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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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81 Highlights

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 334

In most workplaces today, people are holding back far too often – reluctant to say or ask something that might somehow make them look bad. To complicate matters, as companies become increasingly global and complex, more and more of the work is team-based. Today's employees, at all levels, spend 50% more time collaborating than they did 20 years ago.³ Hiring talented individuals is not enough. They have to be able to work well together.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 351

Psychological safety is not immunity from consequences, nor is it a state of high self-regard. In psychologically safe workplaces, people know they might fail, they might receive performance feedback that says they're not meeting expectations, and they might lose their jobs due to changes in the industry environment or even to a lack of competence in their role. These attributes of the modern workplace are unlikely to disappear anytime soon. But in a psychologically safe workplace, people are not hindered by interpersonal fear. They feel willing and able to take the inherent interpersonal risks of candor. They fear holding back their full participation more than they fear sharing a potentially sensitive, threatening, or wrong idea. The fearless organization is one in which interpersonal fear is minimized so that team and organizational performance can be maximized in a knowledge intensive world. It is not one devoid of anxiety about the future!

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 364

Psychological safety is broadly defined as a climate in which people are comfortable expressing and being themselves.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 371

Yet a 2017 Gallup poll found that only 3 in 10 employees strongly agree with the statement that their opinions count at work.⁶ Gallup calculated that by “moving that ratio to six in 10 employees, organizations could realize a 27 percent reduction in turnover, a 40 percent reduction in safety incidents and a 12 percent increase in productivity.”⁷ That's why it's not enough for organizations to simply hire talent. If leaders want to unleash individual and collective talent, they must foster a psychologically safe climate where employees feel free to contribute ideas, share information, and report mistakes.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 391

For now, let's just say I didn't set out to study psychological safety but rather to study teamwork and its relationship to mistakes.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 540

Don't want to look ignorant? Don't ask questions. Don't want to look incompetent? Don't admit to mistakes or weaknesses. Don't want to be called disruptive? Don't make suggestions. While it might be acceptable at a social event to privilege looking good over making a difference, at work this tendency can lead to significant problems – ranging from thwarted innovation to poor service to, at the extreme, loss of human life. Yet avoiding behaviors that might lead others to think less of us is pretty much second nature in most workplaces.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 560

Remaining silent due to fear of interpersonal risk can make the difference between life and death. 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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 587

I have defined psychological safety as the belief that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk taking.⁶ 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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 626

When all of the error and survey data were compiled, I was at first thrilled. Running the statistical analysis, I immediately saw that there was a significant correlation between the independently collected error rates and the measures of team effectiveness from my survey. But then I looked closely and noticed something wrong. The direction of the correlation was exactly the opposite of what I had predicted. Better teams were apparently making more – not fewer – mistakes than less strong teams. Worse, the correlation was statistically significant. I briefly wondered how I could tell my dissertation chair the bad news. This was a problem. No, it was a puzzle. Did better teams really make more mistakes?

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 638

And then came the eureka moment. What if the better teams had a climate of openness that made it easier to report and discuss error? The good teams, I suddenly thought, don't make more mistakes; they report more. But having this insight was a far cry from proving it.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 646

In short, people in the better teams (as measured by my survey, but unbeknownst to the research assistant) talked openly about the risks of errors, often trying to find new ways to catch and prevent them.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 656

The data are consistent in this simple but interesting finding: psychological safety seems to “live” at the level of the group. In other words, in the organization where you work, it's likely that different groups have different interpersonal experiences; in some, it may be easy to speak up and bring your full self to work. In others, speaking up might be experienced as a last resort – as it did in some of the patient-care teams I studied. That's because psychological safety is very much shaped by local leaders. As I will elaborate later in this book, subsequent research has borne out my initial, accidental discovery.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 664

Massachusetts Institute of Technology professors Edgar Schein and Warren Bennis wrote about the need for psychological safety to help people cope with the uncertainty and anxiety of organizational change in a 1965 book.⁹ Schein later noted that psychological safety was vital for helping people overcome the defensiveness and “learning anxiety” they face at work, especially when something doesn't go as they'd hoped or expected.¹⁰ Psychological safety, he argued, allows people to focus on achieving shared goals rather than on self-protection.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 682

A key insight from this work was that psychological safety is not a personality difference but rather a feature of the workplace that leaders can and must help create. More specifically, in every company or organization I've since studied, even some with famously strong corporate cultures, psychological safety has been found to differ substantially across groups. Nor was psychological safety the result of a random or elusive group chemistry. What was clear was that leaders in some groups had been able to effectively create the conditions for psychological safety while other leaders had not. This is true whether you're looking across floors in a hospital, teams in a factory, branches in a retail bank, or restaurants in a chain.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 703

Worse, many managers – both consciously and not – 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. This might make sense if the work is straightforward and the worker is unlikely to run into any problems or have any ideas for improvement. But for jobs where learning or collaboration is required for success, fear is not an effective motivator. Brain science has amply demonstrated that fear inhibits learning and cooperation.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 724

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. Psychological safety exists when people feel their

workplace is an environment where they can speak up, offer ideas, and ask questions without fear of being punished or embarrassed.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 734

Working in a psychologically safe environment does not mean that people always agree with one another for the sake of being nice. It also does not mean that people offer unequivocal praise or unconditional support for everything you have to say. In fact, you could say it's the opposite. Psychological safety is about candor, about making it possible for productive disagreement and free exchange of ideas.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 747

Some have interpreted psychological safety as a synonym for extroversion. They might have previously concluded that people don't speak up at work because they're shy or lack confidence, or simply prefer to keep to themselves. However, research shows that the experience of psychological safety at work is not correlated with introversion and extroversion.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 754

Although trust and psychological safety have much in common, they are not interchangeable concepts. A key difference is that psychological safety is experienced at a group level. People working together tend to have similar perceptions of whether or not the climate is psychologically safe. Trust, on the other hand, refers to interactions between two individuals or parties; trust exists in the mind of an individual and pertains to a specific target individual or organization.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 768

Psychological safety is not an “anything goes” environment where people are not expected to adhere to high standards or meet deadlines. It is not about becoming “comfortable” at work. This is particularly important to understand because many managers appreciate the appeal of error-reporting, help-seeking, and other proactive behavior to help their organizations learn. At the same time, they implicitly equate psychological safety with relaxing performance standards – that is, with an inability to, in their words, “hold people accountable.” This conveys a misunderstanding of the nature of the phenomenon.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 777

In short, as depicted in Figure 1.1, psychological safety and performance standards are two separate, equally important dimensions – both of which affect team and organizational performance in a complex interdependent environment.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 792

But it's not the comfort or apathy zones that worry me most. What keeps me up at night is the lower right-hand quadrant. When performance standards are high but psychological safety is low – a situation far too common in

today's workplace – employees are anxious about speaking up, and both work quality and workplace safety suffer.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 834

I do not mean to imply that psychological safety is all you need for high performance. Not even close. I like to say that psychological safety takes off the brakes that keep people from achieving what's possible. But it's not the fuel that powers the car. In any challenging industry setting, leaders have two vital tasks. One, they must build psychological safety to spur learning and avoid preventable failures; two, they must set high standards and inspire and enable people to reach them. Setting high standards remains a crucial management task. So does sharing, sharpening, and continually emphasizing a worthy purpose.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 921

“Your greatest fear as a CEO is that people aren't telling you the truth.” —Mark Costa

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 954

One measure of practitioner interest in psychological safety can be found in the term's use frequency in the popular media. To gauge the popularity of the concept, I used Factiva to see how many times the term had been mentioned in newspapers, articles, blogs, and other news media. The graph in Figure 2.1 depicts the results, indicating mentions of “psychological safety” and its variants (i.e. psychologically safe) each year since 1990. Figure 2.1 Mentions of Psychological Safety in Popular Media.⁴ The uptick in mentions in recent years reflects, I believe, growing recognition that psychological safety matters in any environment in which people are attempting to do something novel or challenging.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1025

But the two most frequently mentioned reasons for remaining silent were one, fear of being viewed or labeled negatively, and two, fear of damaging work relationships. These fears, which are definitionally the opposite of psychological safety, have no place in the fearless organization.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1083

It's an old truism that bad news doesn't travel up the hierarchy. But what we found is that people err so far on the side of caution at work that they routinely hold back great ideas – not just bad news.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1091

Table 2.2 Why Silence Wins in the Voice-Silence Calculation. Who Benefits When Benefit Occurs
 Certainty of Benefit Voice The organization and/or its customers After some delay Low Silence Oneself Immediately High

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1181

In a particularly compelling study in several US manufacturing and service companies, University of Minnesota Professor Enno Siemsen and his colleagues found an intuitively interesting relationship between confidence and psychological safety.²⁴ As expected, the more confident people were in their knowledge, the more they spoke up. More interestingly, a psychologically safe workplace helped people overcome a lack of confidence. In other words, if your workplace is psychologically safe, you're more able to speak up even when you have less confidence. Given that an individual's confidence and the value of his idea are not always tightly linked, the usefulness of psychological safety for facilitating knowledge sharing can be immense.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1226

What they had discovered was that even the extremely smart, high-powered employees at Google needed a psychologically safe work environment to contribute the talents they had to offer. The team also found four other factors that helped explain team performance – clear goals, dependable colleagues, personally meaningful work, and a belief that the work has impact. As Rozovsky put it, however, reiterating the quote at the start of Chapter 1, “psychological safety was by far the most important...it was the underpinning of the other four.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1541

What many people do not realize is that motivation by fear is indeed highly effective – effective at creating the illusion that goals are being achieved. It is not effective in ensuring that people bring the creativity, good process, and passion needed to accomplish challenging goals in knowledge-intensive workplaces.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1638

Beginning in 2013, reports began to surface that Wells Fargo employees had engaged in, and were still currently engaging in, questionable practices to hit their sales numbers. A former employee reported that members of his Los Angeles branch opened accounts or credit cards for customers without their consent, saying a computer glitch had occurred if customers complained. He also reported that employees lied to customers-saying that certain products could only be purchased together-to hit their numbers.³¹ Other tactics to meet sales goals included encouraging customers to open unnecessary multiple checking accounts – one for groceries, one for travel, one for emergencies, and so on³² – and creating fake email addressees to enroll customers in online banking.³³ Before the scandal went public, Wells Fargo made a number of changes that seemed to try to address its problems. The company fired over 5300 employees for ethics violations between 2011 and 2016,³⁴ rolled out a “Quality of Sale” Report Card that set limits on the terms of a sale,³⁵ expanded ethics training, and explicitly told employees not to create fake accounts.³⁶ There was, however, one glaring omission: no changes were made to “Going for Gr-Eight.” Just as VW engineers were unable to design a clean diesel engine in ways that were “permissible,” Wells Fargo employees were unable to meet sales goals without engaging in shady practices. There was simply a limit to how many products any one customer's wallet could allow. As one former banker put it, “They [the higher ups] warned us about this [unethical] type of behavior...but the reality was that people had to meet their goals. They needed a paycheck.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1662

Like Volkswagen, Wells Fargo's avoidable failure was not the result of one bad apple but of a system that demanded hitting targets so ambitious they could only be met by deceit. Employees operated in a culture of fear that brooked no dissent. Rather than manifesting interest in salespeople's experiences while executing the cross-selling strategy and using what was being learned in the field to shift or sharpen the company's strategy,⁴⁰ managers sent a clear message: produce – or else.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1755

Most critically, Beim reported that within three weeks of his investigation he saw signs of regulatory capture, a phenomenon that journalist Ira Glass later described as like “a watchdog who licks the face of an intruder and plays catch with the intruder instead of barking at him.”⁵⁹ The regulators were, in a sense, disabled from effectively carrying out their regulatory duties by a culture of fear and deference. What makes this dynamic especially frustrating is that the banks were required by law to hand over whatever information the Feds asked for. Carmen Segarra, who worked as a regulator after the Beim investigation, said, “The Fed has both the power to get the information and the power to punish a bank if it chooses to withhold it.” When asked why she thought the regulators chose deference even though they possessed this power, her answer was succinct: “they are coming from a place of fear.”

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 1770

Volkswagen, Wells Fargo, Nokia, and the New York Federal Reserve serve as vivid examples of organizations that boasted deep reservoirs of expertise, driven, intelligent leaders, and clearly articulated goals. None lacked capable employees in any of the relevant fields required for the organization to succeed in its industry. In short, they had the 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 – and, in the case of the Fed, to their industry partners. Chapter 7 will focus on what leaders need to do to create and recover psychological safety; here, I simply note that the kinds of large-scale business failures described in this chapter are preventable. None of these failures occurred overnight or out of the blue. Quite the opposite. The seeds of failure were taking root for months or years while senior management remained blissfully unaware. In many organizations, like those discussed in this chapter, countless small problems routinely occur, presenting early warning signs that the company's strategy may be falling short and needs to be revisited. Yet these signals are often squandered. Preventing avoidable failure thus starts with encouraging people throughout a company to push back, share data, and actively report on what is really happening in the lab or in the market so as to create a continuous loop of learning and agile execution.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2056

Rocha's statement captures a subtle but crucial aspect of the psychology of speaking up at work. Consider his words carefully. He did not say, “I chose not to speak,” or “I felt it was not right to speak.” He said that he “couldn't” speak. Oddly, this description is apt. 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. We can all recognize this phenomenon. We understand why his hands

spontaneously depicted that poignant vertical ladder. When probed, as Rocha was by Gibson, many people report a similar experience of feeling unable to speak up when hierarchy is made salient. Meanwhile, the higher ups in a position to listen and learn are often blind to the silencing effects of their presence.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2108

Such is the inexorably psychological pull of hierarchy that even when their own lives were at risk, not to mention the lives of others, the first officer and the flight engineer did not push back on their captain's authority. In those moments where speaking up might make sense, we all go through an implicit decision-making process, weighing the benefits and costs of speaking up. The problem, as explained in Chapter 2, is that the benefits are often unclear and delayed (e.g. avoiding a possible collision) while the costs are tangible and immediate (van Zanten's irritation and potential anger). As a result, we consistently underweight the benefits and overweight the costs. In the case of Tenerife, this biased process led to disastrous outcomes. Many who analyze events leading up to tragic accidents such as this one—which could have been avoided had the junior officer spoken up—cannot help pointing out that people should demonstrate a bit more backbone. Courage. It is impossible to disagree with this assertion. Nonetheless, agreeing doesn't make it effective. 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. After Tenerife, cockpit training was changed to place more emphasis on crew decision-making, encourage pilots to assert their opinion when they believed something was wrong, and help captains listen to concerns from co-pilots and crews.⁹ These measures were a precursor to the official crew resource management (CRM) training that all pilots must now undergo.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2387

Susan Fowler at Uber is just one example of how social media has enabled the speaking of truth to power in the workplace. In 2017, thousands of women spoke up to say, “Me Too,” to workplace harassment, and hundreds of men in high-profile positions suffered the consequences of behavior that had, in many cases, worked for awhile – decades, or even entire careers. Communication technology gave social media movements such as MeToo and Black Lives Matter the power to ignite and move with rapidity into mainstream media, public opinion, and in some cases, into the legal courts. Such movements raise the sense of urgency to create and maintain organizations where psychological safety supports people to do their best work.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2646

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. It helps that the directors have often already gone through the process themselves. Praise and appreciation, especially for the director's vision and ambition, are doled out in heaping measures. Catmull, again: “The Braintrust is benevolent. It wants to help. And it has no selfish agenda.”⁵ The Braintrust, seen as a neutral and free-floating “it” rather than as a fearsome “them,” is

perceived as more than the sum of its individual members. When people feel psychologically safe enough to contribute insight, opinion, or suggestion, the knowledge in the room thereby increases exponentially. This is because individual observations and suggestions build on each other, taking new shape and creating new value, especially compared to what happens when individual feedback is collected separately. 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. Pixar director Andrew Stanton offers advice for how to choose people for an effective feedback group. They must, he says, “make you think smarter and put lots of solutions on the table in a short amount of time.”⁶ Stanton's point about having people around who make us “think smarter” gets to the heart of why psychological safety is essential to innovation and progress. We can only think smarter if others in the room speak their minds.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2854

In any creative industry, failure is a fact of life. Most design ideas never come to fruition. Similarly, most film footage hits the cutting room floor, and many financial bets will fail before you hit a winner. Indeed, more and more people in leading companies around the world are embracing the notion of failing well to succeed sooner. But as appealing and logical as the idea of learning from failure may be, the truth is no one really wants to fail.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 2891

Teller highlights how unpleasant it feels for us to fail, especially at work. It's natural to worry what other people will think and about losing our job. That's why, unless a leader expressly and actively makes it psychologically safe to do so, people will seek to avoid failure.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3010

Leaders who are willing to say “I don't know” play a surprisingly powerful role in engaging the hearts and minds of employees.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3346

By now you're well aware that 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, as we'll explore in depth in Chapter 7, 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 I call “stage setting.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3381

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. As you will see, lekgotla seems to echo tenets and practices of psychological safety.

Traditionally, in these assemblies (somewhat like meetings at Eileen Fisher), 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.²⁴ 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. One group said that they'd like hot water at their work site to clean up and make tea. (Management complied with this request.) 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. As Judy Ndlovu, an Anglo American executive said about this process, “the real change was listening to the workers... Cynthia challenged management to understand what the employees were thinking, what they felt when they went into the mine each day.”²⁵ Previously, for an individual miner to speak up would have taken courage but might very well have been a foolish act if not well received by management. Once psychological safety started to take root in the culture, miners could then speak up to help insure physical safety.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3472

As the men raced against the clock, Masuda slowly came to an unwelcome realization: his plan was untenable. Even at the superhuman pace the men were working, they would not have enough time to hook up all three reactors. The waste building was just too far away. Masuda's strength as a leader was demonstrated by the immediate admission of his mistake. In keeping with Ray Dalio's Principles, Masuda succeeded by virtue of extreme candor – by telling people the worst news, which he believed would increase the chances they could figure out how to handle the situation. Despite its unwelcome nature, the admission increased the psychological safety in the team and bonded the group more tightly. Consulting with his team leaders, Masuda concluded that they had no choice but to gamble by utilizing some of the power from the generator of the lone functioning reactor unit. On the whiteboard, Masuda added in adjustments to the original plan. The men continued to work tirelessly throughout the day. Yet, as night approached, some engineers noticed that the pressure in Unit 1 was now climbing faster than that of Unit 2. Fortunately, they spoke up to inform Masuda that they now believed Unit 1 to be most vulnerable and suggested to him that the workers refocus their energy. Equally important, Masuda listened closely to his engineers and took their suggestions seriously. Having seen his team push onward, without having slept in almost two days, Masuda was understandably reluctant to tell them, “redo it! Shift from Unit 2 to Unit 1!” Still, he broke the news. Though some were upset, a climate of psychological safety and a recognition of what was at stake helped them to commit to the new course of action. Just before midnight, ecstatic applause broke out when the workers finished laying the last of the cable. At 1:24 a.m., they were notified that the cooling function had been restored to Unit 1 – with about two hours to spare. On the morning of March 15, Masuda and his team were notified that all reactors were finally in cold shutdown. Finally, they could rest. Masuda influenced the workers to act, even as the ground shook beneath their feet. Through his calmness, openness, and willingness to admit his own fallibility as a leader, Masuda created the conditions for the team to make sense of their surroundings, overcome fear, and solve problems on the fly. Although their physical safety was in constant danger, they felt psychologically safe, and this allowed them to come together, try things, fail, and regroup. In the many moments of fear for their lives over the course of those days, interpersonal fear within the group was nearly nil. Masuda's words and actions set the tone and reassured workers that they could – and must – save the plant.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3506

Clear, direct, candid communication is an important aspect of reducing accidents. A compelling company purpose combined with caring leadership motivates people to go the extra mile to do what's needed to ensure safe work practices and employee dignity. Worker safety starts with encouraging and reinforcing employees' speaking up about hazards and other concerns.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3622

You can tell whether a man is clever by his answers. You can tell whether a man is wise by his questions. —
Naguib Mahfouz

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3650

As soon as she took the job, Morath began speaking to large and small groups in the hospital to explain that healthcare delivery, by its nature, was a complex system prone to breakdowns. She presented new research and statistics on medical adverse events to educate everyone about their prevalence. She introduced new terminology (“words to work by”) that altered the meaning of events and actions in important ways; for instance, instead of an “investigation” into an adverse event, the hospital would use the term “study;” instead of “error” she suggested people use “accident” or “failure.” In subtle but important ways, Morath was trying to help people think differently about the work – and especially about what it means when things go wrong. These leadership actions comprise what I refer to as framing the work. Frames consist of assumptions or beliefs that we layer onto reality.³ All of us frame objects and situations automatically. Our focus is on the situation itself, and we are typically blind to the effects of our frames. Our prior experiences affect how we think and feel about what's presently around us in subtle ways. We believe we're seeing reality – seeing what is there.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3663

But when Morath began to give presentations that called attention to hospital care as a complex, error-prone system, what she was doing was framing the work – or, more accurately, reframing it. Her goal was to help people shift from a belief that incompetence (rather than system complexity) was to blame. This shift in perspective would prove essential to helping people feel safe speaking up about the problems, mistakes, and risks they saw.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3677

Morath, hearing silence from the staff, stopped to consider. I'm sure it crossed her mind to try again – to re-explain the complex, error-prone nature of tertiary care hospital operations so as to correct the staff's implicit response that nothing was going wrong. If so, she resisted the temptation to lecture. Instead, she did something that was as simple as it was powerful. She asked a question. “Was everything as safe as you would like it to have been this week with your patients?”⁵ The question – genuine, curious, direct – was respectful and concrete: “this week,” “your patients.” Its very wording conveys genuine interest. Curiosity. It makes you think. Interestingly, she did not ask, “did you see lots of mistakes or harm?” Rather, she invited people to think in aspirational terms: “Was everything as safe as you would like it to be?” Sure enough, psychological safety started to take hold. People began to bring up incidents that they had seen and even contributed to.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3687

First, she set up a core team called the Patient Safety Steering Committee (PSSC) to lead the change initiative. The PSSC was designed as a cross-functional, multilevel group to ensure that voices from all over the hospital would be heard. Each member was invited with a personal explanation for why his or her perspective was sought. Second, Morath and the PSSC introduced a new policy called “blameless reporting” – a system inviting confidential reports about risks and failures people observed. Third, as people began to feel safe enough to speak up, Morath led as many as 18 focus groups to make it easy for people throughout the organization to share concerns and experiences. These simple structures made speaking up easier. When you join a focus group, your input is explicitly requested. It feels more awkward to remain silent than to offer your thoughts. In this way, the voice asymmetry described in Chapter 2, in which silence dominates because of the inherent risks of voice, is mitigated.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3701

Consider the “focused event analysis” (FEA), a cross-disciplinary meeting that Morath instituted at Children's to bring people together after a failure. The FEA represents a disciplined exploration of what happened from multiple perspectives – like the proverbial blind men around the elephant. In this setting, however, the goal is not to fight about who was right, as the blind men did, but rather to identify contributing factors with the goal of improving the system to prevent similar failures in the future.⁶ The FEA is thus a prime example of responding productively. Equally important, the blameless reporting policy enabled productive responses to messengers who brought bad news about an error or mishap. Instead of expecting blame or punishment, the healthcare personnel at Children's began to expect – and experience – appreciation for their effort in bringing valuable information forward.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3714

Table 7.1 The Leader's Tool Kit for Building Psychological Safety. Category Setting the Stage Inviting Participation Responding Productively Leadership tasks Frame the Work Set expectations about failure, uncertainty, and interdependence to clarify the need for voice Emphasize Purpose Identify what's at stake, why it matters, and for whom Demonstrate Situational Humility Acknowledge gaps Practice Inquiry Ask good questions Model intense listening Set up Structures and Processes Create forums for input Provide guidelines for discussion Express Appreciation Listen Acknowledge and thank Destigmatize Failure Look forward Offer help Discuss, consider, and brainstorm next steps Sanction Clear Violations Accomplishes Shared expectations and meaning Confidence that voice is welcome Orientation toward continuous learning

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3746

Reframing Failure Because fear of (reporting) failure is such a key indicator of an environment with low levels of psychological safety, how leaders present the role of failure is essential.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3751

unless a leader expressly and actively makes it psychologically safe to do so, people will automatically seek to avoid failure.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3767

Learning to learn from failure has become so important that Smith College (along with other schools around the country) is creating courses and initiatives to help students better deal with failures, challenges, and setbacks. “What we're trying to teach is that failure is not a bug of learning, it's a feature,”¹² said Rachel Simmons, a leadership development specialist in Smith's Wurtele Center for Work and Life and the unofficial “failure czar” on campus. “It's not something that should be locked out of the learning experience. For many of our students – those who have had to be almost perfect to get accepted into a school like Smith – failure can be an unfamiliar experience. So when it happens, it can be crippling.”¹³ With workshops on impostor syndrome, discussions on perfectionism and a campaign to remind students that 64% of their peers will get (gasp) a B-minus or lower, the program is part of a campus-wide effort to foster student resilience.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3786

Reframing failure starts with understanding a basic typology of failure types. As I have written in more detail elsewhere, 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).¹⁵ 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. Intelligent failures, like the preventable and complex, are still results no one wanted. But, unlike the other two categories, they are the result of a thoughtful foray into new territory.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3800

Table 7.2 Failure Archetypes – Definitions and Implications.¹⁶

Preventable	Complex	Intelligent
Definition	Definition	Definition
Deviations from known processes that produce unwanted outcomes	Unique and novel combinations of events and actions that give rise to unwanted outcomes	Novel forays into new territory that lead to unwanted outcomes
Common Causes	Behavior, skill, and attention deficiencies	Complexity, variability, and novel factors imposed on familiar situations
Uncertainty, experimentation, and risk taking	Descriptive Term	Process deviation
System breakdown	Unsuccessful trial	Contexts
Where Each Is Most Salient	Production line manufacturing	Fast-food services
Basic utilities and services	Hospital care	NASA shuttle program
Aircraft carrier	Nuclear power plant	Drug development

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3834

Finally, how most people see bosses presents a crucial area for reframing. Table 7.3 compares a set of default frames to a deliberate reframe for how we might think about bosses and others at work. As a default, bosses are viewed as having answers, being able to give orders, and being positioned to assess whether the orders are well executed. With this frame, others are merely subordinates expected to do as they are told. CEO Martin

Winterkorn at VW is a prime example of an executive governed by the default frame. Notice that the default set of frames makes interpersonal fear sensible. In a world in which bosses have the answers and absolute authority over how your work is judged, it makes sense to fear the boss and to think very carefully about what you reveal. The reframe, in contrast, spells out logic that clarifies the necessity for a psychologically safe environment. This logic applies to the successful execution of work in most organizations today. Table 7.3 Framing the Role of the Boss.

Default Frames	Reframe
The Boss Has answers	Gives orders
Assesses others' performance	Sets direction
Invites input to clarify and improve	Creates conditions for continued learning to achieve excellence
Others Subordinates who must do what they're told	Contributors with crucial knowledge and insight

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3868

Framing the work is not something that leaders do once, and then it's done. Framing is ongoing. Frequently calling attention to levels of uncertainty or interdependence helps people remember that they must be alert and candid to perform well.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3894

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. Realizing that self-protection is natural, 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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3902

Frankly, adopting a humble mindset when faced with the complex, dynamic, uncertain world in which we all work today is simply realism. The term situational humility captures this concept well (the need for humility lies in the situation) and may make it easier for leaders, especially those with abundant self-confidence, to recognize the validity, and the power, of a humble mindset. MIT Professor Ed Schein calls this "Here-and-Now Humility."¹⁸ 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. Research shows that when leaders express humility, teams engage in more learning behavior.¹⁹ Demonstrating situational humility includes acknowledging your errors and shortcomings. Anne Mulcahy, Chairperson and CEO of Xerox, who led the company through a successful transformation out of bankruptcy in the 2000s, said that she was known to many in the company as the "Master of I Don't Know" because rather than offer an uninformed opinion she would so often reply, "I don't know," to questions.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3942

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. Why is this hard? Because all adults, especially high-achieving ones, are subject to a cognitive bias called naive realism that gives us the experience of "knowing" what's going on.²⁵ As noted in the previous

section, we believe we are seeing “reality” – rather than a subjective view of reality. As a result, we often fail to wonder what others are seeing. We fail to be curious. Worse, many leaders, even when they are motivated to ask a question, worry that it will make them look uninformed or weak. Further exacerbating the challenge, some companies sport “a culture of telling,” as a senior executive in a global pharmaceutical company put it in a recent conversation we had about his company. In a culture of telling, asking gets short shrift.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3956

The leaders' tool kit contains a few rules of thumb for asking a good question: one, you don't know the answer; two, you ask questions that do not limit response options to Yes or No, and three, you phrase the question in a way that helps others share their thinking in a focused way.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3961

Attributes of a Powerful Question²⁶ Generates curiosity in the listener Stimulates reflective conversation Is thought-provoking Surfaces underlying assumptions Invites creativity and new possibilities Generates energy and forward movement Channels attention and focuses inquiry Stays with participants Touches a deep meaning Evokes more questions

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 3977

Bob Pittman, founder of MTV, offers an example of inquiry to push for depth of analysis and diversity of perspective at the same time. In an interview with former New York Times “Corner Office” writer Adam Bryant, Pittman recounts, Often in meetings, I will ask people when we're discussing an idea, “What did the dissenter say?” The first time you do that, somebody might say, “Well, everybody's on board.” Then I'll say, “Well, you guys aren't listening very well, because there's always another point of view somewhere and you need to go back and find out what the dissenting point of view is.”²⁸ Here we can see that Pittman is practicing proactive inquiry and also modeling to his employees how to do it. Further, the idea that there's always another point of view is a subtle move to frame the work. In this small point, he is framing the work, implicitly reminding the team that creative programming work, such as practiced at MTV, benefits from a diversity of views.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 4008

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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 4016

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.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 4045

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. Although obvious in concept, in practice people routinely get this wrong.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 4077

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.³³ Might this be a bridge too far? I don't think so. First, and most obvious, it helps build a psychologically safe climate for thoughtful risks, which is mission critical in science. Second, it helps people acknowledge failures in a timely way, which allows redeployment of valuable resources – scientists and materials – to new projects earlier rather than later, potentially saving thousands of dollars. Third, when you hold a party, people tend to show up – which means they learn about the failure. This in turn lowers the risk that the company will repeat the same failure. An intelligent failure the first time around no longer qualifies as intelligent the second time.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 4155

Leadership Self-Assessment Setting the Stage Framing the work Have I clarified the nature of the work? To what extent is the work complex and interdependent? How much uncertainty do we face? How often do I refer to these aspects of the work? How well do I assess shared understanding of these features? Have I spoken of failures in the right way, given the nature of the work? Do I point out that small failures are the currency of subsequent improvement? Do I emphasize that it is not possible to get something brand new “right the first time?” Emphasizing Purpose Have I articulated clearly why our work matters, why it makes a difference, and for whom? Even if it seems obvious given the type of work or industry I'm in, how often do I talk about what's at stake? Inviting Participation Situational Humility Have I made sure that people know that I don't think I have all the answers? Have I emphasized that we can always learn more? Have I been clear that the situation we're in requires everyone to be humble and curious about what's going to happen next? Proactive Inquiry How often do I ask good questions rather than rhetorical ones? How often do I ask questions of others, rather than just expressing my perspective? Do I demonstrate an appropriate mix of questions that go broad and go deep? Systems and Structures Have I created structures to systematically elicit ideas and concerns? Are these structures well designed to ensure a safe environment for open dialogue? Responding Productively Express Appreciation Have I listened thoughtfully, signaling that what I am hearing matters? Do I acknowledge or thank the speaker for bringing the idea or question to me? Listen thoughtfully Destigmatize Failure Have I done what I can to destigmatize failure? What more can I do to celebrate intelligent failures? When someone comes to me with bad news, how do I make sure it's a positive experience? Do I offer help or support to guide the next steps? Sanction Clear Violations Have I clarified the boundaries? Do people know what constitute blameworthy acts in our organization? Do I respond to clear violations in an appropriately tough manner so as to influence future behavior?

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 4322

The greatest enemy of learning is knowing. —John Maxwell

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 4483

often. When

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 4487

I don't think you can have too much psychological safety. I do think, however, that you can have not enough discipline. Psychological safety is about reducing interpersonal fear. Making it less heroic to ask a question or admit an error. It doesn't mean you automatically have a good strategy for getting the work done. It also doesn't mean your employees are sufficiently motivated or well-trained.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 4529

You Advocate a Psychologically Safe Workplace. Does That Mean We Have to Be Transparent About Everything? To say that psychological safety can't be too high is not the same as saying more transparency is always better. Different situations likely call for different levels of transparency. In the surgical operating room, I'd venture to say that full transparency is excellent practice. Please share any observations you have! If they are wrong or unhelpful, I hope (and expect) others to respond with appreciation and transparency to that effect as well. But there are times where it simply isn't all that helpful to share each and every one of your workplace thoughts – for example, about someone's attire or presentation style. I think reasonable people can disagree about whether Ray Dalio's aggressive transparency would work in their own companies or industries. Decisions about what aspects of personal growth and feedback are fair game in your organization, for instance, can be thoughtfully made.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 4559

Finally, I would like to suggest a few simple, uncommon, powerful phrases that anyone can utter to make the workplace feel just a tiny bit more psychologically safe: I don't know. I need help. I made a mistake. I'm sorry.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 4566

Similarly powerful in shaping the climate even if you are not the boss are words of interest and availability. For example, most of us face many opportunities to say things like these: What can I do to help? What are you up against? What are your concerns?

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 4574

What I hope is clear at this point is that you don't have to be the boss to be a leader. The leader's job is to create and nurture the culture we all need to do our best work. And so anytime you play a role in doing that, you are exercising leadership.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 4643

Help! My Colleague Is Bringing His True Self to Work and It's Driving Me Crazy! I think most of us can empathize with this one. Perhaps there are people we wish felt a little less psychologically safe at work so that

they'd stop expressing themselves! Tempting as it is to want to solve this kind of problem with a sprinkle of interpersonal fear, in the long run it's not a productive solution. The most important reason is this: a colleague who is not being helpful and productive needs – and deserves – our feedback. Psychological safety doesn't guarantee effectiveness. It just makes it easier to find out what people have to offer.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 4676

A related, oft-raised issue is captured in the following comment: “but the people above me don't do this, so I'm stuck.” With great empathy, my response is first to let people know how widespread this experience is and that I recognize how frustrating it feels. Then, I go on to point out that people have a natural tendency to look up – to look in the direction of the managers above us in the hierarchy. We have to train ourselves to look down and across instead. As noted earlier, each of us can shape the climate in which we work in small ways. Creating a pocket of excellence, candor, and learning in your group is worthwhile, no matter what those above you are doing. It may be contagious! As an aside, I've been struck by how many times the people articulating this concern are near the very top of enormous companies. They may be among the top 200 managers in a global corporation, and yet their natural tendency is still to look upward and bemoan their powerlessness. And so I also remind them gently that there are a great many more people looking up and pointing to them as the problem than there are above them.

Highlight (Yellow) | Location 4731

Creating psychological safety is a constant process of smaller and larger corrections that add up to forward progress. Like tacking upwind, you must zig right and then zag left and then right again, never able to head exactly where you want to go and never quite knowing when the wind will change.

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