Harvard Business Review

Digital Article

Organizational Culture

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Published on HBR.org / December 05, 2023 / Reprint H07X93

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"Hmm, I'm not sure of the best way for us to proceed. What do you all think we should do?"

Josh*, the CEO of a global financial services company, said those words to his team during a meeting aimed at solving a thorny problem with a struggling product line. Josh was well liked and incredibly smart. So smart, in fact, that the team had come to rely heavily on him alone to solve problems. He wanted to change that dynamic so that everyone felt

committed to offering their own ideas, challenging his, and sharing in the work of wrestling with difficult issues.

Because of my extensive research on organizational honesty, leaders commonly ask for my help in getting people to be more honest with them. It's a known phenomenon that the higher you climb in organizations, the more sanitized and fawning the information and opinions you receive become. How can you create an environment that welcomes dissenting voices?

Why Psychological Safety Matters...

The concept of employee voice — the behavioral science term for the conditions under which people will speak their minds about problems like misconduct or impending setbacks, as well as freely offer ideas and feedback — has been the subject of research for decades. Much of it has focused on dissecting horrific disasters that could have been prevented had someone spoken up (or listened to the person who did speak up). These include catastrophes like the Challenger Space Shuttle in 1986 and the Columbia in 2003, which were the result of known issues that had been raised and dismissed within NASA. The groundings of 387 of Boeing's 737 Max airplanes due to mechanical issues beginning in 2019 is another example. Although qualified test pilots and the company's own engineers raised red flags about the new-generation planes, their warnings were ignored by Boeing until two fatal crashes occurred.

In each case, somewhere between the offering and reception of employee voice, things broke down, with tragic consequences.

The critical element that determines if employees will use their voice is the presence of psychological safety. Pioneered and popularized by Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson, it's the ability to feel safe acknowledging failure, offering tough feedback, sharing

unorthodox ideas, and telling the truth about difficult situations without fear of retaliation. Thanks to her work, psychological safety has mainstreamed into management vernacular. Its importance to high performance is well documented. The consequences of its absence, like the ones cited above, are painfully chronicled.

Expectedly, most leaders say they want their people to speak up. And many, like Josh, believe they've made it safe for them to do so, having demonstrated the necessary humility, curiosity, openness, and expressed invitation required to welcome their voices.

But the data suggests we have a long way to go. Research from McKinsey reveals that only 26% of leaders develop the skills needed to create psychological safety for their teams.

...and How Leaders Fake It

One problem, as with any good management concept, is that counterfeit versions of psychological safety inevitably propagate. While most leaders want to encourage people to speak their minds, their underlying (often unconscious) ambivalence about *actually getting the truth* can unwittingly lead them to a performative version of psychological safety.

Here are some well-intentioned but misguided attempts at creating psychological safety I've observed. Each one sent mixed messages that ultimately reduced, not strengthened, psychological safety.

Feigning uncertainty to appear open to others' ideas

One of the best ways to invite others' voices is to acknowledge when you don't know something. This demonstration of humility sends two important signals: First, that it's OK not to know everything, and second, that you need others' help. That's what Josh was attempting to do when he told his team he didn't know the best way forward. The problem was that he was lying, and everyone knew it.

In fact, he knew exactly how to proceed, making his invitation feel manipulative and insincere.

Many smart leaders like Josh struggle with chronic certainty, feeling the need to be the "answer ATM" for all of their team's problems and questions. If that's something you grapple with, acknowledging things you *genuinely* don't know is an important step toward making others feel safe enough to offer their thinking. But for many smart leaders, the fear of receiving lesser-quality ideas than their own makes it tough to ask for them in the first place.

Josh's invitation was met with dead silence. When he and I debriefed afterward, he confessed, "They saw right through me." In the meeting, he sincerely believed he'd done the right thing. His intention wasn't to be deceptive; it was to elicit their ideas. When I asked why he chose that situation — one where he actually knew what to do — to ask for input, he admitted that subconsciously he was hedging his bets. He said, "I guess in hindsight, I wanted an escape hatch if I felt the ideas wouldn't work." Another way of putting that would have been, "If I'd asked for input on something I'm not an expert in, I would have to face the discomfort of considering an untested idea without confidence."

Psychological safety does require some relinquishment of control. You have to jump into the fray of *collective uncertainty*, which initially appears like unformed ideas and inarticulate fragments of genius, with the confidence that great ideas will surface through the *collective intelligence* you harness. Josh thought he was ready for that experience but apparently wasn't. Pretending not to know something to mimic this process is almost worse than pretending to know everything. Both lead to hearing less, not more, of others' voices.

Asking for feedback they don't really want, then not acting on it
Learning to solicit feedback, listen graciously (not necessarily agree), and then act upon it in some way is vital to demonstrating your commitment to psychological safety. If you want those you lead to willingly volunteer their feedback, start by asking for it.

Today, most leaders understand this. Unfortunately, many go about it in ways that ensure they'll never receive it. Here are some real examples of common missteps I've seen recently:

- Waiting until the end of the meeting and then saying, "Anyone have any concerns about this decision? Speak now or forever hold your peace." (The token ask)
- In response to a 360-degree feedback report, saying to someone, "I really want to be a better leader for the team. But this feedback just isn't adding up. Do *you* think I'm THIS bad?" (Collusion)
- After being told by a direct report that they were too slow making decisions, the leader apologized, then went on for almost 15 minutes describing why they were indecisive, repeating several times how much they appreciated the feedback. (Neurotic deflection)

Most leaders want the benefits of quality feedback; they just don't want the experience of receiving it. Experts agree that one way to get folks to offer feedback is by being the first to acknowledge your shortfalls. By saying something like, "I know how driven I can be, and sometimes that can lead me to be insensitive. I'd welcome your help in making sure I'm not pushing too hard," it helps people trust that your recognition of the issue means you want to change.

But here, too, I've seen leaders twist this tactic. In one organization, I observed Phoebe's* "admission" of her leadership gaps take the form of a tearful, self-deprecating rant about how horrible she was. Not only did she *not* get honest feedback about how she could improve, but the team

felt guilted into giving her false reassurance that she was a great leader. This simply reinforced the team's conclusion that Phoebe couldn't take honest feedback.

If you find that you're feedback averse, get to the bottom of why. Ask yourself, "What's my worst nightmare about hearing how my team truly feels about my leadership?" Maybe you aren't as capable in some areas as you thought. Maybe the gap between your intent and your impact is wider than you considered. Maybe they can't stand you. Regardless, isn't it better to actually know than to perpetuate the illusion that things are better than they are?

When you solicit feedback to appear as though you care, without commitment to changing, you're fooling only yourself. All you accomplish is convincing people that you're not capable of hearing the truth — about anything. So, when your team faces something devastating that they *could* warn you about, the loss of psychological safety your pretend-feedback invitation caused is going to come back to bite you.

Responding to failure with artificial compassion

Most leaders understand that making it safe to admit errors is vital to great performance, especially in complex work where mistakes can have substantial consequences. So, in the face of an admitted mistake, harsh blaming behaviors like screaming, berating, or being excessively punitive will only ensure that future mistakes get swept under the carpet.

But what does responding *effectively* to failure look like? It requires some combination of caring accountability that protects the dignity of people responsible for the mistake, as well as remedying the error when possible, or at least ensuring that learnings are applied to prevent it from happening again.

The confluence of emotions leaders experience upon hearing about unforeseen errors can be hard to completely mask. Reactions like surprise (*How could this have happened?),* panic (*What's the fallout? How will this make me look? Am I complicit?*), disappointment (*I was counting on this project going smoothly*), and even anger (*I warned them this could happen*) can make it awfully hard to center responses like curiosity, compassion, and dignified accountability. And when well-intended leaders try to mask those reactions, it creates a foul mix of awkward behaviors that mistake-makers receive just as harmfully as if the leader had shouted and disgraced them.

One employee told me, "I wish he'd just yelled at me and gotten it over with. It would have felt more honest. I could tell he was trying to look sympathetic by asking questions and appearing supportive. He said the right words. But he was wringing his hands, his face was tight with tension, and his tone felt condescending and cold, like he was reading a script."

Clearly his good intensions backfired. He had caused the very feelings he believed he was preventing. Suppressing our feelings is different than regulating them. Leaders must learn to regulate intensified emotions honestly, while still focusing on the person and the failure. While admittedly difficult, it is possible to judiciously express your emotions while caring for an employee who's failed and supporting them through the experience. Trying to disguise strong emotions only discharges them.

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When it comes to psychological safety, leaders want the best of both worlds: all voices heard and considered, failure acknowledged and learned from, and feedback offered clearly and received graciously. But they also want harmony, comfort, and a sense of equilibrium.

The good news is that you can have both — you just can't have one without the other. The only way to harmony, comfort, and equilibrium is *through* the messiness of disagreement, the emotional discomfort that accompanies hard news, and the disequilibrium that arrives when failure must be courageously and compassionately engaged. Persevering through that journey creates real psychological safety — one management skill for which "fake it till you make it" definitely doesn't work.

** Name changed for privacy.*

This article was originally published online on December 05, 2023.

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