

Interview with Amy C. Edmondson

# Psychological safety matters for learning

Amy C. Edmondson is een van werlds meest toonaangevende denkers op het gebied van leiderschap en verandering. Haar bekendheid nam een vlucht na het verschijnen van haar boek *The Fearless Organization* in 2018.<sup>1</sup> Het boek is gebaseerd op twintig jaar onderzoek naar de oorzaken en kenmerken van psychologische veiligheid in werksituaties. Edmondson wordt sedertdien wereldwijd beschouwd als dé expert op het gebied van psychologische veiligheid en gedrag op de werkvloer. Dit interview is weergegeven in het Engels, de taal waarin ook het gesprek plaatsvond.

BY KATALIEN BOLLEN AND SANNE SCHREURS

**An important concept you refer to is psychological safety – what is present (or absent) in order to feel psychologically safe?**

There are a lot of people talking about psychological safety who are using it to refer to a broad range of phenomena – often related to being nice or being comfortable or free of any kind of disagreeable conversation. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Psychological safety describes an environment where people are willing to take interpersonal risks, like speaking up, admitting a mistake, asking for help, challenging the status quo, or offering a dissenting view. These are all behaviors that bring interpersonal risk. Which may not seem an important kind of risk – that is, the risk that people might not like you or might make fun of you, or might in some way reject you. But human beings are very sensitive to, and spontaneously anxious about, such risks. I am not saying we think about that all the time, but rather that we notice when an environment feels safe to take risks and where it is okay to be myself – and when in contrast it feels safer to hold back.

So psychological safety describes a sense of permission for candor, for honesty, for authenticity. And my interest in it was because of its importance for knowledge-based work, knowledge intensive work. If you are doing work

today, in almost any setting, to do it well you will often need to ask questions, to ask for help, to share an idea. If that doesn't feel possible, then you hold back. And holding back is more common than leaning in. You could say: 'well, so what?' But what I and many others have found is that there is a big 'so what?'

When people are holding back, there are two categories of negative results. One is the failures that could have been prevented, if someone had spoken up earlier. The other is the innovation or improvement that never happened. The second type of bad outcome is harder to measure because it is harder to track the innovation that did not happen. We ended up with more case studies on the first category, because it was easier to get the data.'

**People sometimes do not realize they are not opening up or voicing their concerns. What can companies start to do from tomorrow on in favor of psychological safety?**

I devote a chapter or even two to answering that question in my book *The Fearless Organization*. Before I answer it fully, I want to say that I don't think it is realistic for organizations to ever have complete psychological safety. In fact, we might not even want people to have no qualms, that there is never an internal question of 'I wonder, can I say this?' But when you have a psychologically safe work environment you are more likely



**Katalien Bollen** and **Sanne Schreurs** are editor of this magazine.



Amy C. Edmondson is Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School. She reached the first place in the 2021 Thinkers50, also called the Oscars of Management Thinking.

to say 'yes, of course I can, because I care about my team member, I care about the customer, I care about the patient'. So how do you get people to believe – and I think of it as more of a belief, a cognition, than a feeling or an emotion, even though it is a subtle distinction – that their voice is welcome, that their input is welcome, that they will never be rejected for asking for help when in over their head.

My answer is a set of behaviors in three categories. You can think of them as 'before', 'during' and 'after', even if that is a little oversimplified. The three categories of behaviors that support that belief are:

1. 'Framing the work, or setting the stage'. That is about calling attention to uncertainty, challenge, or novelty. Those three are all attributes of the work today that logically depend upon people speaking up. For doing things for which there is uncertainty, when people are holding back their observations or concerns. So you emphasize that the work simply requires input. You need them. This is about setting the stage, where people think 'yes, we are like scientists doing something that has never been done before exactly in this way'. So, there is not a perfect blueprint or perfect recipe that we are supposed to be following.
2. 'Make the invitation more explicit'. How do you make it easy for people to speak up? The best way to do that is what you are doing right now: ask questions. When you ask questions, it becomes very awkward not to respond. You can almost not do that, you feel strange, you feel not socialized properly. If someone asks 'Amy, what do you think of this?', then I am going to answer it. I might not answer it truthfully but if it seems like a genuine question, it is related to the work and it is related to our doing a good job, of course I am going to answer it, as well as I can. People appreciate being asked for their thoughts.
3. How do you respond when someone disagrees with you or brings bad news to the team? The psychological safety building response is a combination of appreciative and forward looking. I am not talking about false cheerfulness or 'Isn't that wonderful?!'. No, what I mean is honest appreciation of honesty, as in, 'Thank you for that clear line of sight'. And then: 'How can we help?' This is forward looking – compared to 'How did that happen?' I am a big fan of after actions reviews, but if you want to build more psychological safety your first response should be forward looking, where do we go from here? Your subsequent response could be: 'Let's dig into this, let's understand how this happened'.

It is all about being learning oriented. As adults we stop being learning oriented and we start being knowing oriented and that is the killer of psychological safety. So we have to reinvigorate our humility. And I do not mean false modesty, I mean humility about the challenges that lie ahead and then remind ourselves to be curious about what others bring. And then of course call upon our empathy when others are in a tough spot, so that we respond the way we would want someone to respond to us.

### **When you say it should be future oriented and appreciative, you refer also to acting upon it?**

You bring up a good point, because it is really important that people feel like there is an impact. Because, as I said, it is never perfectly easy, or perfectly effortless to bring up a concern or problem or something. If there is no benefit to it or if I can't feel the benefit, then I might not do it again. So it is really important that there is some kind of follow through. Even if it turns out there is nothing, let people know there is nothing. It is a kind of respect.

You know, everybody wants to matter. One way to matter is to be contributing, but if you then don't think it matters, if no one seems to be listening, you stop contributing. If we are not encouraged and invited, then we end up just holding back. All of this becomes more possible if you're working not just on psychological safety but also on felt accountability, so that people feel inspired by, energized and motivated by the work. If people have a sense of accountability for their own contributions to the work but also are willing to encourage each other to follow through as well, magic happens. I love the idea of permission to hold each other accountable. A permission to say: 'You were going to get me these reports, and I'd love to have an update on that.' Or permission to say: 'How are you doing on (whatever)?'

### **Can you talk about the role of leadership in promoting a fearless organization?**

There is no such thing as a completely fearless organization. Organizations always encompass variance. Once an organization grows beyond a single team (as a startup), it will have smaller subgroups that have slightly different norms, behaviors and routines. In my research I have found that psychological safety varies significantly across teams in the same organizations. There are differences across organizations too but these organizational differences also encompass team differences. The implications of that are pretty important. First, organizations will learn from their teams learning and there will be differences you will need to pay attention to. The goal is to get all teams to be learning oriented. Second, the most important implication is that leaders in the middle matter. They may even matter most. The leadership example from the top is very important. It is very visible, it is very influential, but the skills and leadership competencies of people in the middle – whether they are leading a bank branch or a customer service team – those leadership skills and behaviors matter almost more than the top to the people who interact with them.

### **Why is that?**

Because this is where the work is done. If I go to work every day and I do my job – customer service inquiries, producing a product, or research in a lab – I am not influenced everyday by the CEO and by what the CEO is doing. I am very influenced by the most proximal leader, the person who is nearest to me and who has some kind of authority or status. That person's behaviors are what people pay attention to. These leaders have the opportunity to shape performance reviews, but even more informally they set the tone. If you have more status, people pay more attention to you and so your behavior matters.'

**If middle management is that important, I guess they should also be trained in this kind of skills?**

Yes, exactly. Anybody in a people management role or a leadership role needs training. They usually have expertise, that's what got them there in a leadership role (maybe it is marketing, maybe it is engineering or finance). But whatever it is, they also need behavioral skills to manage others and to enable a team to learn, be energized, and grow. Many companies assume that because you are a smart expert you will be a good manager. Some will be, because they bring good instincts or got it from their upbringing, but it is not automatic. So offering training and learning programs is very important.

**What is crucial for top management?**

The messaging from top management is important. They need to set the tone. Their example is quite visible. Essentially, what I am saying is that they need to model the desired behavior. They need to inspire the rest of the leaders. They can do that in their own way. It doesn't have to be one style that is right for everybody. But they *do* need to model learning. They must be excited but also humble about the challenge ahead. They must show that they believe the company has a great purpose to serve customers or society. And, they must be very clear that they don't have all the answers and that they are absolutely dependent on the workforce for that.

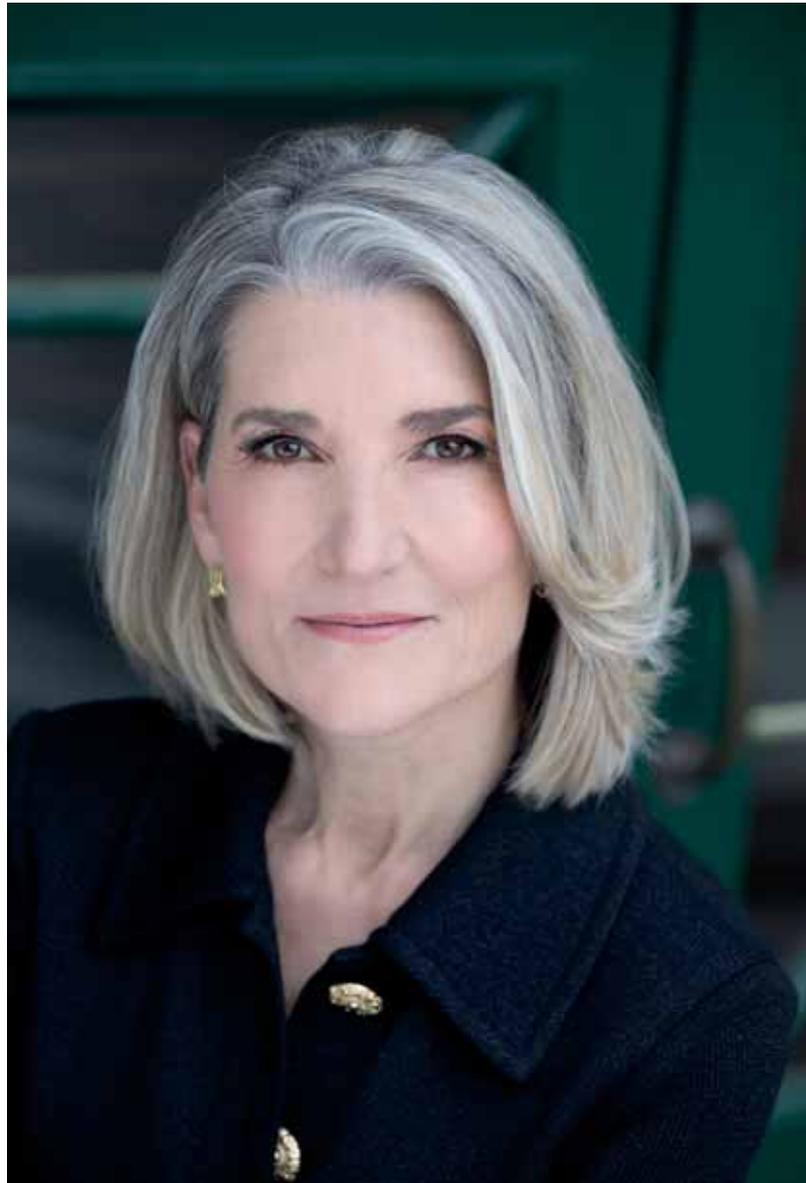
**Is it important as top management to grant middle management some time with their team to work on the team next to the client and/or patient related work?**

'Yes. In a way it is about getting comfortable being uncomfortable. Maybe in your social life you can surround yourself with friends with whom you feel relaxed and comfortable. There is nothing wrong with that. But at work, if you are feeling too comfortable, it is probably a bad sign, because work is supposed to be hard, it's supposed to be challenging. The world keeps changing. We all must keep learning. Organizations that don't keep changing or innovating with the changes in the world, will not be successful. So, you have to get in the habit of challenging yourself and your colleagues to keep stretching.

**Psychological safety seems to be something that needs time to grow. As a mediator, you want parties in a conflict to feel psychologically safe to share what really bothers them. How do you achieve that, because you don't have that much time in a mediation.**

Let's challenge the time thing. If you have a very bad history, as you might have in a big conflict, you are starting below water. And so you have to repair what has to happen before you really engage in the process of mediation. My recipe is: make it discussable. In a sense, the mediator plays an important role in normalizing the discussion of things we normally consider undiscussable. It is freeing to realize that it is okay to say: 'I was really angry about that when I heard X, and it let me to conclude (for example): you don't care.' And then the other person has a chance to explain their thinking.

Abraham Lincoln once said: 'I don't like that man very much, I must get to know him better.' This is a very powerful insight:



if I don't like you, I probably don't understand where you are coming from. Because if I *did* understand where you are coming from, I'd probably like you. If I understood your path, your ladder of inference, your journey, I would like you more. In short, I think the answer to your question is: let's name the elephant in the room, and let's acknowledge that it is hard. In times of real conflict or in bad experiences where people have felt punished or humiliated or disrespected for speaking up, let's acknowledge the deficit and the harm. This is job one: make it discussable. Job two is: make it a team problem solving opportunity. You will not come in with answers and solutions to fix psychological safety. You have to give people the invitation and the tools to do it themselves.

I want to challenge the assumption that it takes time to develop psychological safety. I actually think you can do this very quickly. You can also destroy it very quickly by shaming someone. But you can create it quickly by saying in a mediation something like: 'This is going to be interesting/challenging, I don't think we have ever done a project like this, I think we'll need everybody to contribute their ideas and concerns.' The other might think: 'Okay, that's interesting,

I wonder if the mediator means it.' If the mediator invites parties to give their opinion, they should experience that their input is wanted and needed. But it is crucial that input is followed by a positive response. Let's say the mediator decides to put the input on a white board. People may pretty soon realize that the sport they're playing is a pretty exciting one. And then people stop being self-protective. They want to show off (in a good way) as a contributor; they are no longer worrying about how to stay safe. They hope others will think well of them because they're engaged and offering good ideas. In that moment you are tapping into the desire that we all have to be seen well by others. The problem is that that desire (of being seen well by others) most of the time drives us to hold back, to stay safe.

What I want to do is to flip that around. You have to be very careful that you do not punish people who lean in. But if you do say 'that's a stupid idea', you quickly correct yourself: 'I am so sorry, that was an error on my part. Let me take that back. Instead, let's dig in. I need to understand that better. Why might that work – or not work. What do people think?' We have to train ourselves to slow down, take a breath, and not to respond too quickly.

## We have to train ourselves to slow down, take a breath, and not to respond too quickly

### How can you measure psychological safety?

There is a formal way, the survey measure. My colleague, Sander Hoeken, in the Netherlands hosts a free site to measure psychological safety ([fearlessorganization.com](http://fearlessorganization.com)). You can use that scan and then discuss the results of the scan with your team. More informally, you can measure psychological safety in another way – by asking yourselves about the ratio of good news to bad news, or requests for help versus 'all is well'-remarks. If the ratio is out of balance, favoring all good, you might have a psychological safety problem.

### You mention that reasons for not speaking up are: fear of being perceived negatively and fear of damaging relationships at work. Those fears have no place in a fearless organization. But don't they always remain latent?

That is okay. They do not have to totally disappear. We want people to have some thoughtfulness about speaking up. It is not the case that every thought that comes into your mind needs to be raised, but the things that are relevant to the work need to be raised. Anything that might make a difference should be raised. We should not expect Nirvana, perfection.

### In practice we sometimes see that employees tend to fall silent or freeze from the moment that they are confronted with negative and/or emotional feedback. How do you view this?

Like all feedback. You want to keep nudging people to be as concrete as possible. We want people to offer their best account of what happened and what the impact was. Be

concrete. Chris Argyris called this the ladder of inference. Let's walk down the ladder. You felt unsafe, let's go down, where did that feeling or conclusion come from? What did you see? You know, 8 times out of 10, it might be something like this: the boss looked upset in a meeting and it turns out that he just realized he was late for a daycare pickup, and it has nothing to do with you. The other two times maybe the boss legitimately was upset and responded badly. Not modeling the best leadership. It is very important to respond to reports of 'bad behavior'. We don't assume those are bad people, but we know that sometimes people act in ways that – either due to ignorance or bad day or something else – have a problematic impact on others. We want to take this seriously, but always with a learning mindset. The goal is to get specific: your feeling that you are not safe is not concrete and not a legitimate reason to assume that someone deliberately decided to make it so. There might not be a culprit; there might be a busy parent who was doing six things at once and was short with you. So let's all learn together. Let's do the best we can – recognizing that we are all fallible human beings.

### This magazine focuses on transgressive behavior. How would you relate the fearless organization to this topic?

I think it would be perfectly fine, in fact accurate, to replace 'psychological safe environment' by 'learning environment'. It is the same thing. That means, I think, for transgressive behaviors, in the work environment, if you bring a learning lens to it, you would be better off than if you bring a knowing lens to it. So if someone transgresses a border or boundary, my initial instinct as a human being is to blame, to assume that this person did it on purpose and knew what s/he was doing. It is not about asking 'I wonder why that happened' or 'Can I try to understand that better?'

The point is each of us must bring curiosity to everything, bad and good. If something good happens: let's be curious about how and why. If bad things happen, let's be curious about how and why. This attitude is necessary until we know enough about the event. We have to force ourselves to hold off from judging. Our brains want to judge. They are very good at it. But we are wrong, some significant portion of the time. We are too hasty.

So, psychological safety matters for learning, full stop. That is what I care about. I think the organizations we create are not very good at continuous learning. And that gets us in trouble. We won't innovate, we won't adapt, we won't be agile, we won't grow and develop as human beings. Whether we are looking at matters of problematic behavior or inspiring behavior, we want to come at it with curiosity instead of 'I am supposed to know the answer'. ■

### NOTE

1. Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*, Wiley John & Sons 2018, published in Dutch as *De onbevreesde organisatie. Creëer psychologische veiligheid op de werkvloer om innovatie en groei te stimuleren*, Business Contact 2019.