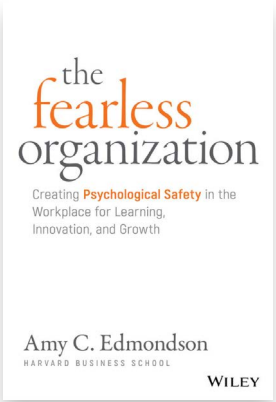

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The Fearless Organization

THE SUMMARY

John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 2019

PART I: THE POWER OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Chapter 1: The Underpinning

No one wakes up in the morning excited to go to work and look ignorant, incompetent, or disruptive. These are called interpersonal risks, and they are what nearly everyone seeks to avoid, not always consciously. In fact, most of us want to look smart, capable, or helpful in the eyes of others. No matter what our line of work, status, or gender, all of us learn how to manage interpersonal risk relatively early in life. At some point during elementary school, children start to recognize that what others think of them matters, and they learn how to lower the risk of rejection or scorn. By the time we're adults, we're usually so good at it we do it without conscious thought. Don't want to look ignorant? Don't ask questions. Don't want to look incompetent? Don't admit to mistakes or weaknesses. Don't want to be called disruptive? Don't make suggestions. At work this tendency can lead to significant problems—ranging from thwarted innovation to poor service to, at the extreme, loss of human life. Yet avoiding behaviors that might lead others to think less of us is pretty much second nature in most work places.

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There is, of course, a range of interpersonal riskiness involved in speaking up. Some cases of speaking up occur after significant trepidation; others feel reasonably straightforward and feasible. Still others simply don't occur because one has weighed the risk (consciously or not) and come out on the side of silence. The free exchange of ideas, concerns or questions is routinely hindered by interpersonal fear far more often than most managers realize. This kind of fear cannot be directly seen. Silence—when voice was possible—rarely announces itself! The moment passes, and no one is the wiser except the person who held back.

I have defined psychological safety as the belief that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk taking. The concept refers to the experience of feeling able to speak up with relevant ideas, questions, or concerns. Psychological safety is present when colleagues trust and respect each other and feel able—even obligated—to be candid.

Fear may have once acted to motivate assembly line workers on the floor or farm workers in the field—jobs that reward individual speed and accuracy in completing repetitive tasks. Most of us have been exposed to, and internalized, the figure of a villainous boss who rules by fear. Indeed, popular culture has exaggerated the stereotype to become comical, as in the animated Pixar film *Ratatouille*. Here Remy the rat, the story's cartoon hero, must first overcome the tyrannical restaurant chef who rules the kitchen if he is to realize his dream of becoming chef.

Worse, many managers still believe in the power of fear to motivate. They assume that people who are afraid (of management or of the consequences of underperforming) will work hard to avoid unpleasant consequences, and good things will happen. This might make sense if the work is straightforward and the worker is unlikely to run into any problems or have any ideas for improvement. For jobs where learning or collaboration is required for success, fear is not an effective motivator.

Fear inhibits learning. Research in neuroscience shows that fear impairs analytic thinking, creative insight, and problem solving. This is why it's hard for people to do their best work when they are afraid. As a result, how psychologically safe a person feels strongly shapes the propensity to engage in learning behaviors, such as information sharing, asking for help, or experimenting. It also affects employee satisfaction. Hierarchy reduces psychological safety. Research shows that lower-status team members generally feel less safe than higher-status members. Research also shows that we are constantly assessing our relative status, monitoring how we stack up against others, again mostly subconsciously. Further, those lower in the status hierarchy experience stress in the presence of those with higher status.

Psychological safety describes a belief that neither the formal nor informal consequences of interpersonal risks, like asking for help or admitting a failure, will be punitive. In psychologically safe environments, people believe that if they make a mistake or ask for help, others will not react badly. Instead, candor is both allowed and expected. Psychological safety exists when people feel their

workplace is an environment where they can speak up, offer ideas, and ask questions without fear of being punished or embarrassed. Is this a place where new ideas are welcomed and built upon? Or picked apart and ridiculed? Will your colleagues embarrass or punish you for offering a different point of view? Will they think less of you for admitting you don't understand something?

I do not mean to imply that psychological safety is all you need for high performance. I like to say that psychological safety takes off the brakes that keep people from achieving what's possible. In any challenging industry setting, leaders have two vital tasks. One, they must build psychological safety to spur learning and avoid preventable failures; two, they must set high standards and inspire and enable people to reach them. Setting high standards remains a crucial management task but so does sharing, sharpening, and continually emphasizing a worthy purpose.

In most workplaces today it's simply not possible to ensure excellence by inspecting proverbial widgets. In knowledge work, excellence cannot be measured easily and simply along the way. More to the point, it's almost impossible to determine whether people have failed to hit the highest possible standards. It takes time for the results of uncertain programs to become clear, and reliably measuring good process is difficult. In other words, today's leaders must motivate people to do their very best work by inspiring them, coaching them, providing feedback, and making excellence a rewarding experience.

Chapter 2: The Paper Trail

In today's organizations, psychological safety is not a "nice-to-have." It's not an employee perk, like free lunch or game rooms, that you might care about so as to make people happy at work. Psychological safety is essential to unleashing talent and creating value. Hiring talent simply isn't enough anymore. People have to be in workplaces where they are able and willing to use their talent. In any organization that requires knowledge, and especially in one that requires integrating knowledge from diverse areas of expertise, psychological safety is a requirement for success. In short, when companies rely on knowledge and collaboration for innovation and growth, whether or not to invest in building a climate of psychological safety is no longer a choice.

In any company confronting conditions that might be characterized as volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA), psychological safety is directly tied to the bottom line. This is because employee observations, questions, ideas, and concerns can provide vital information about what's going on in the market and in the organization. Add to that today's growing emphasis on diversity, inclusion, and belonging at work, and it becomes clear that psychological safety is a vital leadership responsibility. It can make or break an employee's ability to contribute, to grow and learn, and to collaborate.

We found plenty of evidence that psychological safety matters. It affects measurable outcomes ranging from employee error to company return on investment. Unfortunately, the research also

makes clear that many workplaces lack psychological safety, cutting themselves off from the kinds of employee input, engagement, and learning that are so vital to success in a complex and turbulent world. I've organized the research into five categories:

An Epidemic of Silence. Chances are you've had the experience at work when you did not ask a question you really wanted to ask, or you may have wanted to offer an idea but stayed quiet instead. Several studies show that these types of silence are painfully common. Studies have investigated when and why people feel unable to speak up in the workplace. From this work we learn, first and foremost, that people often hold back even when they believe that what they have to say could be important for the organization, for the customer, or for themselves.

There is poignancy in these discoveries. No one gains from the silence. Teams miss out on insights. Those who fail to speak up often report regret or pain. Some wish they had spoken up. Others recognize they could be experiencing more fulfillment and meaning in their jobs were they more able to contribute. Those deprived of hearing a colleague's comments may not know what they are missing, but the fact is that problems go unreported, improvement opportunities are missed, and occasionally, tragic failures occur that could have been avoided.

A Work Environment that Supports Learning. Given this well-documented tendency for people in the workplace to choose silence over voice, sometimes it seems surprising that anyone ever speaks up at all with potentially sensitive or interpersonally threatening content. This is where psychological safety comes in. A growing number of studies find that psychological safety can exist at work and, when it does, that people do in fact speak up, offer ideas, report errors, and exhibit a great deal more that we can categorize as "learning behavior."

With Wharton Professor Ingrid Nembhard and Boston University Professor Anita Tucker, I studied over a hundred quality improvement (QI) project teams in neo-natal intensive care units (NICUs) in 23 North American hospitals. By asking the QI team members to report on what they did to improve unit processes, we found that these clustered into two distinct sets of learning behaviors, which we called learn-what and learn-how. Learn-what described largely independent activities like reading the medical literature to get caught up with the latest research findings. Learn-how, in contrast, was team-based learning that included sharing knowledge, offering suggestions, and brainstorming better approaches.

We were intrigued to find that psychological safety predicted an uptick in learn-how behaviors (those that came with interpersonal risk) but had no statistical relationship whatsoever with the more independent behaviors captured by learn-what activities. This result provided a reassuring demonstration that psychological safety does promote learning by helping people overcome interpersonal risk for engaging in learn-how behaviors. Not surprisingly, for the kinds of learning that you can do alone (read a book, take an online course) psychological safety is not essential. The results also offer support for why psychological safety was not as important in days of yore when

work might consist primarily of well-defined tasks such as typing letters for the boss or passing the surgeon the correct scalpel.

Why Psychological Safety Matters for Performance. To understand why psychological safety promotes performance, we have to step back to reconsider the nature of so much of the work in today's organizations. With routine, predictable, modular work on the decline, more and more of the tasks that people do require judgment, coping with uncertainty, suggesting new ideas, and coordinating and communicating with others. This means that voice is mission critical. So, for anything but the most independent or routine work, psychological safety is intimately tied to freeing people up to pursue excellence.

Psychologically Safe Are Engaged Employees. Executive interest in employee satisfaction has taken hold in recent years. Today, most managers understand that satisfaction is important but incomplete. Satisfaction, which refers to how happy or content employees are, doesn't capture emotional commitment to the work, or motivation to pour oneself into doing a good job. Engagement, defined as the extent to which an employee feels passionate about the job and committed to the organization, is seen as an index of willingness to put discretionary effort into one's work. Validated measures of employee engagement are widely available, and most executives recognize employee engagement as a vital element of strong company performance.

Psychological Safety as the Extra Ingredient. The fifth and final group of studies emphasizes psychological safety's role in altering the strength of relationships between other variables. In these studies, psychological safety acts (using statistical language) as a moderator that makes other relationships weaker or stronger. Psychological safety has been found to help teams overcome the challenges of geographic dispersion, put conflict to good use, and leverage diversity. More and more professionals—consultants, managers, physicians, nurses, engineers—can be found talking about psychological safety. Yet few may be aware of the full weight of supporting evidence that it matters. Fewer still may have stopped to reflect on what their companies lose when psychological safety is missing.

One of the most important things to keep in mind, wherever you work, is that the failure of an employee to speak up in a crucial moment cannot be seen. This is true whether that employee is on the front lines of customer service or sitting next to you in the executive board room. Not offering an idea is an invisible act, so it's hard to engage in real-time course correction. That means that psychologically safe workplaces have a powerful advantage in competitive industries.

PART II: PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AT WORK

Chapter 3: Avoidable Failure

In May 2015, the Volkswagen Group had every reason to feel proud. It had sold over 10 million vehicles the previous year, thereby laying claim to the title of world's largest automaker. As the

saying goes, pride cometh before the fall. Merely months later, Volkswagen was facing unimaginable scandal. The clean diesel engines that had anchored its impressive US sales were discovered to have been—essentially—a hoax.

In the following years, prosecutors in the United States and Germany would identify more than 40 people, spread out across at least four cities and working for three VW brands involved in an elaborate scheme to defraud government regulators. "Dieselgate," as the scandal was dubbed, referred to VW's deceptiveness in complying with the regulations required by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to sell automobiles in the United States. The root cause of VW's Dieselgate scandal in 2015 cannot be located in the personality or leadership of any single person or small group. The failure was caused by holding fast to an outdated belief about what motivates workers. A scene in Charlie Chaplin's classic film *Modern Times* parodies what such old-fashioned motivation-by-fear can look like. Chaplin plays an assembly line worker who fails to keep pace tightening the widgets as they appear before him on the moving belt, only to be kicked by a coworker, chastised and hit by a manager, and ordered to increase speed by an executive.

Today, when simple tasks have increasingly become automated and knowledge workers do not tighten widgets but rather collaborate, synthesize, make decisions, and continually learn, such methods seem especially comedic. Like the noxious fumes the faulty VW diesel engines emitted, low psychological safety affects everyone who breathes it in. Given this insidious culture of fear, it's unsurprising that when faced with the seemingly insurmountable technical obstacles to produce a diesel engine that could pass US environmental testing, and pressed for a solution that could meet the company's target goals, engineers and regulatory officials at VW decided to find a way. However clever and lucrative the idea may have seemed at the time, and however much VW's sales and reputation soared, history has shown us that it was not, in the long run, a viable solution.

Perhaps the most stunning thing about the VW emissions debacle is that it's by no means a singular event. The same script—unreachable target goals, a command-and-control hierarchy that motivates by fear, and people afraid to lose their jobs if they fail—has been repeated again and again. In part that's because it's a script that was useful in the past, when goals were reachable, progress directly observable, and tasks largely individually executed. Under those conditions, people could be compelled to reach them simply by fear and intimidation. The problem is that, in today's volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) world, this is no longer a script that's good for business. Rather than success, it's a playbook that invites avoidable, and often painfully public, failure.

Volkswagen, Wells Fargo, Nokia, and the New York Federal Reserve serve as vivid examples of organizations that boasted deep reservoirs of expertise, driven, intelligent leaders, and clearly articulated goals. None lacked capable employees in any of the relevant fields required for the organization to succeed in its industry. In short, they had the talent. What they lacked was the leadership needed to ensure that a climate of psychological safety permeated the workplace, allowing people to speak truth to power inside the company.

None of these failures occurred overnight or out of the blue. The seeds of failure were taking root for months or years while senior management remained blissfully unaware. In many organizations, countless small problems routinely occur, presenting early warning signs that the company's strategy may be falling short and needs to be revisited. Yet these signals are often squandered. Preventing avoidable failure thus starts with encouraging people throughout a company to push back, share data, and actively report on what is really happening in the lab or in the market so as to create a continuous loop of learning and agile execution.

Success in a VUCA world requires senior executives to engage thoughtfully and frequently with company operations across all levels and departments. The people on the front line who create and deliver products and services are privy to the most important strategic data the company has available. They know what customers want, what competitors are doing, and what the latest technology allows. Organizational learning requires actively seeking deviations that challenge the assumptions underpinning a current strategy. Then these deviations must be welcomed because of their informative value for adapting the original strategy. Ironically, pushing harder on "execution" in response to early signals of underperformance may only aggravate the problem if shortcomings reveal that prior market intelligence or assumptions about the business model were flawed.

Chapter 4: Dangerous Silence

More than just business failure is at stake when psychological safety is low. In many workplaces, people see something physically unsafe or wrong and fear reporting it. They might feel bullied and intimidated by someone but don't mention it to supervisors or counselors. This reticence unfortunately can lead to widespread frustration, anxiety, depression, and even physical harm. In short, we live and work in communities, cultures, and organizations in which not speaking up can be hazardous to human health.

On February 1, 2003, NASA's Space Shuttle Columbia experienced a catastrophic re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere. All seven astronauts perished. Although space travel is obviously risky and fatal accidents seem part of the territory, this particular accident did not come "out of the blue." Two weeks earlier, a NASA engineer named Rodney Rocha had watched launch-day video footage, a day after what had seemed to be a picture-perfect launch on a sunny Florida morning. Something seemed amiss. Rocha played the tape over and over. He thought a chunk of insulating foam might have fallen off the shuttle's external tank and struck the left wing of the craft. The video images were grainy, shot from a great distance, and it was impossible to really tell whether or not the foam had caused damage, but Rocha could not help worrying about the size and position of that grainy moving dot he saw on the screen. To resolve the ambiguity, Rocha wanted to get satellite photos of the Shuttle's wing. This would require NASA higher ups to ask the Department of Defense for help.

Rocha e-mailed his boss to see if he could get help authorizing the request for satellite images. His boss thought it unnecessary and said so. Discouraged, Rocha sent an emotional email to his fellow engineers, later explaining that "engineers were…not to send messages much higher than their own

rung in the ladder." Working with an ad hoc team of engineers to assess the damage, he was unable to resolve his concern about possible damage without obtaining images. A week later, when the foam strike possibility was briefly discussed by senior managers in the formal mission management team meeting, Rocha, sitting on the periphery, observed silently. A formal investigation by experts would later conclude that a large hole in the shuttle wing occurred when a briefcase-sized piece of foam hit the leading edge of the wing, causing the accident. They also identified two, albeit difficult and highly-uncertain, rescue options that might have prevented the tragic deaths. Reporting on the investigation, ABC News anchor Charlie Gibson asked Rocha why he hadn't spoken up in the meeting. The engineer replied, "I just couldn't do it. I'm too low down [in the organization] …and she [meaning Mission Management Team Leader Linda Ham] is way up here," gesturing with his hand held above his head.

Rocha's statement captures a subtle but crucial aspect of the psychology of speaking up at work. Consider his words carefully. He did not say, "I chose not to speak," or "I felt it was not right to speak." He said that he "couldn't" speak. Oddly, this description is apt. The psychological experience of having something to say yet feeling literally unable to do so is painfully real for many employees and very common in organizational hierarchies, like that of NASA in 2003. We can all recognize this phenomenon. We understand why his hands spontaneously depicted that poignant vertical ladder. When probed, as Rocha was by Gibson, many people report a similar experience of feeling unable to speak up when hierarchy is made salient. Meanwhile, the higher ups in a position to listen and learn are often blind to the silencing effects of their presence.

Many who analyze events leading up to tragic accidents such as this one cannot help pointing out that people should demonstrate a bit more backbone. Courage. It is impossible to disagree with this assertion. Nonetheless, agreeing doesn't make it effective. Exhorting people to speak up because it's the right thing to do relies on an ethical argument but is not a strategy for ensuring good outcomes. Insisting on acts of courage puts the onus on individuals without creating the conditions where the expectation is likely to be met. For speaking up to become routine, psychological safety and expectations about speaking up must become institutionalized and systematized.

Cassandra, one of the most tragic characters in classical Greek mythology, was given the gift of prophecy along with the curse that she would never be believed. Low levels of psychological safety can create a culture of silence. They can also create a Cassandra culture—an environment in which speaking up is belittled and warnings go unheeded. When speaking up entails drawing attention to unpleasant outcomes, as was the case for Cassandra in her prediction of war, it's easy for others not to listen or believe. 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.

Consider the Challenger shuttle explosion back in 1986. Unlike Rodney Rocha's silence in a crucial workplace moment, Roger Boisjoly, an engineer at NASA contractor Morton Thiokol, did speak up. The night before the disastrous launch, Boisjoly raised his concern that unusually cold temperatures might cause the O-rings that connected segments of the shuttle to malfunction. His data was

incomplete and his argument vague, but the assembled group could have readily resolved the ambiguity with some simple analyses and experiments had they listened intensely and respectfully. Effective voice requires a culture of listening. A culture of silence can thus be understood as a culture in which the prevailing winds favor going along rather than offering one's concerns. It is based on the assumption that most people's voices do not offer value and thus will not be valued.

Chapter 5: The Fearless Workplace

Perhaps the truly fearless workplace is an impossibility. People are naturally averse to losing their standing in the eyes of peers and bosses. Nonetheless, a growing number of organizations are making the fearless workplace an aspiration. Leaders of these organizations recognize that psychological safety is mission critical when knowledge is a crucial source of value. In that sense, the fearless organization is something to continually strive toward rather than to achieve once and for all. It's a never-ending and dynamic journey.

When people speak up, ask questions, debate vigorously, and commit themselves to continuous learning and improvement, good things happen. It's not that it's easy, or always enjoyable, but investing the effort and living with the challenges pays off. Workplaces where employees know that their input is valued create new possibilities for authentic engagement and stellar performance. If you were over the age of three in 1995, chances are you were aware of a movie called *Toy Story*, the first computer animated feature film released by a company named Pixar. That year, *Toy Story* would become the highest grossing film and Pixar the largest initial public offering. The rest, as they say, is history. Pixar Animation Studios has since produced 19 features all of which have been critical triumphs. This is a remarkable statement in an industry where hits are prized but rare, and a series of hits without fail from a single company is all but unheard of. How do they do it? Through leadership that creates the condition where both creativity and criticism can flourish. Pixar may be in the business of creating and animating stories, but the way the company works offers lessons about psychological safety that, much like their movies, are universal.

Pixar co-founder Ed Catmull credits the studio's success, in part, to candor. His definition of candor as forthrightness or frankness and his insight that we associate the word "candor" with truth-telling and a lack of reserve support psychological safety's tenets. When candor is part of a workplace culture, people don't feel silenced; they don't keep their thoughts to themselves. They say what's on their minds and share ideas, opinions, and criticisms. Ideally, they laugh together and speak noisily. Catmull encourages candor by looking for ways to institutionalize it in the organization in what Pixar calls its "Braintrust."

As Catmull candidly admits, "…early on, all of our movies suck." In other words, it would have been easy to make Toy Story a movie about the secret life of toys that was sappy and boring. But the process, innately iterative, relies on feedback that is truly honest. If the people in the Braintrust room had murmured words of polite praise for early screenings rather than feeling safe enough to candidly

say what they felt was wrong, missing, or unclear or made no sense, chances are that Toy Story and Toy Story 2 would not have soared into the cinematic stratosphere.

Pixar's Braintrust has rules. First, feedback must be constructive and about the project, not the person. Similarly, the filmmaker cannot be defensive or take criticism personally and must be ready to hear the truth. Second, the comments are suggestions, not prescriptions. There are no mandates, top-down or otherwise; the director is ultimately the one responsible for the movie and can take or leave solutions offered. Third, candid feedback is not a "gotcha" but must come from a place of empathy. It helps that the directors have often already gone through the process themselves. Praise and appreciation, especially for the director's vision and ambition, are doled out in heaping measures. Catmull, again: "The Braintrust is benevolent. It wants to help. And it has no selfish agenda." The Braintrust, seen as a neutral and free-floating rather than as a fearsome "them," is perceived as more than the sum of its individual members. When people feel psychologically safe enough to contribute insight, opinion, or suggestion, the knowledge in the room thereby increases exponentially. This is because individual observations and suggestions build on each other, taking new shape and creating new value, especially compared to what happens when individual feedback is collected separately.

Braintrusts—groups of people with a shared agenda who offer candid feedback to their peers—are subject to individual personalities and chemistries. In other words, they can easily go off the rails if the process isn't well led. To be effective, managers have to monitor dynamics continually over time. It helps enormously if people respect each other's expertise and trust each other's opinions. Pixar director Andrew Stanton offers advice for how to choose people for an effective feedback group. They must, he says, "make you think smarter and put lots of solutions on the table in a short amount of time." Stanton's point about having people around who make us "think smarter" gets to the heart of why psychological safety is essential to innovation and progress. We can only think smarter if others in the room speak their minds.

Failure is another ingredient Catmull cites as crucial to exponential numbers at the box office. That might sound odd, in that the last thing Pixar wants is a box office flop. Avoiding that outcome is understood to be dependent on embracing failure earlier in the creative journey. The Braintrust views risk and failure as a necessary part of the creative process. In its early stages a film will "suck" according to Catmull. Stanton compares the process of moviemaking to that of learning to ride a bicycle; no one learns how to pedal gracefully without falling over a few times. Catmull believes that without the freedom to fail people "will seek instead to repeat something safe that's been good enough in the past. Their work will be derivative, not innovative." As in so many other contexts, experimentation and its inevitable trial-and-error process are necessary to innovation.

Failure can, of course, be costly, and Pixar is strategic in seeking to have failures occur early in the process by, for example, allowing directors to spend years in the development phase, which involves expenditures of salaries but limits excess production costs. How do you know when failure isn't

productive? When is it better to cut losses and give up? According to Catmull, when a project isn't working out, the only reason Pixar will fire a director is if the director has clearly lost the confidence of his or her team or has received constructive feedback in a Braintrust meeting and refused to act on it for a prolonged period. In this way, Pixar tries to institutionalize what Catmull calls "uncouple[ing] fear and failure" by creating an environment where psychological safety is high enough that "making mistakes doesn't strike terror into employees' hearts." Of course, Pixar is not alone in embracing candor and failure. In fact, it's likely that any successful creative endeavor does this, either implicitly or explicitly.

Astro Teller, CEO at Google X, explained in his 2016 TED talk why and how X "make[s] it safe to fail": "You cannot yell at people and force them to fail fast. People resist. They worry, 'What will happen to me if I fail? Will people laugh at me? Will I be fired?' ...The only way to get people to work on big, risky things—audacious ideas—and have them run at all the hardest parts of the problem first is if you make that the path of least resistance for them. We work hard at X to make it safe to fail. Teams kill their ideas as soon as the evidence is on the table because they are rewarded for it. They get applause from their peers. Hugs and high fives from their manager, me in particular. They get promoted for it. We have bonused every single person on teams that ended their projects, from teams as small as two to teams of more than 30."

Teller highlights how unpleasant it feels for us to fail, especially at work. It's natural to worry what other people will think and about losing our job. That's why, unless a leader expressly and actively makes it psychologically safe to do so, people will seek to avoid failure.

Chapter 6: Safe and Sound

By now you're well aware that speaking up is easier said than done. There's no switch to flip that will instantaneously turn an organization accustomed to silence and fear into one where people speak candidly. Instead, creating a psychologically safe workplace requires a lot of effort to alter systems, structures, and processes. Ultimately, it means that deep-seated, entrenched organizational norms and attitudes must change.

People up and down an organization can contribute to creating a climate of silence and fear. Similarly, people up and down and across the organization can contribute to creating a climate of voice and safety. 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. As we have seen, commitment to doing this is particularly vital for preventing or managing a crisis. It is both challenging and important to build psychological safety to ensure that the talent in an organization is able to be put to good use to learn, innovate, and grow. Speaking up is not a natural act in hierarchies. It must be nurtured. When it's not, the results can be catastrophic—for people and for the bottomline. When it is nurtured, you can be certain that it is the product of deliberate, thoughtful effort.

The Fearless Organization

Creating a psychologically safe workplace takes leadership. Leadership can be seen as a force that helps people and organizations engage in unnatural acts like speaking up, taking smart risks, embracing diverse views, and solving remarkably challenging problems.

PART III: CREATING A FEARLESS ORGANIZATION

Chapter 7: Making it Happen

Whenever you are trying to get people on the same page, with common goals and a shared appreciation for what they're up against, you're setting the stage for psychological safety. The most important skill to master is that of framing the work. If near perfection is what is needed to satisfy demanding car customers, leaders must know to frame the work by alerting workers to catch and correct tiny deviations before the car proceeds down the assembly line. If zero worker fatalities in a dangerous platinum mine is the goal, then leaders must frame physical safety as a worthy and challenging but attainable goal. If discovering new cures is the goal, leaders know to motivate researchers to generate smart hypotheses for experiments and to feel okay about being wrong far more often than right.

Fear of (reporting) failure is such a key indicator of an environment with low levels of psychological safety, how leaders present the role of failure is essential. Failure is a source of valuable data, but leaders must understand and communicate that learning only happens when there's enough psychological safety to dig into failure's lessons carefully. Reframing failure starts with understanding a basic typology of failure types. Failure archetypes include preventable failures (never good news), complex failures (still not good news), and intelligent failures (not fun, but must be considered good news because of the value they bring). Preventable failures are deviations from recommended procedures that produce bad outcomes. If someone fails to don safety glasses in a factory and suffers an eye injury, this is a preventable failure. Complex failures occur in familiar contexts when a confluence of factors comes together in a way that may never have occurred before. Consider the severe flooding of the Wall Street subway station in New York City during Super storm Sandy in 2012. With vigilance, complex failures can sometimes, but not always, be avoided. Neither preventable nor complex failures are worthy of celebration.

In contrast, intelligent failures, as the term implies, must be celebrated so as to encourage more of them. Intelligent failures, like the preventable and complex, are still results no one wanted. Unlike the other two categories, they are the result of a thoughtful foray into new territory.

Framing the work also involves calling attention to other ways, beyond failure's prevalence, in which tasks and environments differ. Three especially important dimensions are uncertainty, interdependence, and what's at stake—all of which also have implications for failure. Emphasizing uncertainty reminds people that they need to be curious and alert to pick up early indicators of change in, say, customer preferences in a new market, a patient's reaction to a drug, or new technologies on the horizon.

Emphasizing interdependence lets people know that they're responsible for understanding how their tasks interact with other people's tasks. Interdependence encourages frequent conversations to figure out the impact their work is having on others and to convey in turn the impact others' work has on them. Interdependent work requires communication. In other words, when leaders frame the work they are emphasizing the need for taking interpersonal risks like sharing ideas and concerns.

Finally, clarifying the stakes is important whether the stakes are high or low. Reminding people that life is on the line—say, in a hospital, a mine, or at NASA—helps put interpersonal risk in perspective. People are more likely to speak up if leaders frame its importance. Similarly, reminding people that the only thing that is at stake is a bruised ego when a lab doesn't go as hoped is a good way to get them to be willing to go for it by offering possibly crazy ideas and figure out which ones to test first!

Emphasizing a sense of purpose is another key clement of the setting the stage for psychological safety. Motivating people by articulating a compelling purpose is a well-established leadership task. Leaders who remind people of why what they do matters—for customers, for the world—help create the energy that carries them through challenging moments.

The second essential activity in the leaders' tool kit is inviting participation in a way that people find compelling and genuine. The goal is to lower what is usually a too-high bar for what's considered appropriate participation. Realizing that self-protection is natural, the invitation to participate must be crystal clear if people are going to choose to engage rather than to play it safe. To reinforce a climate of psychological safety, it's imperative that leaders—at all levels—respond productively to the risks people take. Productive responses are characterized by three elements: expressions of appreciation, destigmatizing failure, and sanctioning clear violations.

Stanford Professor Carol Dweck, whose celebrated research on mindset shows the power of a learning orientation for individual achievement and resilience in the face of challenge, notes the importance of praising people for efforts, regardless of the outcome. When people believe their performance is an indication of their ability or intelligence, they are less likely to take risks—for fear of a result that would disconfirm their ability. When people believe that performance reflects effort and good strategy, they are eager to try new things and willing to persevere despite adversity and failure. Praising effort is especially important in uncertain environments where good outcomes are not always the result of good process, and vice versa.

Failure is a necessary part of uncertainty and innovation, but this must be made explicit to reinforce the invitation for voice. Leaders who respond to all failures in the same way will not create a healthy environment for learning. When a failure occurs because someone violated a rule or value that matters in the organization, this is very different than when a thoughtful hypothesis in the lab turns out to be wrong. Although obvious in concept, in practice people routinely get this wrong. Yes, firing can sometimes be an appropriate and productive response to a blameworthy act, but won't this kill the psychological safety? No. Most people are thoughtful enough to recognize (and appreciate)

that when people violate rules or repeatedly take risky shortcuts, they are putting themselves, their colleagues, and their organization at risk. In short, psychological safety is reinforced rather than harmed by fair, thoughtful responses to potentially dangerous, harmful, or sloppy behavior.

In short, a productive response is concerned with future impact. Punishment sends a powerful message and an appropriate one if boundaries were clear in advance. Indeed, it is vital to send messages that reinforce values the company holds dear. However, it is equally vital not to inadvertently send a message that says, "Diverse opinions simply won't be tolerated here," or "one strike and you're out." Such messages reduce psychological safety and ultimately erode the quality of the work. In contrast, a message that reinforces the values and practices of a learning organization is, "it's okay to make a mistake, and it's okay to hold an opinion that others don't like, so long as you are willing to learn from the consequences." The most important goal is figuring out a way to help the organization learn from what happened. If there is ambiguity about public self-expression related to company policies a productive response engages people in a learning dialogue to better understand and improve how the company functions.

Chapter 8: What's Next?

By now it should be clear that psychological safety is foundational to building a learning organization. Organizations that seek to stay relevant through continuous learning and agile execution must cultivate a fearless environment that encourages speaking up. In any company that thrives in our complex and uncertain world, leaders must be listening intently with a deep understanding that people are both the sensors who pick up signals that change is necessary and the source of creative new ideas to test and implement.

The basic asymmetry of the psychological and societal forces favoring silence over voice, or self-protection over self-expression will always be with us, but the rewards of voice and silence are also asymmetrical. Self-protection remains a hollow victory compared to the fulfillment that comes from actively serving an inspiring purpose and being a part of a team that's able to accomplish an ambitious goal. It's the difference between playing not to lose and playing to win. Playing not to lose is a mindset that focuses, consciously or not, on protecting against the downside; playing to win, in contrast, is focused on the upside, seeks opportunity, and necessarily takes risks. When we're playing not to lose, we play it safe.

Stop to consider which mindset is in charge when you're at work. How often do you find yourself truly playing to win? It can be challenging to make this shift, because when you play not to lose, you're likely to succeed (in not losing). You miss opportunities to grow, to innovate, and to experience a deeper sense of fulfillment. When you make up your mind to play to win, the rules change. You might fall flat on your face publicly sometimes, but you also will become more able to contribute to something that makes a difference in the world. Perhaps the best way to experience psychological safety is to act as if you have it already. The chances are you'll be creating a safer and more energizing environment for those around you as well.

The Fearless Organization

Leadership is a vital force in making it possible for people and organizations to overcome the inherent barriers to voice and engagement, so as to gain the emotional and practical rewards of fully participating in an inspiring shared mission. Leadership is not constrained to the top of an organization but rather can be exercised at all levels. Leadership at its core is about harnessing others' efforts to achieve something no one can achieve alone. It's about helping people go as far as they can with the talents and skills they have. Substituting candor for silence and engagement for fear are essential responsibilities for leaders today.

We don't have a magic wand to make psychological safety happen overnight, but by committing to the aspiration to build it, one conversation at a time, leaders take the first step of a perpetual journey toward building and nurturing organizations that can innovate and thrive in the knowledge economy.

If you set out to build psychological safety in your organization, it's somewhat like setting sail on journey for which much is known and much is unknown. Just as skippers and crew on a sailboat must communicate and coordinate to stay the course facing shifting tides and winds, you and your colleagues must do likewise. The sailing metaphor is apt as well because it's impossible for a sailboat to head directly to an upwind mark (almost always set as the first destination in a regatta). The boat can head at a 45-degree angle off from the target, getting closer, and then "tacking"—switching to head at a 45-degree angle on the other side. Zigzagging upwind in this manner, the boat eventually arrives at its destination, having made large (tacks) and small (sail adjustments) pivots along the way.

Creating psychological safety is a constant process of smaller and larger corrections that add up to forward progress. Like tacking upwind, you must zig right and then zag left and then right again, never able to head exactly where you want to go and never quite knowing when the wind will change.