

BOOK REVIEW

Making Speaking Up Safe: A Review of the Fearless Organization

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Book Review on *Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation and Growth*, by Amy C Edmondson, 9781119477242, John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken, NJ, 2019.

INTRODUCTION

Organisations depend on the willingness of their members to report bad news, question decisions, and admit errors. In practice, many people conclude that the personal risk of speaking outweighs the collective benefit, and they stay silent. Amy Edmondson, Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School, has studied this problem for more than two decades. *The Fearless Organization* (Edmondson, 2019) consolidates that research into a book for a broad audience of managers, practitioners, and scholars. Its central claim is that the quality of learning, innovation, and error detection in a group depends on whether people believe the group is a safe place to take interpersonal risks.

The book arrived at a moment of heightened interest. After Google's internal study of team effectiveness, known as Project Aristotle, singled out psychological safety as the factor that best explained why some teams outperformed others, the construct moved from academic journals into mainstream management discourse (Duhigg, 2016; Edmondson, 2019, pp. xviii, 40–41). Edmondson's own work long predates that attention (Edmondson, 1999), and the book gives the popular interest a rigorous grounding.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Edmondson defines psychological safety as the belief that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk taking (Edmondson, 2019, p. 8). Where it is present, people feel able to raise concerns, ask questions, and admit mistakes without expecting to be humiliated, ignored, or blamed (p. xvi). She stresses that it is a property of groups rather than individuals: even within a company with a strong culture, some units are markedly safer than others (pp. 8, 11). She places the idea in a longer lineage. Schein and Bennis (1965) argued that safety helps people cope with the uncertainty and anxiety of organisational change, and Schein (1993) later described how it lets people overcome defensiveness and "learning anxiety" (Edmondson, 2019, p. 12).

A notable strength of the opening chapters is the care taken to distinguish the construct from things it is often confused with (pp. 15–19). Four distinctions stand out:

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- **It is not niceness.** The construct depends on candour and on the freedom to disagree productively, and Edmondson notes that polite agreement in meetings followed by private dissent is a sign of its absence.
- **It is not a personality trait.** Silence is often attributed to shyness or low confidence, but the book reports that the experience of safety is not correlated with introversion or extraversion (Edmondson & Mogelof, 2005), because climate affects people of differing temperaments in broadly similar ways.
- **It is not interchangeable with trust.** Trust attaches to a particular person or organisation and concerns whether they can be counted on in future; psychological safety is shared by a group and concerns the immediate interpersonal consequences of speaking.
- **It does not lower standards.** Edmondson (2019, pp. 18–19; adapted from Edmondson, 2008) sets safety against performance standards. Low on both produces an “apathy zone”. Safety without standards is a “comfort zone” in which people are collegial but unchallenged and little is learned. Standards without safety is an “anxiety zone”, and the anxiety in question is interpersonal, about speaking up, rather than worry over meeting targets. Only the combination yields the “learning zone”.

She is equally clear that safety alone is not sufficient: it removes barriers to performance but does not supply the drive, which still depends on high standards and a worthy purpose (p. 21). She also shows that the construct can be measured. A seven-item survey introduced in her doctoral research, mixing positively worded and reverse-scored statements, has proved robust across variations in wording and across translations (pp. 19–20; Edmondson, 1999). This matters for a concept that critics sometimes dismiss as soft.

STRUCTURE AND ARGUMENT

The book has three parts. Part I (Chapters 1 and 2) sets out the concept, its history, and the research base, and argues that safety is a necessity rather than a perk for organisations working in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous conditions (pp. 19, 26). Its origin story is instructive. As a first-year doctoral student studying medication errors in two hospitals, Edmondson expected the most effective teams to make the fewest mistakes and found the reverse: teams that rated better on her survey had higher detected error rates (pp. 8–10; Edmondson, 1996). A research assistant unaware of either dataset then observed that the difference lay in whether people felt able to talk about mistakes. Better teams did not err more; they reported more (p. 10). This finding recurs throughout the book, since silence is an invisible act (p. 46) and an organisation with low safety can therefore look healthier than it is.

Chapter 2 also explains why silence is so common. People weigh the risks of speaking against the risks of staying quiet, often without noticing, and they tend to discount the future, overweighting an immediate reaction from a superior against a later harm (p. 4). Edmondson summarises the asymmetry in a table: the benefits of silence accrue to

oneself, immediately and with high certainty, whereas the benefits of voice accrue to the organisation or its customers, after a delay and with low certainty (p. 34).

Part II (Chapters 3 to 6) turns to cases. Chapter 3, on avoidable failure, examines Volkswagen's emissions scandal, sales practices at Wells Fargo, Nokia's failure to answer the smartphone threat, and the Federal Reserve Bank of New York's supervision of banks before the financial crisis (pp. 53–68). Chapter 4 opens with the loss of the space shuttle Columbia and continues with the Tenerife runway collision and the Fukushima disaster (pp. 78–92). In each, people held information that might have altered events but judged it too risky to share, or were not heard when they did. Chapters 5 and 6 turn to workplaces where candour has been made routine, including Pixar's Braintrust, Bridgewater, and safety practices in mining (pp. 104–109, 109–113, 138–142).

Part III (Chapters 7 and 8) offers the practical framework. Edmondson introduces it through a hospital leader's turnaround of patient-safety reporting (pp. 153–158) and organises it in three stages (p. 159):

1. **Setting the stage:** framing the work by setting expectations about failure, uncertainty, and interdependence so that the need for voice is clear, and emphasising purpose, meaning what is at stake, why it matters, and for whom.
2. **Inviting participation:** demonstrating situational humility by acknowledging gaps in one's knowledge, practising inquiry through good questions and intent listening, and creating forums and guidelines that make input routine.
3. **Responding productively:** expressing appreciation, destigmatising failure by looking forward and offering help, and sanctioning clear violations.

The framework is careful about failure. Edmondson distinguishes preventable failures, which are deviations from known processes; complex failures, which arise when an unprecedented combination of factors meets a familiar situation and which can sometimes, but not always, be avoided; and intelligent failures, which are thoughtful forays into new territory with unwanted outcomes (pp. 161–163). Only the last deserve celebration. She also insists that safety is compatible with accountability. Firing or other sanctions may be appropriate where an act is blameworthy or a deviation from clear policy is repeated, and a fair response of this kind reinforces rather than undermines safety (pp. 177–179).

STRENGTHS

The book's principal contribution is to convert an abstract concept into observable leadership behaviour. The practices it recommends are concrete: acknowledging the limits of one's knowledge, asking questions to which one does not already have the answer, and thanking those who bring unwelcome news. The illustrations show how these behaviours look in practice, from the candid, creatively focused feedback of Pixar's Braintrust (p. 105) to leaders such as Eileen Fisher who openly describe

themselves as not knowing (p. 113). The emphasis on leadership at every level extends the book's relevance to middle managers and informal leaders (pp. 188, 199–200).

The treatment of silence deserves particular mention. By showing that reticence is a rational response to perceived risk rather than a character flaw, the book reframes a common managerial complaint. Its observation that people learn to manage interpersonal risk from early schooling (p. 5), and Dalio's related view that society teaches people to seek right answers rather than to learn from mistakes (p. 111), will interest readers in education. The chapter takeaways, the FAQ section, and the leadership self-assessment (pp. 181–182, 195–208) add to its usefulness as a working resource, and the FAQ takes on hard objections directly, including the question of successful firms run by domineering leaders (pp. 203–204).

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations qualify the book's contribution. First, the practical toolkit arrives late. It occupies Chapter 7, the longest in the book (pp. 153–186), but only after some 150 pages of diagnosis, and some readers, particularly those already familiar with Edmondson's articles and talks, may find the early chapters cover familiar ground. The prose is at times dense and rooted in management-textbook conventions.

Second, the case studies illustrate a mechanism more than they establish it. Edmondson is not naive about this. She states that it cannot be said that safety would have secured Nokia's success (p. 65), acknowledges that lax regulation, greed, and faulty incentives contributed to the financial crisis (p. 68), and reads Volkswagen and Wells Fargo as failures of systems rather than of individual bad actors (p. 63). Even so, the accounts are retrospective and drawn largely from published investigations and press reports, and they cannot isolate the contribution of safety from strategy, incentives, and regulation. The FAQ answers the objection from successful autocratic firms by pointing to sampling on the dependent variable and the absence of counterfactual data (pp. 203–204), which is a fair reply but an argumentative one. The quantitative studies summarised in Chapter 2 (pp. 29–45) carry more of the causal weight than the narrative cases, and readers should weigh the two accordingly.

Third, guidance on several important questions is present but compressed. Advice for people without formal authority appears mainly in the FAQ (pp. 199–200, 205–206), where Edmondson argues that anyone can create safety through questions, listening, and admissions such as "I don't know", and that one can build a pocket of candour regardless of the managers above. The cross-cultural question is addressed in about a page (pp. 207–208): she acknowledges research linking lower safety to higher power distance and rests her case that safety can be built anyway largely on Toyota. On recovery and renewal, the book says safety is fragile and needs continual renewal (p. 188) and offers Nokia's and NASA's later cultural shifts as examples, but explicitly presents them as illustrations rather than proof (pp. 189–192). Finally, the book is explicit that safety is not immunity from consequences (p. xv) and that exhorting people to be courageous is not a strategy (p. 82), yet it says comparatively little about

fear that originates outside the workplace, such as financial dependence on a job or earlier experiences of punitive management.

CONCLUSION

The Fearless Organization succeeds in establishing psychological safety as a foundational condition for learning, innovation, and error correction in knowledge-intensive work. It is not a definitive empirical treatise, and its narrative cases should be read as illustrations rather than tests. Still, it offers an authoritative synthesis of a substantial body of research, a defensible set of conceptual distinctions, and a set of leadership practices that can be applied and tested. It will be of most value to managers and team leaders, and to researchers and educators interested in the organisational conditions under which people are willing to contribute their knowledge. For scholars, it also points to productive lines of inquiry that it raises but does not resolve: how safety is sustained or repaired over time, how it varies with power distance and institutional context, and how it interacts with formal accountability.

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