective, managers have to monitor dynamics continually over time. It helps enormously if people respect each other's expertise and trust each other's opinions.

Safe and Sound

Speaking up is easier said than done. There's no switch to flip that will instantaneously turn an organization accustomed to silence and fear into one where people speak candidly. Instead, creating a psychologically safe workplace requires a lot of effort to alter systems, structures and processes. Ultimately, it means that deep-seated, entrenched organizational norms and attitudes must change.

And it begins with what can be called "stage setting." Let's look at how Anglo American, one of the world's largest mines, headquartered in South Africa, prepared for and then institutionalized speaking up.

When Cynthia Carroll was appointed in 2007, with much fanfare, as the first female CEO of an international mining company, she was appalled by the number of worker fatalities occurring in the company — nearly 200 in the five years prior to her arrival.

Realizing that she was "in an unprecedented position to influence change" as both an American/outsider in a foreign country and as a woman where "until very recently women hadn't been allowed to visit underground at mines in South Africa, let alone work there," she immediately used her position to speak up and demand a policy of zero fatalities or serious injuries.

At first, others in the company, especially members of the old guard who saw themselves as upholding tradition, refused to take Carroll seriously. Serious injuries and deaths were considered an inevitable hazard, part of mining's dangerous physical demands.

An Unprecedented Move

Carroll's response to the resistance could not have been more unambiguous. She shut down one of the most problematic and dangerous mines. Even more shocking, Carroll insisted that before the mine could restart, she wanted to find out what the workers were thinking, and she intended to get input from every single worker about how to improve safety. This, she knew, was a direct challenge to Anglo American's strict hierarchical culture and rigid, top-down management style, which had begun with the mine's founding in 1917 and was further strengthened by South Africa's apartheid history.

Here's where things get interesting. Psychological safety had to be created in the mines by finding a culturally appropriate approach. With help from the unions, Anglo American leadership adopted a traditional South African method of conducting village assemblies, called "lekgotla."

Traditionally, in these assemblies, everyone sits in a circle and has a chance to speak without being interrupted or criticized; conversation continues for as long as it takes to reach consensus on whatever issue is at stake. During Anglo American's "lekgotla," senior managers reframed the initial question. Instead of asking workers to give their opinions directly about safety issues, they asked, "What do we need to do to create a work environment of care and respect?" That was when workers started to feel safe enough to speak up about specific concerns.

The dialogue continued until each group had developed a contract stating what specific actions were needed to maximize safety. In a powerful symbolic gesture of shared commitment, workers and Anglo American executives both signed the contract.

PART III: CREATING A FEARLESS ORGANIZATION

Making It Happen

Let's talk about specific ways leaders can build psychological safety in their organizations. The process involves a tool kit with three main strategies: setting the stage, inviting participation and responding productively. With some practice and reflection, this tool kit is available to any leader wishing to create psychological safety.

How to Set the Stage for Psychological Safety

Whenever you are trying to get people on the same page, with common goals and a shared appreciation for what

> Whenever you are trying to get people on the same page, with common goals and a shared appreciation for what they're up against, you're setting the stage for psychological safety.

they're up against, you're setting the stage for psychological safety. The most important skill to master is that of framing the work.

Framing the work includes reframing failure and clarifying the need for voice.

Reframing failure starts with understanding a basic typology of failure types. Failure archetypes include preventable failures (never good news), complex failures (still not good news) and intelligent failures (not fun, but must be considered good news because of the value they bring).

Preventable failures are deviations from recommended procedures that produce bad outcomes. If someone fails to don safety glasses in a factory and suffers an eye injury, this is a preventable failure.

Complex failures occur in familiar contexts when a confluence of factors come together in a way that may never have occurred before; consider the severe flooding of the Wall Street subway station in New York City during Superstorm Sandy in 2012. With vigilance, complex failures can sometimes, but not always, be avoided. Neither preventable nor complex failures are worthy of celebration.

In contrast, intelligent failures, as the term implies, must be celebrated so as to encourage more of them. They are the result of a thoughtful foray into new territory.

Clarifying the need for voice. Framing the work also involves calling attention to other ways, beyond failure's prevalence, in which tasks and environments differ. Three especially important dimensions are uncertainty, interdependence and what's at stake.

Emphasizing uncertainty reminds people that they need to be curious and alert to pick up early indicators of change in, say, customer preferences in a new market, a patient's reaction to a drug, or new technologies on the horizon.

Emphasizing interdependence lets people know that they're responsible for understanding how their tasks interact with other people's tasks.

Finally, clarifying the stakes is important whether the stakes are high or low. Reminding people that human life is on the line — say, in a hospital, a mine or at NASA — helps put interpersonal risk in perspective. People are more likely to speak up — thereby overcoming the inherent asymmetry of voice and silence — if leaders frame its importance.

How to Invite Participation So People Respond

The second essential activity in the leaders' tool kit is inviting participation in a way that people find compelling and genuine. The goal is to lower what is usually a too-high bar for what's considered appropriate participation. The invitation to participate must be crystal clear if people are going to choose to engage rather than to play it safe. Two essential behaviors that signal an invitation is genuine are adopting a mindset of situational humility and engaging in proactive inquiry.

Situational humility. The bottom line is that no one wants to take the interpersonal risk of imposing ideas when the boss appears to think he or she knows everything. A learning mindset, which blends humility and curiosity, mitigates this risk. A learning mindset recognizes that there is always more to learn.

Keep in mind that confidence and humility are not opposites. Confidence in one's abilities and knowledge, when warranted, is far preferable to false modesty. But humility is not modesty, false or otherwise. Humility is the simple recognition that you don't have all the answers, and you certainly don't have a crystal ball.

Proactive inquiry. The second tool for inviting participation is inquiry. Inquiry is purposeful probing to learn more about an issue, situation or person. The foundational skill lies in cultivating genuine interest in others' responses.

Genuine questions convey respect for the other person — a vital aspect of psychological safety. Contrary to what many may believe, asking questions tends to make the leader seem not weak but thoughtful and wise.

How to Respond Productively to Voice –– No Matter Its Quality

To reinforce a climate of psychological safety, it's imperative

that leaders — at all levels — respond productively to the risks people take. Productive responses are characterized by three elements: expressions of appreciation, destigmatizing failure and sanctioning clear violations.

Express appreciation. Imagine if Christina, the NICU nurse discussed at the beginning of this summary, had spoken up to Dr. Drake. Her quiet fear was that he would have berated or belittled her. But what if he had said, "Thank you so much for bringing that up"? Her feeling of psychological safety would have gone up a notch.

This is an example of an appreciative response. It does not matter whether the doctor believes the nurse's suggestion or question is good or bad. Either way, his initial response must be one of appreciation. Then he can educate — that is, give feedback or explain clinical subtleties. But to ensure that staff keeps speaking up so as to keep patients safe from unexpected lapses in attention or judgment, the courage it takes to speak up must receive the mini-reward of thanks.

Destigmatize failure. Leaders who respond to all failures in the same way will not create a healthy environment for learning. When a failure occurs because someone violated a rule or value that matters in the organization, this is very different than when a thoughtful hypothesis in the lab turns out to be wrong.

A productive response to intelligent failure can mean actually celebrating the news. Some years ago, the chief scientific officer at Eli Lilly introduced "failure parties" to honor intelligent, high-quality scientific experiments that failed to achieve the desired results.

Sanction clear violations. Firing can sometimes be an appropriate and productive response — to a blameworthy act. But won't this kill the psychological safety? No. Most people are thoughtful enough to recognize (and appreciate) that when people violate rules or repeatedly take risky shortcuts, they are putting themselves, their colleagues and their organization at risk. In short, psychological safety is reinforced rather than harmed by fair, thoughtful responses to potentially dangerous, harmful or sloppy behavior.

Leadership is a vital force in making it possible for people and organizations to overcome the inherent barriers to voice and engagement. We must be realistic about the fact that "driving fear out" of any organization, as W. Edwards Deming (the father of total quality management who helped transform manufacturing practices around the world) put it, will be a journey.

We don't have a magic wand to make psychological safety happen overnight, but by committing to the aspiration to build it, one conversation at a time, leaders take the first step of a perpetual journey toward building and nurturing organizations that can innovate and thrive in the knowledge economy.

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As the Novartis professor of leadership and management at the Harvard Business School, Amy C. Edmondson studies leaders seeking to make a positive difference in the world through the work they do in organizations of all kinds. The central thread that has run through her academic career is creating work environments where people can team up and do their best work.

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