

# the fearless organization

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

Amy C. Edmondson

HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL

WILEY



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*To George*

*Whose curiosity and passion make him a great scientist and leader – and who knows all too well that fear is the enemy of flourishing.*



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# Introduction

*“No passion so effectively robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear.”*

—Edmund Burke, 1756.<sup>1</sup>

Whether you lead a global corporation, develop software, advise clients, practice medicine, build homes, or work in one of today’s state-of-the-art factories that require sophisticated computer skills to manage complex production challenges, you are a knowledge worker.<sup>2</sup> Just as the engine of growth in the Industrial Revolution was standardization, with workers as laboring bodies confined to execute “the one best way” to get almost any task done, growth today is driven by ideas and ingenuity. People must bring their brains to work and collaborate with each other to solve problems and accomplish work that’s perpetually changing. Organizations must find, and keep finding, new ways to create value to thrive over the long term. And creating value starts with putting the talent you have to its best and highest use.

## **What It Takes to Thrive in a Complex, Uncertain World**

While it’s not news that knowledge and innovation have become vital sources of competitive advantage in nearly every industry,

few managers stop to really think about the implications of this new reality – particularly when it comes to what it means for the kind of work environment that would help employees thrive and organizations succeed. The goal of this book is to help you do just that – and to equip you with some new ideas and practices to make knowledge-intensive organizations work better.

For an organization to truly thrive in a world where innovation can make the difference between success and failure, it is not enough to hire smart, motivated people. Knowledgeable, skilled, well-meaning people cannot always contribute what they know at that critical moment on the job when it is needed. Sometimes this is because they fail to recognize the need for their knowledge. More often, it's because they're reluctant to stand out, be wrong, or offend the boss. For knowledge work to flourish, the workplace must be one where people feel able to share their knowledge! This means sharing concerns, questions, mistakes, and half-formed ideas. 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.<sup>3</sup> Hiring talented individuals is not enough. They have to be able to work well together.

In my research over the past 20 years, I've shown that a factor I call *psychological safety* helps explain differences in performance in workplaces that include hospitals, factories, schools, and government agencies. Moreover, psychological safety matters for groups as disparate as those in the C-suite of a financial institution and on the front lines of the intensive care unit. My field-based research has primarily focused on groups and teams, because that's how most work gets done. Few products or services today are created by individuals acting alone. And few individuals simply do their work and then hand the output over to other people who do their work, in a linear, sequential fashion. Instead, most work requires people to talk to each other to sort out shifting interdependencies. Nearly everything we value

in the modern economy is the result of decisions and actions that are interdependent and therefore benefit from effective teamwork. As I've written in prior books and articles, more and more of that teamwork is dynamic – occurring in constantly shifting configurations of people rather than in formal, clearly-bounded teams.<sup>4</sup> This dynamic collaboration is called *teaming*.<sup>5</sup> Teaming is the art of communicating and coordinating with people across boundaries of all kinds – expertise, status, and distance, to name the most important. But whether you're teaming with new colleagues all the time or working in a stable team, effective teamwork happens best in a psychologically safe workplace.

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!

As you will learn in this book, psychological safety can make the difference between a satisfied customer and an angry, damage-causing tweet that goes viral; between nailing a complex medical diagnosis that leads to a patient's full recovery and sending a critically ill patient home too soon; between a near miss and a catastrophic industrial accident; or between strong business performance and dramatic, headline-grabbing failure. More importantly, you will learn crucial practices that help you build the psychologically safe workplaces that allow your organization to thrive in a complex, uncertain, and increasingly interdependent world.

Psychological safety is broadly defined as 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. They tend to trust and respect their colleagues. When a work environment has reasonably high psychological safety, good things happen: mistakes are reported quickly so that prompt corrective action can be taken; seamless coordination across groups or departments is enabled, and potentially game-changing ideas for innovation are shared. In short, psychological safety is a crucial source of value creation in organizations operating in a complex, changing environment.

Yet a 2017 Gallup poll found that only 3 in 10 employees strongly agree with the statement that their opinions count at work.<sup>6</sup> 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.”<sup>7</sup> 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. Imagine what could be accomplished if the norm became one where employees felt their opinions counted in the workplace. I call that a fearless organization.

## **Discovery by Mistake**

My interest in psychological safety began in the mid-1990s when I had the good fortune to join an interdisciplinary team of researchers undertaking a ground-breaking study of medication errors in hospitals. Providing patient care in hospitals presents a more extreme case of the challenges faced in other industries – notably, the challenge

of ensuring teamwork in highly-technical, highly-customized, 24/7 operations. I figured that learning from an extreme case would help me develop new insights for managing people in other kinds of organizations.

As part of the study, trained nurse investigators painstakingly gathered data about these potentially devastating human errors over a six-month period, hoping to shed new light on their actual incidence in hospitals. Meanwhile, I observed how different hospital units worked, trying to understand their structures and cultures and seeking to gain insight into the conditions under which errors might happen in these busy, customized, occasionally chaotic operations, where coordination could be a matter of life-or-death. I also distributed a survey to get another view of how well the different patient care units worked as teams.

Along the way, I accidentally stumbled into the importance of psychological safety. As I will explain in Chapter 1, this launched me on a new research program that ultimately provided empirical evidence that validates the ideas developed and presented in this book. 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. I thought that how people work together was an important element of what allows organizations to learn in a changing world. Psychological safety showed up unexpectedly – in what I would later describe as a blinding flash of the obvious – to explain some puzzling results in my data. Today, studies of psychological safety can be found in sectors ranging from business to healthcare to K–12 education. Over the past 20 years, a burgeoning academic literature has taken shape on the causes and consequences of psychological safety in the workplace, some of which is my own work but a great deal of which has been done by other researchers. We have learned a lot about what psychological safety is, how psychological safety works, and why psychological safety matters. I'll summarize key findings from these studies in this book.

Recently, the concept of psychological safety has taken hold among practitioners as well. Thoughtful executives, managers, consultants, and clinicians in a variety of industries are seeking

to help their organizations make changes to create psychological safety as a strategy to promote learning, innovation, and employee engagement. Psychological safety received a significant boost in popularity in the managerial blogosphere after Charles Duhigg published an article in the *New York Times Magazine* in February 2016, reporting on a five-year study at Google that investigated what made the best teams.<sup>8</sup> The study examined several possibilities: Did it matter if teammates have similar educational backgrounds? Was gender balance important? What about socializing outside of work? No clear set of parameters emerged. Project Aristotle, as the initiative was code-named, then turned to studying norms; that is, the behaviors and unwritten rules to which a group adheres often without much conscious attention. Eventually, as Duhigg wrote, the researchers “encountered the concept of psychological safety in academic papers [and] everything suddenly fell into place.”<sup>9</sup> They concluded, “psychological safety was far and away the most important of the five dynamics we found.”<sup>10</sup> Other behaviors were also important, such as setting clear goals and reinforcing mutual accountability, but unless team members felt psychologically safe, the other behaviors were insufficient. Indeed, as the study’s lead researcher, Julia Rozovsky, wrote, “it’s the underpinning of the other four.”<sup>11</sup> Reflecting her wonderfully concise conclusion, Chapter 1 of this book is titled “The Underpinning.”

## Overview of the Book

This book is divided into three parts. *Part I: The Power of Psychological Safety* consists of two chapters that introduce the concept of psychological safety and offer a brief history of the research on this important workplace phenomenon. We’ll look at why psychological safety matters, as well as why it’s not the norm in many organizations.

Chapter 1, “The Underpinning,” opens with a disguised true story taking place in a hospital that shows at once the ordinariness of an employee holding back at work – not sharing a concern or

a question – as well as the profound implications this human reflex can have for the quality of work in almost any organization. I will also recall the story of how I stumbled into psychological safety by accident early in my academic career.

Chapter 2, “The Paper Trail,” presents key findings from a systematic review of academic research on psychological safety. I don’t provide many details of individual studies but rather give an overview of how research on psychological safety has provided evidence supporting the central argument in this book – that no twenty-first century organization can afford to have a culture of fear. *The Fearless Organization* is not only a better place for employees, it’s also a place where innovation, growth, and performance take hold. If readers want to skim this evidence and move quickly to Part II, they will be rewarded by a series of case studies that clearly illuminate first the costs of not having psychological safety and next the rewards of investing in building it.

The four chapters in *Part II: Psychological Safety at Work* present real-world case studies of workplaces in both private and public-sector organizations to show how psychological safety (or its absence) shapes business results and human safety performance.

Chapter 3, “Avoidable Failure,” digs into cases in which workplace fear allowed an illusion of business success, postponing inevitable discoveries of underlying problems that had gone unreported and unaddressed for a period of time. Here we will see iconic companies that appeared to be industry stars only to suffer dramatic and highly-publicized falls from grace. Chapter 4, “Dangerous Silence,” highlights workplaces where employees, customers, or communities suffered avoidable physical or emotional harm because employees, living in a culture of fear, were reluctant to speak up, ask questions, or get help.

Chapters 5 and 6 take us into organizations that have worked diligently to create an environment where speaking up is enabled and expected. These organizational portraits allow us to see what a fearless organization looks and feels like. They are strikingly different from those highlighted in Chapters 3 and 4, but importantly they are

also very different from each other. There is more than one way to be fearless! Chapter 5 (“The Fearless Workplace”) presents companies (like Pixar) where creative work is directly and obviously critical to business performance and where leaders understood the need to create psychological safety early in their tenure, as well as companies like Barry-Wehmiller, an industrial equipment manufacturer that underwent a transformational journey to discover that the business thrives when employees thrive. Chapter 6 (“Safe and Sound”) examines workplaces where psychological safety helps to ensure employee and client safety and dignity.

*Part III: Creating a Fearless Organization* presents two chapters that build on the stories and research presented so far to focus on the question of *what leaders must do* to create a fearless organization – an organization where everyone can bring his or her full self to work, contribute, grow, thrive, and team up to produce remarkable results.

Chapter 7, “Making It Happen,” tackles the question of what you need to do to build psychological safety – and how to get it back if it’s lost. It contains the leader’s tool kit. I present a framework with three simple (but not always easy) activities that leaders – at the top and throughout an organization – can use to create a more engaged and vital workforce. We’ll see that creating psychological safety takes effort and skill, but the effort pays off when expertise or collaboration matter to the quality of the work. We will also see that the leader’s work is never done. It’s not a matter of checking the psychological safety box and moving on. Building and reinforcing the work environment where people can learn, innovate, and grow is a never-ending job, but a deeply meaningful one. Chapter 8, “What’s Next,” concludes the book, updates a few stories, and offers answers to some of the questions I am most frequently asked by people in companies around the world.

★★★★★

In an era when no individual can know or do everything needed to carry out the work that serves customers, it’s more important than ever for people to speak up, share information, contribute expertise,

take risks, and work with each other to create lasting value. Yet, as Edmund Burke wrote more than 250 years ago, fear limits our ability for effective thought and action – even for the most talented of employees. Today’s leaders must be willing to take on the job of driving fear out of the organization to create the conditions for learning, innovation, and growth. I hope this book will help you do just that.

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PART

I

# The Power of Psychological Safety

