

The Fearless Organization

In every organization, moments of silence lead to lost opportunities and errors. In her new book, Harvard Professor Amy Edmondson argues that encouraging ‘voice’ has become mission-critical.

Interview by Karen Christensen

Karen Christensen: How do you define a psychologically safe workplace?

Amy Edmondson: Psychological safety is the belief that the environment is safe for interpersonal risk taking. In a psychologically-safe workplace, people know that their voice is both *welcomed* and *expected*. They know that they won’t be penalized for speaking up with work-relevant content of any kind — even if it entails bad news, a request for help or an admission of error.

You have found that even in strong corporate cultures, pockets of both high and low psychological safety tend to exist. Why does that happen?

AE: I think it’s because psychological safety is fundamentally an attribute of work groups — any interdependent unit that works together over time. The interpersonal climate in these groups is a very ‘local’ phenomenon: It emerges as people work together, and it is highly influenced by the individual at the centre of the group, whether it be a project leader, a branch manager or a unit director. These people powerfully influence what is deemed to be appropriate and how people behave and interact with each other.

When people choose to remain silent rather than speak up, what tends to happen?

AE: There are two types of risk when people remain silent when

they have something to offer, and they are equally problematic for organizations. First, silence creates the risk of safety problems that could have been averted. In high-risk settings like hospitals and manufacturing plants, people get hurt — sometimes fatally — when someone who is aware of the potential for harm remains silent. Second, when people are reluctant to share their improvement ideas or suggestions, organizations lose valuable opportunities for innovation.

More often than most managers realize, people are not speaking up when they could and should. Of course, when people are absolutely confident that what they are about to say will be well received, they will speak up. It’s when they are *not sure* that they remain silent. In my research I’ve seen numerous instances in hospital settings where nurses have held back on pointing out a possible error or problem because they questioned themselves. As the moment for speaking up passes by, the nurse might think, ‘Should I really be challenging what the doctor said?’ The most important thing about these moments of silence is that *they are invisible*. The physician in this example has no idea that he was deprived of the nurse’s voice — and possibly, of an opportunity to catch an error in time to reverse it.

The fact is, we often err on the side of silence because it keeps us safe in the moment. People are reluctant to stand out or to be thought badly of by peers and bosses, so they take only the safest risks — which, of course, aren’t really risks at all.



In situations we haven't faced before, it is simply not possible to have all the answers.

Building Psychological Safety		
	Default Frame	Re-frame
The Boss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has answers • Gives Orders • Assesses others' performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sets direction • Invites input to clarify and improve • Creates conditions for continued learning
Others	Subordinates who must do as they are told	Contributors with crucial knowledge and insight

Can you say a bit more about the relationship between psychological safety and innovation?

AE: Most leaders recognize by now that innovation requires people to engage in experimentation—and that experimenting always entails some failures along the way, whether you're working on new products and services or trying to create process innovations. Everyone wants the results of innovation — but most people aren't terribly enthusiastic about experiencing the risks of innovation. We know intellectually that it will require failure, but emotionally, we would rather only experience success.

When mistakes do occur, I have found that the most innovative teams are much more willing to talk about them. Over time, they are consistently catching and correcting mistakes and failures before they can cause real harm. In every workplace, some degree of human error is inevitable — so if you're not hearing about it at all, that's a problem. That means that people are unwilling to speak up about the things that are going wrong. And worse yet, it means they're not learning from it.

Tell us about the increasingly valuable skills of 'humble listening' and 'situational humility'.

AE: Many leaders balk at the idea of being humble, because

they think, 'Hey, I'm in charge here; I've got expertise and wisdom, so it seems inauthentic for me to be humble'. That's why I use the term 'situational humility.' The term reminds us that a truly wise person knows that they must be humble at least some of the time, depending on the situation. For instance, in situations we haven't faced before — and there are more of them than ever before — we simply cannot have all the answers. The fact is, we're living in a volatile uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world, so regardless of our experience or position, there are many situations characterized by immense uncertainty about what's coming next. In this environment, if you're not appropriately humble about what could go wrong or how you might fail, you're not being realistic. So, situational humility is actually realism.

The second, related skill is 'humble listening'. If I'm always reminding myself that I have to be humble about the challenges ahead, then the obvious next thing to be passionate about is listening. Humble listening is a phrase from MIT Professor Emeritus **Ed Schein**, and it's a stance that says, 'When I'm listening, I am *truly listening*'. I'm not listening to see where you've got it wrong or why my idea is better; I'm listening with a stance of genuine curiosity, interest and absorption, because I want to understand what you are saying and what the implications might be for us going forward.

What does a fearless organization look like in practice?

AE: A *completely* fearless organization is an aspiration that will always remain slightly out of reach. It will never be the case that *every single person* shows up at work with a fearless stance that looks outward and forward, and that everyone is more interested in contributing to shared goals than in staying personally safe.

Having said that, a 'mostly fearless' organization is one in which people feel truly engaged, inspired and willing to take the interpersonal risks of speaking up and experimenting that are necessary, so as to gain the shared rewards of making a difference — of creating great products and services that help customers and change the world in some small way for the better. In such organizations, people share a sense of what is at stake, why it matters — and why every one of us is needed to make progress.

A Toolkit for Leaders			
	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	Demonstrate situational humility: Acknowledge gaps	Express appreciation: Listen, acknowledge and thank
	Emphasize purpose: Identify what's at stake, why it matters and for whom	Practice Inquiry: Ask good questions; model intense learning	Destigmatize failure: Look forward; offer help; discuss, consider and brainstorm next steps
		Set up structures and processes: Create forums for input; provide guidelines for discussion	Sanction clear violations
Result	Shared expectations and meaning	Confidence that voice is welcome	Orientation towards continuous learning

How can a leader set the stage for psychological safety?

AE: The most important skill to master is that of ‘framing’ the work. For example, if ‘near-perfection’ is what is required to satisfy demanding car customers, leaders must know to frame the work by alerting workers to catch and correct even the tiniest of deviations before the car proceeds down the assembly line. If discovering new cures for disease is the goal, leaders must motivate researchers to generate smart hypotheses to drive experiments and to feel okay about being wrong far more often than being right. Framing the work includes two key elements: re-framing failure and clarifying the need for voice.

Can anyone drive psychological safety, or just team leaders?

AE: While it is true that bosses play an outsized role in shaping behaviour in the workplace, anyone can help create psychological safety. Sometimes, all you have to do is ask a good question. This is truly a great place to start. A good question is one motivated by genuine curiosity or by a desire to give someone a voice. Good questions cry out for an answer; they create a vacuum that serves as a voice opportunity for someone.

Additionally, you can create psychological safety by choosing to listen actively to what people say and responding with interest, building on their ideas or giving feedback. True listening conveys respect — and in subtle but powerful ways, reinforces the idea that a person’s full self is ‘welcome here’. You don’t have to agree with what the person said; you don’t even have to like it. But you do have to appreciate the effort that it took for them to say it.

Saying things to frame the challenge you see ahead is another helpful practice. Reminding people of what the team is up against

— for example, by talking about how the work is uncertain, challenging or interdependent — helps to paint reality in ways that emphasize that no one is supposed to have all the answers. This lowers the hurdle for speaking up and reminds people that their input is welcome — and needed.

Here are a few simple but 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.

Each is an expression of vulnerability. By being willing to acknowledge that you are a fallible human being, you give permission to others do likewise. Removing your mask helps others remove theirs. Sometimes you have to take an interpersonal risk to lower interpersonal risk. Similarly powerful are words of interest and availability; most of us face many opportunities to say things like these:

- What are you up against?
- What can I do to help?
- What are your concerns?

The personal challenge for all of us lies in remembering, in the moment, to be vulnerable, interested and available. Give it a try: Pause; look around. Whom can you invite into the safe space for learning and contributing to the shared goal? Anytime you play a role in doing that, you are exercising leadership.



Although diversity can be created through deliberate hiring practices, inclusion does not automatically follow.

The Humble Leader

Eileen Fisher is among the leaders who calls herself a 'don't knower'. She began her celebrated clothing brand in 1984 at the age of 34, when she didn't know how to sew and knew very little about fashion or business. Today, her company operates nearly 70 retail stores, generating between \$400 and \$500 million in revenue annually.

Among the things Fisher *does* know is what it's like to feel unsafe to speak up. In school, she felt that speaking up meant risking criticism, humiliation and embarrassment; consequently, she felt it was "safer to say nothing than to figure out what you think and what you want to say." Perhaps that's why she has so consciously and carefully created an environment where employees feel safe speaking their minds.

As a leader, Fisher models vulnerability and humility, which unsurprisingly helps to create psychological safety in the workplace. She calls herself a natural listener, which helps to make 'not knowing' a positive trait. "My inclination is to ask questions, to get the right people in the conversation and to let everyone have a voice."

Fisher sees empowering women and girls as part of her company's mission, and to that end, she has founded the **Eileen Fisher Leadership Institute**. The company also gives grants to female entrepreneurs and to non-profits that foster leadership in women and girls. "I've learned over time that I actually have a lot to say, particularly around issues like sustainability and business as a movement. My voice matters," she says.

— from *The Fearless Organization* by Amy Edmondson

What is the relationship between psychological safety and diversity and inclusion?

AE: Let me start by saying that a workplace that is truly characterized by inclusion and belonging is a psychologically safe workplace. Today we know that although diversity can be created through deliberate hiring practices, inclusion does not automatically follow. To begin with, all hires may not find themselves included in important decisions and discussions. Going

deeper, a diverse workforce doesn't guarantee that everyone feels a sense of belonging. For instance, when no one at the top of the organization looks like you, it can make it harder for you to feel you belong.

Each of these terms — diversity and inclusion — represent a goal to be achieved. The goals range from the relatively objective (workforce diversity) to the highly subjective (do I feel that I belong here?). Inclusion is more likely to function well with psychological safety because diverse perspectives are more likely to be heard. But it is not easy to feel a sense of belonging if one feels psychologically unsafe. As goal achievement becomes more subjective, psychological safety becomes more valuable; there is no way to know if you're achieving the goal without broad input from people in different groups.

As issues related to diversity at work have moved to the forefront of the agenda, I have begun to consider the central role that psychological safety can play. A fearless organization realizes the benefits of diversity by fostering greater inclusion and belonging.

At the same time, a singular focus on psychological safety is not a strategy for building diversity and inclusion. These inter-related goals must go hand in hand. Great organizations will continue to attract, hire and retain a diverse workforce because their leaders understand that that is where good ideas come from, and talented applicants will be drawn to work for those organizations. These leaders also recognize that hiring for diversity is not enough: They also must care about whether or not employees can bring their full selves to work — whether they can belong in the fullest sense to the community inside the organization. In short, leaders who care about diversity must care about psychological safety, as well.

You believe that voice has become mission-critical for every organization. Please explain.

AE: We live in an era where people in nearly every workplace are engaged in knowledge work — the type of work where what goes on inside of employees' heads is mission critical to success. The talent, the ideas and the ingenuity of a workforce have become the factors that drive success for an organization, and this

Attributes of a Powerful Question

- 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
- Evokes more questions

is true whether you work in financial services or on the front-lines of manufacturing, where highly sophisticated computer programming is helping to guide the work. And yet, quite often, managers operate with a mindset that was appropriate in the industrial era, when work was highly observable, could be objectively assessed and was largely individually accomplished. When you violate those assumptions — when the work is more collaborative and subjective in nature, and it is far more difficult to observe whether people are really engaged and motivated to achieve excellence — it is more critical than ever for the genius that lies inside of people’s heads to be expressed and shared. **RM**



Amy Edmondson is the Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School and author of *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation and Growth* (Wiley, 2018). She has been recognized by the biannual Thinkers50 global ranking of management thinkers in 2011, 2013, 2015 and 2017 and was honoured with its Talent Award in 2017.