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Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace

Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace- Harvard Business Review
Curt Nickisch.

Amy Edmondson, professor at Harvard Business School, first identified the concept of psychological safety in work teams in 1999.
Since then, she has observed how companies with a trusting workplace perform better. Psychological safety isn't about being nice, she says. It's about giving candid feedback, openly admitting mistakes, and learning from each other. And she argues that kind of organizational culture is increasingly important in the modern economy. Edmondson is the author of the new book *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth.*

TRANSCRIPT

CURT NICKISCH: Welcome to the HBR IdeaCast from Harvard Business Review. I'm Curt Nickisch.

It was the late 1990s. Medical mistakes at hospitals were a big problem. And researcher Amy Edmondson had a moment of panic.

She had been studying different teams in the same hospital. She wanted to know do better teams make fewer mistakes?

What she found was the opposite of what she expected.

Turns out, the most cohesive hospital teams reported making the most mistakes, not fewer. That surprised her until she realized: Maybe the better teams weren't making more mistakes. Maybe they were more able and willing to talk about their mistakes.

This became Edmondson' influential 1999 paper, titled "Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams."

Since then, the research has piled on, showing that psychological safety can make not just teams, but entire organizations perform better.

It's been ten years since Amy Edmondson was a guest on the HBR IdeaCast and she's back on the show today. She's a professor at Harvard Business School, and her new book is The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth. Amy, thanks so much for coming on the show.

AMY EDMONDSON: Thank you for having me.

CURT NICKISCH: It's great to have you here because psychological safety – I can't tell you the number of times it has come up in HBR IdeaCast interviews. And it's fun to talk about it now also with the hindsight of what you've learned over the last couple of decades. Now, this term psychological safety, you say it's not the best term. Why not?

AMY EDMONDSON: You know the term implies to people a sense of coziness – you know, "Oh, I'm just, everything's going to be great." You know, that we're all going to be nice to each other and that's not what it's really about. What it's about is candor; what it's about is being direct, taking risks, being willing to say, "I screwed that up." Being willing to ask for help when you're in over your head.

CURT NICKISCH: Why is it that probably more people would say that they don't feel psychologically safe at work than others? I mean, it still seems like it's not the norm.

AMY EDMONDSON: It is not the norm at all. In fact, I think it's unusual, which is what makes it potentially a competitive advantage. The reason why psychological safety is rare has to do with aspects of human nature, human instinct. You know, for example, it is an instinct to want to look good in front of others. It's an instinct to divert blame, you know, it's an instinct to agree with the boss. And hierarchies are places where these instincts are even more exaggerated.

We really want to look good and we especially want to look good in a hierarchy. And the spontaneous way to try to achieve that goal is to kind of be quiet unless I'm sure that what I have to say will be very well received, especially by the higher-ups.

CURT NICKISCH: And these are like phrases we know in real life too, like, "better to be safe than sorry," "don't rock the boat…"

AMY EDMONDSON: Right, don't rock the boat, you know, no one ever got fired for silence. And you know, I think we tend to play not to lose, right? We stay safe. I want to look good. I want to perform well. Learning is great, but not in front of people. I don't want to have the part of learning that involves me to fail along the way.

CURT NICKISCH: I want to learn from when that other person does it.

AMY EDMONDSON: Right, I love vicarious learning. Do I have to learn firsthand that this doesn't work and have everybody see my failure? I'd rather not.

CURT NICKISCH: Yeah. Let's talk about a disaster two where psychological safety has not been present and it led to financial ruin or…

AMY EDMONSON: It led to colossal business failure. So one of the best examples recently is Wells Fargo, which in 2015 was considered one of the world's most admired companies. It was the shining star of banking.

CURT NICKISCH: For anybody who doesn't know it, this is a U.S. bank with a long history.

AMY EDMONSON: Right, and very much a kind of a customer-oriented, household-oriented bank. And their strategy — which I think was a good strategy — was to really push on cross-selling. Of course, once you've made a customer relationship, it's easier to leverage that relationship, sell that customer more products rather than, you know, the extra cost of building new relationships. So it made sense to really emphasize cross-selling.

CURT NICKISCH: And by this you mean if somebody has a savings and checking account, they can get a car loan, then they maybe get a home loan…

AMY EDMONDSON: A home loan and a credit card and in fact, they had a slogan "Going for GR8." The idea was that I should be able to sell you eight different financial services products. So nice idea. And soon this idea runs up against the reality of customers' limited wallets.

But rather than the executives getting the feedback from those, you know, boots on the ground. Instead, the message just kept coming top down, "You must do this." You know, people had the sense that they'd be fired if they didn't achieve the targets that they were set. The managers were very tough and present.

CURT NICKISCH: Stretch goals!

AMY EDMONDSON: Stretch goals. I love stretch goals, right? I'm a big fan of stretch goals, but if you want to have stretch goals, you better have open ears. So I think of the Wells Fargo story as a recipe for failure is stretch goals plus closed ears.

So what ultimately happened was, of course, the sales folks started crossing an ethical line. They started making up fake customers, they lied to customers saying if you buy this product, you also have to buy this product, right? I mean they did a dozen little things that were just inappropriate and wrong. And ultimately, as is always the case, this comes to light. The beautiful success of Wells Fargo proves itself to be an illusion of success.

CURT NICKISCH: Why do you see this as an absence of psychological safety rather than like an incentives problem or an ethics problem?

AMY EDMONDSON: Yeah, I mean there is an incentive story here, but I could give you in your job a poor incentive and you could give me feedback. You could tell me, you know, this actually doesn't work. And in fact, if you think about it's encouraging some behaviors you really don't want to encourage.

And then I'd say, "Hey, that's really interesting. You're right, let's tweak it. Let's talk together about what would be the best incentive to optimize our performance." And that's not what happened. So it's a psychological safety story because from what I learned, people really did not feel it was safe to push back – to say this isn't working, it can't be done. It's a lovely

strategy, but the strategy in execution is discovering some new and important things about the reality of the market.

And in a well-run organization, managers – middle managers, senior managers, executives – would be quite interested in those data and they would not automatically say, “Oh, these people just aren’t trying hard enough. Let’s push harder.”

CURT NICKISCH: What about an example of a company that has mastered psychological safety in the workplace and has gained that competitive advantage that you referenced at the beginning,

AMY EDMONDSON: The one industry that is a very challenging industry to succeed in, and particularly to succeed in consistently, is the movie industry. Most movie producers, most movie houses will have an occasional hit and then a few, you know, bombs.

So Pixar is a company that has had 17, in a row, major box office successes that have also been critically acclaimed. It’s an unheard of success.

CURT NICKISCH: Definitely outsized.

AMY EDMONDSON: It’s outsized, right? It’s way beyond the sort of just pretty good. And Ed Catmull, cofounder and longtime leader, has gone out of his way and very deliberately to create and keep creating a psychologically safe environment where candor is expected, possible, you know, critical feedback.

And they do this in two fundamental ways. You know, one is behavioral, the other is structural. And the behavioral is that Catmull will often say things like, you know, he’ll say, “Here’s the mistake I made,” right? Because leaders have to go first. Leaders have to show that they know that they’re fallible human beings.

He shows up with humility, with curiosity, with interest, with fallibility. And then the other is structural, you know, setting up meetings and sessions where they’re designed in thoughtful ways to make it easier for us to give each other candid feedback or to really critique the movie.

And he’ll say things like “Early on, all of our movies are bad. You know, they’re terrible.” And he says that not because that’s necessarily good news, but because he wants everyone to know that’s just part of the journey. There is no way to get to magnificent unless we go through bad and inadequate and sappy and boring along the way. And we just keep pushing back and we keep making it better.

You know, this film that I’m making is my baby. I don’t want you to criticize my baby, but I have to kind of realize, no, I do want you to, because I’d much rather get it from you now then get it in the box office later.

CURT NICKISCH: So let's talk about how to do this. What do you tell people? If they want to create a fearless organization, what do they need to do?

AMY EDMONDSON: I say it's – there's three sort of temporal steps, you know, three types of activities that you as a leader have to do, but I want to be clear it's not one and done. It's three activities that you have to just keep doing often. And the first one is setting the stage, the second one is inviting engagement, and the third one is responding productively.

And setting the stage really means let's get people on the same page about the nature of the work we're doing, you know, the nature of the project we're on. And the most important variables in the work we're doing is how much uncertainty do we face? How much complexity, how much interdependence? The more the work is uncertain or complex, the more your voice is essential to our success.

CURT NICKISCH: This is the confidence thing, right? If people are – it's easy to speak up when you know what you say is going to be well-received, especially by the higher-ups. It gets harder if you're not sure and in a complex place – exactly what you're talking about right now – that just means that confidence levels across the team, across the organization, across the project, whatever it is, are lower, and you have to increase safety so that people still feel that they could speak up when they're not sure.

AMY EDMONDSON: Right. If you think about each one of us is always putting the threshold for when I'll speak up and what I'll speak up about somewhere.

CURT NICKISCH: It's a scale.

AMY EDMONDSON: It's a scale, right? It's like, you know, maybe I'll speak up if I'm 50 percent confident this is an okay thing to say. Or maybe someone else it's 40 percent.

CURT NICKISCH: I'll do it once a week.

AMY EDMONDSON: Yeah, so what I think leaders need to do is just keep trying to push that threshold back down to lower than is natural, lower than is instinctive. And by reminding us of what's at stake, by reminding us of the uncertainty or complexity, I'm saying, "you know, it really matters. Your voice might make the difference." I'm creating the logical case for voice.

CURT NICKISCH: What's an example of this? Just like a real world-thing, something you've heard somebody say at a company?

AMY EDMONDSON: So Julie Morath, Chief Operating Officer at Children's Hospital and Clinics in Minneapolis says healthcare delivery by its nature is a complex error-prone system. What does that say? It's sort of saying, you know, this is just more likely to go wrong than right. Speaking up saves lives.

Because I think our default, our default stance is that the work is like a factory – we're supposed to know what to do. We're supposed to do it. We're supposed to execute. We're supposed to hit our targets.

And sure, we want people trying as hard as they possibly can to perform well, but when we assume, a priori, we know what the right metrics are, I think we're missing something.

CURT NICKISCH: Do managers ever have the – run the risk of appearing too soft when they do that?

AMY EDMONDSON: I think many managers worry about that risk. The risk of this kind of stuff will appear to soft.

CURT NICKISCH: It's easier to give the metrics…

AMY EDMONDSON: Right, it's easier to just give the metrics, that makes me appear hard-nosed. But it's also out of touch with reality. The more we're in new territory – and so many organizations are in new territory with at least some part of their activities, especially the innovation side – the more, like Ed Catmull, we're saying things like, "We need to hear from you. What ideas do you have? We're going to you know, let's test them. Let's test them quickly."

Or, Astro Teller at Google X, you know, it's like, well, this is a Moonshot. It probably won't be able to work, but we are going to really give it our all. You know, we're going to learn fast in doing so. So, leaders who do this well, they're anything but soft. You know, they're driven, they're passionate, they're compelling, but they're not soft. They do have empathy.

CURT NICKISCH: And curiosity – they're trying to understand what's keeping us from getting there?

AMY EDMONDSON: Yeah. And they get human beings, like they know what they're asking isn't necessarily going to be easy. So they have empathy for that. But they're not going to give up, there's too much at stake.

CURT NICKISCH: And that's why they take the time to set the stage?

AMY EDMONDSON: Yeah.

CURT NICKISCH: So what happens next? Like what's the next step?

AMY EDMONDSON: What happens next is realizing that you've got to be proactive as a leader. You've got to invite participation. Now that sounds kind of pointy-headed. What I really mean is ask questions.

Ask people directly, what are you seeing out there? I need to hear from you. What ideas do you have? What help can I offer? And when I ask a question that's a real question, you know

a genuine question. And then when I listen carefully to the response, I'm creating a moment – and hopefully more – of psychological safety. I'm saying I'm genuinely interested and maybe what you have to say is a little bit threatening and you're reluctant to say it, but I'm giving you that room to do it.

CURT NICKISCH: It is amazing what you can ask somebody if they really believe that you care, right? You can ask them anything.

AMY EDMONDSON: You really can. If they believe you care, they will offer it and they will hope to get something out of it. Right? To learn something or to feel a little better about the situation. And Julie Morath at Children's invited, you know actively invited people's observations and ideas.

CURT NICKISCH: You had an amazing quote in your book from her. The words she used to get people to admit things could be better. She said something like, what have you seen this week that could have been safer for our patients?

AMY EDMONDSON: Right. And that's because they were just resisting. They were – when she said, "Let's make this place really safe. You know, as safe as it can be." People kind of thought, "I think we're pretty good already. Like, I don't hear about anything going wrong."

CURT NICKISCH: We haven't been sued lately.

AMY EDMONDSON: We haven't been sued lately, so Morath didn't try to push back on that resistance. Instead, she asked them a question. She essentially asked groups, audiences, full of employees: "Think about your experience last week with your patients. Was everything as safe as you would like it to be at? That remarkable question, which by the way, notice she didn't say, "Did you see lots of hazards?"

CURT NICKISCH: Did somebody make a mistake?

AMY EDMONDSON: Did someone make a mistake? She said, "Was everything as safe as you would like it to be?" It was an "aha moment" and that she said, "My office became a confessional. Like, people are lining up to come in and say, "No, it isn't as safe as I'd like it to be."

Like all of a sudden, they realized she was all ears and she had helped them see their own experiences in a new way. She helped them see it against the aspiration of, you know, as safe as it could possibly be rather than against the default, which is yeah, it looks pretty good to me. I mean it's the way it always was. It's fine.

CURT NICKISCH: Yeah. So what do you do when somebody comes and says, "I saw this or you know, maybe this wasn't as safe as it could be?"

AMY EDMONDSON: Let me give us an even harder one. Like someone comes to you and says, "My project is really delayed, right? It's really off track." And make no mistake. This is bad news, right? I've just shared bad news.

Your instinct is to get – you know, be mad, to express profound disappointment and it's okay to be disappointed. In fact, you should be disappointed. It's not okay to get mad. Because the primary accomplishment of getting mad is that you're not going to hear from me next time.

So a productive response is: "Thank you for that clear line of sight." Right? So it's a – now, what help do you need? What can we do to get this back on track? Which is after all what we both really care about.

CURT NICKISCH: What if the person screwed up?

AMY EDMONDSON: That person is a human being and screwing up comes with the territory of human beings. So I'll postpone for a moment the issue of if someone is repeatedly screwing up and I'll come back to that. But each and every one of us are allowed to screw up now and then. It just comes with the territory of being human.

That can't be something that we just really penalize. Most of us feel bad enough when we screwed up. We don't need the boss to tell us, "Hey, this is really bad that you screwed up." We know that already. We need help figuring out how to get back on track. Now, if someone is screwing up repeatedly, we've got an obligation, you know, either to really give them some very real help – coaching, training, what have you so that this doesn't happen or to free up their future.

CURT NICKISCH: No danger of too much psychological safety, I take it? Do you basically see places where they could only have more?

AMY EDMONDSON: Yes. I don't think you can have too much psychological safety. I think you can have people speaking too much and they need and deserve our feedback, right? Most people want to be effective. Let's give them feedback about how effective they're being, but let's not try to regulate voice through fear.

CURT NICKISCH: Does this mean we have to be transparent about everything – like candor? Like there's the radical candor thing, right?

AMY EDMONDSON: I think we have to be transparent about the relevant things. I don't need to tell you about the fight I had with my teenage son last week. I do need to tell you about the new information I just got from the customer. W have to be thoughtful and we have to get better and better at being thoughtful, at determining what's relevant and what isn't.

CURT NICKISCH: What about psychological safety in different cultures? Like we've been talking predominantly about U.S. companies here. That's where you've done much of your research. Does this concept still apply in cultures where organizations are more hierarchical

and just the way you speak to authority is different and the way you work together is different?

AMY EDMONDSON: It’s such an important question because it’s tempting to say, “Oh, this doesn’t apply to places like say Japan, or countries where power distance really matters. Where hierarchy really matters.” And tempting as it is, we have to push back and say, “No, it does apply.”

Because the nature of the work is the same, but if they’re trying to come up with innovative new products, it’s just as important to be hearing ideas from people. If they’re trying to do quality improvement on an existing production line, it’s just as important that people tell them when things aren’t working well.

So what I like to say is psychological safety is just as important for excellence in any organization around the world. It’s just harder to get there.

CURT NICKISCH: Or you have to devise a system – design ways to get past it.

AMY EDMONDSON: Right and in fact, if you think about the Toyota production system, for example, they designed this beautiful thing called the Andon cord, which is a physical reminder that not only is it okay, but we expect and need you to pull that cord when you see something that’s just not quite right.

Even if you’re not sure, like err on the side of inclusion, they say, and it would be harder, let’s say for a Japanese associate to raise his hand and say, come – me, me, me. But pulling a cord quietly that lights up a lantern – that’s not so bad, that I can do so. So they’re putting that nice scaffolding in place to make it easier.

And having accomplished that, created that kind of psychological safety to speak up about problems, they created a remarkable competitive advantage.

CURT NICKISCH: What have you learned about psychological safety over the past couple of decades since you first researched this and the economy has changed quite a bit for many, many people? What have you learned about psychological safety that you didn’t anticipate and surprised you?

AMY EDMONDSON: One thing that really surprised me was the Google study – Project Aristotle, which was written up in the New York Times a couple of years ago. The goal of this study was to find out what distinguishes high performing teams from low performing teams. And of course, they put all sorts of things in there, you know, where you went to school, gender mix – you know, everything you would think of in human capital that might predict team performance.

And nothing worked until they stumbled into the concept of psychological safety and found that it was just a very powerful predictor. Right, in fact, the most powerful predictor of team

performance at Google. If you had asked me would psychological safety have been the big predictor of team performance at Google, I would've said, I don't think so.

Like I think all those folks are going to be pretty able to take care of themselves, right? They've been told their whole life that they're really smart, they've done well in school, they're going to show up and…

CURT NICKISCH: They were selected carefully.

AMY EDMONDSON: They were selected carefully. They're going to expect their colleagues to be very interested in what they have to say.

CURT NICKISCH: But even at Google.

AMY EDMONDSON: Even at Google. So to me, that was quite a powerful and surprising moment. Even at Google, they would have differences – which really means that leadership matters enormously. That team leaders, project leaders, even at a place like Google can make this a great energizing experience, or a kind of unsafe experience where people are holding back and then that has real consequences for the team.

CURT NICKISCH: And that means that if you're at a place where you don't have it, you, by trying to be this type of leader or this type of manager, you can make a big difference, especially at a place where it isn't present.

AMY EDMONDSON: Right, such opportunity. I mean, I think there's a lot of latent untapped talent because people are not making it psychologically safe enough to get that talent and put it to good work.

CURT NICKISCH: Right, you've had employees who for a long time have had great independent thoughts about how to improve things just haven't said it.

AMY EDMONSON: Right, right. So that was one surprise. Another, and this isn't so much of a surprise, but, over the years, I'm often asked, well, how do you explain the Ubers or the Apples of this world where it sure doesn't look psychologically safe and yet their market cap is you know, enormous.

CURT NICKISCH: Yeah, I thought about that when you mentioned Pixar and I thought about Steve Jobs. Yeah.

AMY EDMONDSON: And so I always want to explain, you know, there is an observed and quite robust correlation between psychological safety and learning and performance. That does not mean that this is, you know, you can't have high performance without it. You sometimes have high performance because you've just got a great strategy. You know, it's brilliant, no one else is doing it or a product that is irresistible.

And what I like to say is you're getting away with it in a way. And like, what would this company be like, you know, if they'd had an engaging leader that was better at tapping into the brilliance of others in the organization rather than only relying on his or her own brilliance.

CURT NICKISCH: Amy, I'm so glad that you were on the show to talk about your research over the years and also your new book, The Fearless Organization.

AMY EDMONDSON: Thank you. Thank you for having me. It was really a pleasure and I learned something being here.

CURT NICKISCH: That's Amy Edmondson. She's a professor at Harvard Business School. Her new book is The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth.

This episode was produced by Mary Dooe. We get technical help from Rob Eckhardt. Adam Buchholz is our audio product manager.

Thanks for listening to the HBR IdeaCast. I'm Curt Nickisch.