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Fearless

Imagine...



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Imagine a hospital



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A neonatal intensive care unit, or NICU, cares for those newborns that need extra attention. Like prematurely born children, for example.



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Like these twins. Normally, preemies as they are often called, get some medicine that helps with the final development of the lung, since this is the most susceptible organ in that case. Here we have 2 medical workers, one nurse and one doctor, standing next to them and checking their vitals.



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The nurse notices that the babies did not receive the lung medicine.



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But then she remembers that the doctor just yesterday shouted at another nurse. She does not know exactly what the cause was, but maybe her colleague was asking stupid questions or otherwise showing incompetence?



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So now she's weighing her getting shouted at against a - possible minimal? - health risk for the twins...
But while she's thinking...



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The doc already turned on his heel and is walking away...

Not too hard to imagine...

- Continuous self-evaluation and risk assessment
- Over-weighting the current, discounting the future
- Managing our image at work

Continuous self-evaluation and risk assessment
Over-weighting the current, discounting the future
Managing our image at work

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Fearless

How to create and maintain psychological safety

co-create digital value

the fearless organization

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

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Other reasons

... that keep us from speaking up

- My opinion might be “wrong”
- I might look stupid if I don’t understand that
- I am a newcomer, and the team/group thinks otherwise
- ...

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- I am a newcomer, and the team/group thinks otherwise

Taken-for-granted Rules

Why we don't speak up

Don't criticize ...

Don't speak up ...

Speaking up brings career consequences.

Don't criticize something the boss helped create.

Don't speak unless you have solid data.

Don't speak up if the boss' boss is present.

Don't speak up in a group with anything negative about the work to prevent boss from losing face.

Speaking up brings career consequences.

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

Why silence wins:

We are driven by ancient instincts, unless we are explicitly looking out for them and aware of them.

Immediate, Certain benefits always win over Delayed, Uncertain ones.

Fear

Fear inhibits learning, analytic thinking, creative insight, and problem solving.

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VUCA

Volatility

Uncertainty

Complexity

Ambiguity

Volatility - changing often and fast

Uncertainty - not predictable

Complexity - not easily explained and understandable

Ambiguity - inexact, open to more than one interpretation

Envisioning a psychologically safe workplace

- Not contributing your opinion or concerns might have severe consequences
- So what if..

- Not contributing your opinion or concerns might have severe consequences
 - Injury or death (luckily not often in our line of work)
 - Impact on quality or timeliness of work
 - Impact on personal well-being
- So What If...
 - The babies get potentially life-saving medication (or the nurse gets an explanation why not)
 - Doctor increases his trust in the nurse, he can rely on her to catch oversights
 - Maybe even a protocol is put in place to avoid future mistakes

Psychological safety is not...

It's not about being nice.

It is not a personality factor.

It's not another word for trust.

It's not about being nice

Psychological safety is about candor and willingness to engage in productive conflict as so to learn from different points of view.

It's not a personality factor

It's not linked to extroversion. It refers to the work climate, and climate affects people with different personality traits in roughly the same way.

It's not another word for trust

Trust refers to interactions between two individuals or parties, psychological safety is experienced at group level.

One way to put this is that trust is about giving 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.

Psychological safety is not...

It's not about lowering performance standards.

	Low Standards	High Standards
High Psychological Safety	Comfort Zone	Learning & High Performance Zone
Low Psychological Safety	Apathy Zone	Anxiety Zone

It's not about lowering performance standards

It's not about creating an "anything goes" environment. High standards are required to reach optimal performance:

What we need for team performance

- Psychological safety
- Clear goals
- Dependable colleagues
- Personally meaningful work
- Belief that the work has impact

- Psychological safety
- Clear goals
- Dependable colleagues
- Personally meaningful work
- Belief that the work has impact

... but psychological safety is the underpinning of the other four factors

Example 1: VW dieselgate



#Dieselgate

“Dieselgate” – regulators discovered that VW had been cheating on emission testing, which led to severe penalty payments and caused costly recalls.

Volkswagen Group CEO Martin Winterkorn resigned, and several high ranking VW Group managers were suspended.

VW has/had a very hierarchical structure with a lot of leadership-by-fear-and-shouting. This can be traced back to the first assembly line factories of Ford. Back then, workers had only to do repetitive uncreative tasks, so this was arguably a prove managerial strategy.

When the target of conquering the US market with diesel engines was decided from the topmost levels, no-one dared give their bosses the bad news that with current technology this was impossible.

So, workarounds were searched and found...

Example 2: Nokia



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Nokia lost the smartphone battle partly because the fearful climate made it impossible to tell the leadership the severity of the threats posed by Apple and Google and their upcoming smartphones.

A reality check instead of just giving managers the good news might have prevented a lot.

Leaders who welcome only good news create fear that blocks them from hearing the truth. A lack of psychological safety can create an illusion of success that eventually turns into serious business failures.

Example 3: Columbia



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On February 1, 2003, NASA's Space Shuttle Columbia experienced a catastrophic reentry into the Earth's atmosphere. All seven astronauts perished.

There were some who noticed warning signs, but communication was hindered by the feeling of being too low in the hierarchy to be allowed to speak up about concerns when the direct boss dismissed them.

Example 4: Tenerife Desaster



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Workplace silence played a major role in the collision of two Boeing 747 jets on an island runway in the Canary Islands in March 1977. The crash ignited two jumbo jets into flames, and 583 people died.

The pilot was a very experienced chief flight trainer, one of the companies most senior pilots. He also had the power to issue pilot's licenses and oversee the half-yearly flight checks. The copilot just recently had a check under the pilot.

When the pilot made a reckless decision, both other members of the cabin crew did not feel safe enough to tell him to wait and re-check with the tower.

Example 5: Fukushima



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Katsuhiko Ishibashi, a professor at the Research Center for Urban Safety and Security at Kobe University, was appointed to a Japanese subcommittee tasked with revising the national guidelines on the earthquake-resistance of the country's nuclear power plants.

When he pointed out the issues at Fukushima Daichii, his concerns were dismissed and he was belittled as “nobody”.

Dr. Yukinobi Okamura, the director of Japan's Active Fault and Earthquake Research Center, also voiced concerns about the 1938 quake that was taken as base for the reinforcements made. He was also ignored.

Excessive confidence in authority is a risk factor in psychological and physical safety.

A culture of silence is a dangerous culture.

But now let's look at some examples where a psychologically safe workplace works, and how it works.

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Example 1: Pixar



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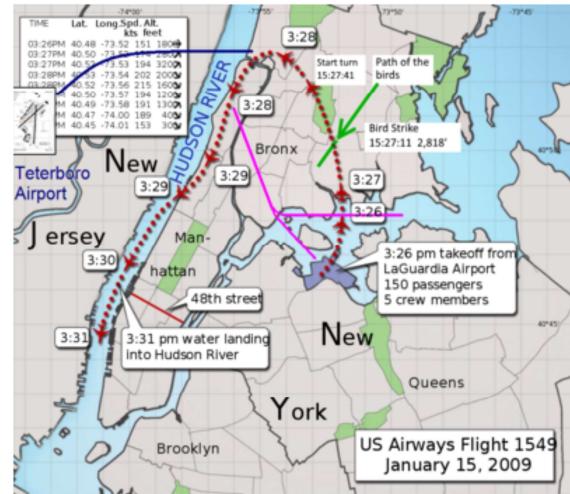
Pixar created a “Braintrust”: a small group that meets every few months to assess a movie in process and provide candid feedback to the director. It was created in 1999 to help save Toy Story 2 when it had gone off the rails.

In the academic community, a similar process is called “peer review”.

One of the things necessary to make it work is a good leadership to prevent this feedback from becoming competitive and unfriendly.

Another thing is the “freedom to fail” - without that, the outcome will be derivative, not innovative.

Example 2: Hudson River



Emergency water landing of a plane short after takeoff in January 2009 after a bird strike damaged both engines.

Clear, candid, concise communication and trust in each other's decisions saved 155 or more lives that day.

Example 3: “Leadership by Whiteboard”



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During the fateful Fukushima earthquake, not only Fukushima Daichi, but also nearby Fukushima Daini was damaged. Naohiro Masuda, the plant superintendent, managed to inspire his 400 employees to safely shut down all 4 of the plant's reactors.

They managed to lay 5.5 miles of extremely heavy cable in 24 hours – a job that under normal circumstances would take a team of 20, with machinery, at least a month.

He gave out data, not orders.

Strategies for Big Corporations



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- Enforce rules like:
 - No-one has the right to hold a critical opinion unless they speak up about it
 - Do not talk about people who are not present
- As a leader: be a “don’t know-er” - give your team the space to come up with their own ideas
- Make it safe to fail: celebrate failures (if they were discovered and terminated early enough)
 - Learn from failures
 - Don’t fail to fail.
- Companies who care for their employees fare better
- Collect and work on suggestions for improvement (kaizen)
- Get input from the people who have to work with management’s decision

**A leader can be the driving force
and catalyst for others to speak up;
but ultimately, the practice must be co-created
– and continuously nurtured –
by multiple stakeholders.**

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Making it happen

How to make an organization fearless

- Setting the stage
- Inviting participation
- Responding productively

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Setting the stage

Leaders re-frame the work (e.g. defining alternative words like “accident” instead of “error”)
Frames consist of assumptions or beliefs that we layer onto reality.

Inviting participation

Ask open questions

Allow blameless reporting of problems

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
- Stays with participants
- Touches a deep meaning
- Evokes more questions

Responding productively

Appreciative, respectful, offering a path forward

FAQs

**Can you have too much
psychological safety?**

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I don't think you can have too much psychological safety. I do think, however, that you can have not enough discipline.

If you think: What is the right level of safety? -> you're trying to figure out the optimal level of interpersonal fear.

If something inappropriate or unhelpful comes out of "too much safety", best provide feedback to the speaker on the impact they had.

FAQs

**Won't having a
psychologically safe
workplace take
too much time?**

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Again, it comes down to meeting discipline.

And in contrast, being in an unsafe environment can be very inefficient due to decisions being stretched out over long periods of time and endless meetings full of cautious remarks, afraid of stepping on anyone's toes.

FAQs

I'm all in.
But I'm not the boss.
What can I do?

Anyone can help create psychological safety.

- Ask a good question
- Listen actively
- Respond with interest, build on other's ideas, give feedback
- Express your own vulnerability ("I don't know.", "I need help.", "I made a mistake.")
- Communicate your availability ("How can I help?", "What are your concerns?")

FAQs

What about those
successful companies run
by arrogant dictators?

- Beware the “[Swimmer’s body illusion](#)” -- don’t sample on the dependent variable
 - Many things might be explained by other factors: good timing, a market vacuum, a genius idea, or even just plain luck.
 - The few real geniuses, Steve Jobs, Elon Musk, ... are the real exception.

FAQs

**Help! My colleague is bringing
his true self to work
- and it's driving me crazy!**

There might be people we wish would feel less psychologically safe so they'd stop expressing themselves!

Solving this with a sprinkle of interpersonal fear is not a sustainable solution.

Feedback and coaching leads to long-lasting improvements instead.

FAQs

**Help! I've started bringing my
whole self to work
- and no-one likes me anymore!**

Two possibilities:

- You're not getting the reaction you were expecting: solicit feedback to learn and improve.
- You're learning something about your work and colleagues that might suggest your current work is not a good fit for you. You might want to look for an opportunity where your suggestions are appreciated.

FAQs

**What about
cross-cultural differences?**

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It still can be done.

Think of Japan. Psychological safety is traditionally not on the top priorities there.

But then there is Toyota, where it is deeply ingrained into the company culture.

It might not be easy, but it can be done.

Fearlessly Ask Questions

Let's discuss... here and now
or at the bar...

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Time for your questions / discussions