

# Executive Book

## Summary

FRANCIS DENIS

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### Introduction

What It Takes to Thrive in  
a Complex, Uncertain  
World

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### Part 1

The Power of  
Psychological Safety

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### Part 2

Psychological Safety at  
Work

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### Part 3

Creating a Fearless  
Organization



<https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/profile.aspx?facid=6451>



# the fearless organization

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

Amy C. Edmondson  
HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### AMY C. EDMONDSON

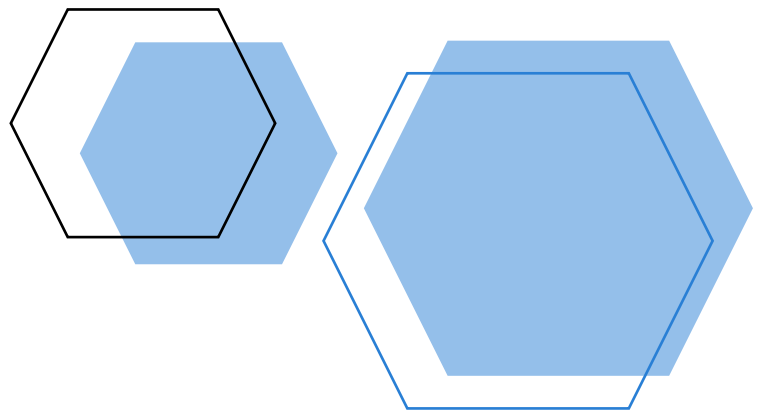
Amy C. Edmondson is a Harvard College graduate and has been on the Harvard faculty since 1996, teaching courses in leadership, decision-making and organizational learning. She has published over 70 published articles and written several books in these areas.

Among many other awards and recognitions, she has also been named one of the 20 Most Influential Thinkers in Human Resources by *HR Magazine*.

# INTRODUCTION

## WHAT IT TAKES TO THRIVE IN A COMPLEX, UNCERTAIN WORLD

During her 20 years of research on psychological safety, Amy C. Edmondson has identified its role in the success or failure of organizations in a variety of fields including hospitals, factories, schools, and government agencies. In all of these situations where teamwork was involved, success was dependant on a psychologically safe workplace which was not hampered by interpersonal fear. Edmondson defines psychological safety as “a climate in which people are comfortable expressing and being themselves”. She adds that this would also mean that “they feel comfortable sharing concerns and mistakes without fear of embarrassment or retribution”.



## PART 1

### THE POWER OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

#### UNCONSCIOUS CALCULATORS

Leaders sometimes create environments where staff calculate the risk associated to sharing their thoughts, which can have devastating consequences, and keep them to themselves. This is referred to as discounting the future – “underweighting the more important issue... which would take some time to play out, and *overweighing* the importance of the [person]’s possible response, which would happen immediately.

#### AN ACCIDENTAL DISCOVERY

In studying psychologically safe workplaces, teams seeing better success were reporting *more* mistakes than others. This is explained by those teams feeling safe to report the problems, allowing the organization to address and those issues.

“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”  
(Itroduction, para. 5).

## Psychological Safety

“a belief that **one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up** with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes, and that **the team is safe** for interpersonal risk-taking”

-Amy Edmondson

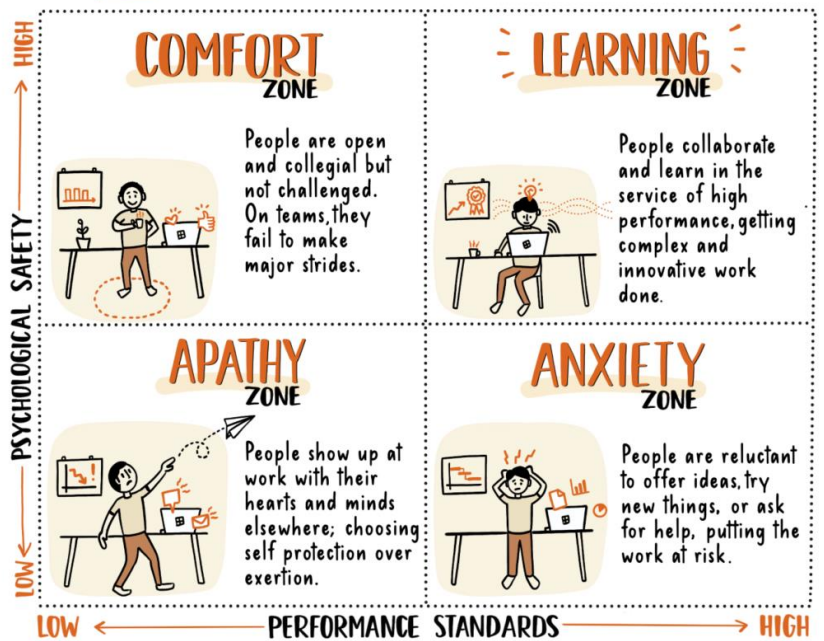


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## HOW psychological safety RELATES TO PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

AMY EDMONDSON



Sketchnote: Tanmay Vora, QAspire.com

[www.amycedmondson.com](http://www.amycedmondson.com)

<https://amycedmondson.com/psychological-safety-%E2%89%A0-anything-goes/>

## PART 2

### PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AT WORK

Leaders who only want to hear positive situations about their organization block the truth, which creates an illusion of success. A culture of silence is then extremely dangerous for an organization. Physical safety is of those involved is at risk when excessive confidence in authority is part of the culture. In setting the stage for a safe environment for workers to share concerns early, large-scale failures can be avoided. The expression “I don’t know” can play “a powerful role in engaging the hearts and minds of employees” (p. 123). Finally, in having a clear and meaningful purpose, along with caring leadership, employees will be motivated to ensure safety and dignity of all those involved.

### PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IS NOT...

- About being nice: It is about being candid, allowing for positive disagreement and an open space for sharing ideas.
- A personality factor (extrovert vs introvert): It refers to work climate, which affects different personality traits similarly.
- A synonym for trust: Trust refers to two individuals or groups, whereas psychological safety refers to the whole organization. “Trust is about giving the others the benefit of the doubt, and psychological safety relates to whether others will give you the benefit of the doubt when, for instance, you have asked for help or admitted a mistake” (p.17).
- About lowering performance standards: Low standards in a psychologically safe environment leads to a “comfort Zone”, but high standards in a high psychologically safe environment leads to a “learning and high performance zone”.

## Fear Within Organizations

### Volkswagen clean diesel scandal

The company set objectives that were unrealistic, tripling US sales within 10 years. Workers feared sharing bad news with management due to him yelling at workers, which led to no bad news being shared. The belief was that nothing was going wrong.

“A reign of terror and a culture where performance was driven by fear and intimidation” (p. 57).

### Canary Islands plane crash in 1977

In heavy fog, knowing there was a risk for takeoff, the first officer and the flight engineer did not question the captain's decision because of his authority. The result was the death of 583 people.

“Such is the inexorably psychological pull of hierarchy that even when their own lives were at risk, not a to mention the lives of others, the first officer and the flight engineer did not push back on their captain's authority” (p. 81).

### Creating psychologically unsafe environments

“A culture of silence is thus not only one that inhibits speaking up but one in which people fail to listen thoughtfully to those who do speak up - especially when they are bringing unpleasant news” (p. 86).

### Creating an unsafe psychological environment

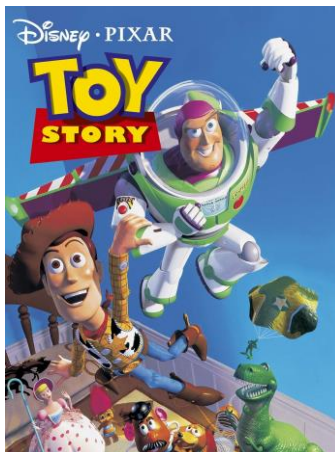
“I'll give you the recipe. I called all the body engineers, stamping people, manufacturing, and executives into my conference room. And I said, I am tired of all these lousy body fits. You have six weeks to achieve world-class body fits. I have all your names. If we do not have good body fits in six weeks, I will replace all of you. Thank you for your time today” (p. 56).



<https://www.scmp.com/news/world/europe/article/3031000/volkswagen-faces-first-mammoth-diesel-lawsuit-germany>



<https://www.vintag.es/2022/03/tenerife-airport-disaster.html>



<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0114709/>



<https://techcrunch.com/2019/08/01/citizen-ray-bridgewater-ray-dalio-is-the-wise-uncle-you-wished-you-had/>

## Fearless Organizations

### Pixar

Pixar created an environment where positive criticism is encouraged and mistakes are rewarded. “We need to understand failure not as something to fear or try to avoid, but as a natural part of learning and exploration” (p. 108).

### Ray Dalio from Bridgewater Associates

Dalio founded his company on a culture which values meaningful work and meaningful relationships that he attains by instituting the need for radical truth and transparency. A key piece of advice he shares is “don't try to 'win' the argument. Finding out that you are wrong is even more valuable than being right, because you are learning” (p. 111).

“People feel safe to explore their own ideas instead of feeling like they just need to do what you tell them to” (p. 113).

“Leaders who are willing to say ‘I don't know’ play a surprisingly powerful role in engaging the hearts and minds of employees” (p. 123).

“Clear, direct, candid communications is an important aspect of reducing accidents” (p. 146).



# PART 3 – BUILDING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

1. Setting the Stage: Creates shared expectations and meaning
  - a. Set expectations about failure, uncertainty, and interdependence to clarify the need for voice
  - b. Identify what's at stake, why it matters, and for whom
2. Inviting Participation: Creates confidence that their voice is welcome
  - a. Demonstrate Situational Humility – Acknowledge gaps
  - b. Practice Inquiry – Ask good questions and model intense listening
  - c. Set up Structures and Processes – Create forums for input and provide guidelines for discussion
3. Responding Productively: Creates orientation toward continuous learning
  - a. Express Appreciation – Listen, acknowledge, and thank
  - b. Destigmatize Failure – Look forward, offer help, and discuss, consider and brain-storm next steps
  - c. Sanction Clear Violations (pp. 157-158)



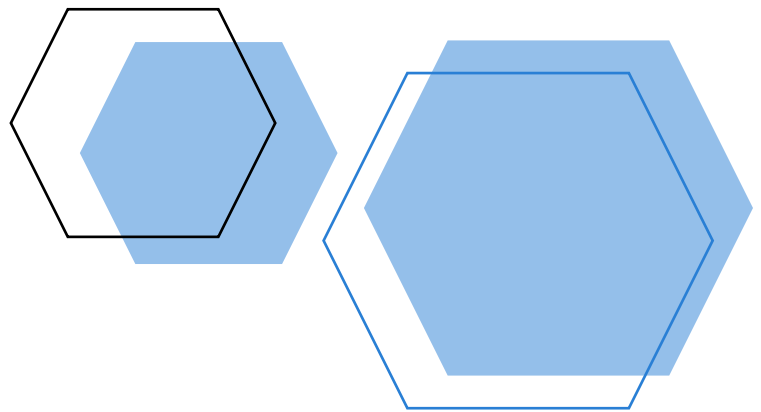
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# DESTIGMATIZING FAILURE FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

## BEFORE AND AFTER



1. The idea of failure used to be seen as unacceptable but is now understood as a natural process of growth and learning.
2. Typically, effective performers, or the star employees, never fail. We now see effective performers as those that share their experiences in intelligent failure to help others grow.
3. Organizations from the past aimed to avoid failure whereas a psychologically safe environment will promote fast learning through intelligent failure.
4. The consequences of psychologically unsafe environments lead to hidden mistakes to protect themselves. The consequences of psychologically **safe** environments lead to open discussions, fast learning and innovation.



## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- It's not possible to have too much psychological safety, but leaders need to constantly work on limiting fear in the workplace.
- Transparency is very important, but its levels depend on the situation. Certain things do not need to be shared with all the staff, and the process for knowing where to draw the line takes time and experience.
- Every worker within an organization can participate in creating a psychologically safe workplace environment. Sometimes, simply asking good questions and listening actively is all that is needed.
- Remember these phrases:
  - ✚ I don't know
  - ✚ I need help
  - ✚ I made a mistake
  - ✚ I'm sorry
  - ✚ What can I do to help