

Professor Amy C. Edmondson: Learning Session

KEY THEMES, INSIGHTS & NOTES

10/11/25

A Shared Understanding of Psychological Safety and Why It's Important

● **A primary job of leaders is to foster high-quality conversations** to enable better decision-making, 'placing bets' in uncertainty. This requires developing the skills to do so and creating the context to do it in. Both are critical. Developing the context is often under-attended to.

That context needs to support both high psychological safety and accountability, as well as explicit, open communication within your teams. Genuine curiosity, care and ambition. Leaders must navigate that very real tension - managing ongoing tensions well and doing it out loud. This is often the exception rather than the norm it is assumed to be.

● **Psychological safety is about creating the conditions for doing hard things together in a complex world.** And, showing the passion to hold discipline for us and our teams. High-quality conversation + responding productively + discipline creates psychological safety, which supports goal achievement and learning.

● The meaning of psychological safety has gathered some baggage; this is typical for any approach over time - people apply the model through their own understanding and simplification, conflating it with psychosocial hazards. The distinction needs to be drawn:

<https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/this-working-life/what-are-we-getting-wrong-about-psychosocial-safety-/105626906>

● Psychological Safety is not about being nice - **it's having the courage to be kind (versus being nice).**

Behaviours That Foster Safety

● **Encourage leaders to bring their best self to work rather than their 'whole self'** - *what does this moment and team need of me?* This supports (and requires) adaptability and effectiveness.

● **Encourage teams to balance care and ambition, even under constraints.** Be explicit about what "bold" means in your context and support both boldness and collaboration as compatible strengths - 'freedom within a framework'.

● **Manage the tensions** (e.g., *both* short *and* long term rather than *either* short *or* long term) **and do it out loud.** Be as clear as possible and acknowledge the bind/s. Make them discussable (e.g., measures are inadequate and yet also necessary)

● Promote curiosity, feedback loops and assume positive intent. Build a culture of noticing, naming and pausing to reflect, which helps manage unintended missteps and drives continuous improvement - and is (re)generative.

● **Vulnerability and openness from leaders build trust.** 'Live out loud'. Acknowledge and be explicit about what you're trying to do and why. Be open and honest vs. protected....and ask for help. Overtly.

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Helpful Models & Work Practices

Context Awareness and Adaptive Leadership - Core Competencies.

Recognise that different work contexts (predictable, variable, novel) require tailored approaches - efficiency, experimentation or adaptability. Name it explicitly

Different learning contexts:

In predictable – continue to invite voice/thinking - e.g., *'I've never flown a perfect flight, and it won't be today...so I need to hear from you.'*

In variable – deliver what's needed and recognise there is likely more complexity than you're paying attention to.

In novel – if getting it right all the time, then you're not doing your job – need to be taking smart bets and learning from them.

Connectedness to navigate through continuous change and uncertainty (e.g., post-COVID, AI, remote work) threatens connectedness - building high-quality relationships is more important and challenging than ever – in the tsunami of all this change and uncertainty, the way through is reconnecting...but it isn't that easy. Cultivate freedom within a framework – with connectedness at the centre.

Boldness, Collaboration, and Intelligent Failure.

Support boldness and collaboration as co-existing values. Differentiate between mistakes and intelligent failures, and encourage learning from intelligent failures to drive innovation in new territory.

Remember the classic model around **interest/influence/control**.

We control very little. We influence more. We are interested in much. We get very 'busy' on/with the stuff we're interested in. Apply the discipline to turn focus towards what I can influence and the little bit I can actually control. Leave the rest – it's largely a waste of time.

Effectiveness vs efficiency.

Efficiency - an industrial era tool. Effectiveness - critical in the high-complexity knowledge era. As a leader, focus on effectiveness (doing the right things) over just efficiency (doing things right). An effective team feels safe enough to learn, adapt, and solve the correct problem, which delivers far more value than just executing a flawed plan quickly.

Empower and activate the "middle layer" of organisations.

Help operational leaders focus on their teams and build skills and effectiveness as the operational core that helps gets things done.

Actively invite people to join the conversation/thought experiment.

Offer observations/ideas, enquire together with deep listening and curiosity, and then really be willing to do the hard work of responding productively.

Teaming is a contact sport – let's name it and make it discussable.

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Barriers and Ways to Navigate

● **Changing the math on the tacit calculus that leans strongly towards holding back.**

Use the *Fearless Leader's Toolkit* to make voicing much less expensive and make silence more costly: *Set the Stage – Invite Participation – Respond Productively*.

● **Mistakes – not the same as intelligent failure.**

The job is not to get to 100% agreement or certainty. It's to be open/curious to learn enough to land on a good hypothesis that enables a call. As we go forward, learn more and be attentive to data as it comes in, we can adjust the hypothesis.

● **Holding back information as we communicate through the organisation.**

People will fill in the gaps with their own guesses. Are their guesses better for the business than the hard truths?

If our sense is to hold back information, don't. We hired adults, so treat them as such. It may not be easy, or comfortable. Our job is to get beyond the discomfort. The work requires us to get comfortable being uncomfortable. Sometimes there are real constraints, and we need to be as transparent as possible within any genuine constraints.

● Confusion/baggage conflating psychological safety with psychosocial hazards.

Measurement & Accountability

● **Integrating organisational performance metrics and storytelling** is important!

- Acknowledge the limitations of current metrics.
- Balance short-term and long-term goals, integrating quantitative ('use the numbers but don't deify them') and qualitative inputs.
- Use inquiry and robust relationships to enrol others to long term outcomes.

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Additional Notes – Captured from Flipchart Activity

In pursuit of boldness, in pursuit of transformation and innovation. What have you tried?
What has worked and what hasn't worked? What's working?

What is Working

- Clarifying the risk appetite
- Focusing on geography and chunks
- Choosing where and how to be bold
- Developing a proof of concept
- Staying adaptive and pivoting
- Having an incubator
- Creating a novel context separate from the rest of the organisation
- Structured cross-business working group
- Appetite for innovation
- Novel projects
- Acknowledging the need for cultural reform, including behavioural expectations, effectiveness and accountability
- Linking any initiatives to the core business purpose and the why
- Cross-functional leadership team,
- Catch and correct, especially in operations in the here and now
- Having explicit, intentional and regular communication increased perceptions of innovation by 10% explicit role modelling
- Having an incubator
- Encouraging inter-team collaboration and contribution, and willingness to help through/towards corporate or enterprise contribution, and having that integrated into performance management and discussion
- The criticality of leadership modelling, not singularly so, collective leadership modelling

What Didn't Work or Are Works in Progress

- Small risks amplified with disproportionate attention. For example, media (no safe failure in a very public organisation) - everything is considered controversial
- Good in-session dialogue that appears to get diluted or no responses post-session equals bandwidth to implement embedded leadership behaviours that support boldness
- Responding to BAU reduces capacity, appetite for boldness and a genuine learning culture, capability, and a slow mindset shift
- Explaining the need for a shift when we don't have the language yet
- Not linking purpose to *why*?
- Translating 'just culture' into corporate areas, from where it works well in operations - this remains a Work In Progress and is constrained in specific contexts.

Learnings on How to Talk About It

- In the face of mixed messages, misinformation and predictable challenge, declare we got it wrong
- Strength and capability in managing messages from a function perspective
- Leaders modelling, creating the construct and being consistent