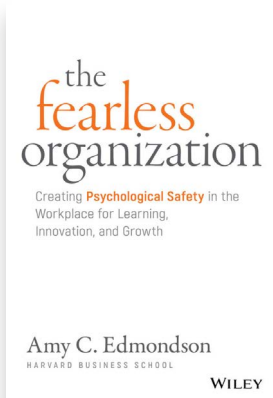


EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARIES

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The Fearless Organization

THE NUTSHELL

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Chapter 1: The Underpinning.

Psychological safety is 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 inhibits learning. 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.

Chapter 2: The Paper Trail.

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.

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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.

Chapter 3: Avoidable Failure.

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 frontline 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—championed by company leaders but enacted by everyone—requires actively seeking deviations that challenge the assumptions underpinning a current strategy. 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.

Low levels of psychological safety can create a culture of silence. They can also create an environment in which speaking up is belittled and warnings go unheeded. When speaking up entails drawing attention to unpleasant outcomes, 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.

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. 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.

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Chapter 6: Safe and Sound.

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, and 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.

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.

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, leaders must know to frame the work by alerting workers to catch and correct tiny deviations. If zero worker fatalities, 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.

Chapter 8: What's Next?

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.