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Hot Book Blog

*The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*

If you work in an organization, you’ve likely heard the term “psychological safety.” It’s in the zeitgeist, and for good reason: organizations who desire innovation, creativity, growth, and learning must have it.

Must, you ask?

Yes. Must.

In fact, psychological safety is the underpinning to all these goals. Without it, organizations foster a culture of silence, mistakes that go unreported, and a failure to thrive. So, what *is* psychological safety and how do we cultivate it at work? Author and Harvard professor and researcher Amy Edmonson tackles this subject in her book *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth.*

But before we get into what psychological safety is, we should first define what it’s not.

1. **Psychological Safety Is Not About Being Nice**

Perhaps the first misconception about psychological safety is that it means people on teams always get along, only offer praise, or otherwise perpetuate toxic positivity. This isn’t the case. In fact, Edmonson points out that it’s quite the opposite – psychologically safe environments favor candor over kindness, productive dissent over creativity-limiting agreement. Conflict at work is inevitable, and the teams who can engage in productive conflict have greater creativity and innovation.

1. **Psychological Safety Is Not a Personality Factor**

Psychological safety is not a synonym for extraversion. Some folks believe that not speaking up at work or in teams is a function of shyness or low self-confidence; however, psychological safety is about the climatein an organization, not the personality traits of the individuals at that organization.

1. **Psychological Safety Is Not Just Another Word For Trust**

This one is a bit tricky and trust and psychological safety do have a lot in common. However, psychological safety is felt at the group level, whereas trust is between individuals or entities. Trust is the expectation that colleagues or organizations will do what they say they will, whereas psychological safety is the [expectation of immediate personal consequences.]

1. **Psychological Safety Is Not About Lowering Performance Standards**

Organizational leaders often reject fostering psychological safety at work because they think it means they must lower performance standards. But nothing is further from the truth. Psychological Safety and accountability are mutually exclusive. Such leaders believe that psychological safety is creating a lax, anything goes environment. Edmonson says that while psychological safety is important, it’s not the only ingredient to high performing, innovating organizations. But a lack of psychological safety with high standards creates a culture of anxiety. The sweet spot is a culture that cultivates high psychological safety and high standards, as seen in Figure 1.1 on page 20:



So, now that we’ve defined what psychological safety isn’t, what exactly *is* it? Simply put, psychological safety is “a climate in which people are comfortable expressing and being themselves. More specifically, when people have psychological safety at work, they feel comfortable sharing concerns and mistakes without fear of embarrassment or retribution. They are confident that they can speak up and won't be humiliated, ignored, or blamed. They know they can ask questions when they are unsure about something.”

Before you spend your next Zoom meeting asking colleagues if they feel safe speaking up at work in order to measure the level of psychological safety in your team, take heart in that Edmonson provides a survey you can give to your team, and even gives statistical research variations in measuring psychological safety for those who prefer a scientifically backed approach.

For those who prefer real-life illustrations of organizations that do and do not possess psychological safety and the repercussions of both, Edmonson gives extensive narrative examples. From airline crashes, deaths resulting from medication dosing errors, and emissions scandals to groundbreaking animated movies, fashion industry leaders, and innovative tech companies, *The Fearless Organization* is rife with stories that will keep you turning the pages.

So, how *do* we cultivate psychological safety at work? Edmonson provides detailed guidance in what she calls “The Leader’s Tool Kit.” Broadly stated, leaders can engender psychological safety by setting the stage, inviting participation, and responding productively. This includes the following leadership tasks:

* Framing the work
* Emphasizing purpose
* Demonstrating situational humility
* Practicing inquiry
* Setting up structures and processes
* Expressing appreciation
* Destigmatizing failure
* Sanctioning clear violation

Through descriptions and references to successful companies from previous stories, Edmonson gives a clear roadmap for how we can cultivate psychologically safe cultures at work. And if you still have questions, she’s thought of that, too. She’s finishes her book with psychological safety FAQs, including the questions and answers most often addressed during the past 20 years at her speaking engagements and conferences.

This book gave me a clear, scientifically backed, and entertaining education into the concept of psychological safety. As the one ingredient I feel hasn’t been addressed in the creative problem-solving framework, I found this information to be extremely helpful, particularly when using CPS tools in the workplace. When diverging and converging in a group, particularly when members of the leadership team are present, it’s important to first ensure psychological safety exists so that employees can speak up, offer dissent, and disagree with ideas that are presented. It’s evident that not everyone at work will agree, and psychological safety is the underpinning to having constructive conflict to push past the boundaries of what any team thinks is possible. When people can feel safe to disagree without the fear of interpersonal conflict, when people can dissent without being thought of as disruptive or unappreciative, and when people can offer a different or even controversial view without being ganged up on is when real creative breakthroughs happen.

Edmondson, A. C. (2018). *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth* (1st ed.). Wiley.