



# THE LEADERSHIP CONTEXT

Fear is the enemy of flourishing:  
Why Psychological Safety is  
needed now more than ever.

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What I learned from my podcast with  
Amy Edmondson and Kieran White

**By: Pod O'Sullivan**



*“I understand that I need to find my voice and speak up more in leadership team meetings but I know there have been repercussions in the past for people who have done that, so I am unsure it is worth the risk”.*

This was the commentary from more than one member of a leadership team that we have been working with. Each member had the opportunity to explore their leadership effectiveness with their coach and determine how they could leverage that to enhance their performance and enable the achievement of the organisation’s strategic objectives.

These are mature, experienced executives, stewarding an organisation and doing important work. Yet, they felt unable to make their full contribution as the environment did not feel safe for them to make their maximum contribution. The result is suboptimal outcomes and frustration not just for them but for the entire organisation.

## **“Fear is the enemy of flourishing.”**

Fear is the enemy of flourishing. Organisations are incredibly active in creating physically safe environments. The implications of a physical accident or injury are tangible and obvious. You can’t pretend it isn’t there or didn’t happen. Less tangible but no less real is the need to create a psychologically safe environment. Creating a situation where there is no fear enables people to flourish. To make this happen, people need to not be inhibited by interpersonal fear. This is creating a psychologically safe environment.

It is grounded in the [1965 work](#) of Warren Bennis and Edgar Schein. It came to the fore as a result of the work done at [Google](#) where it was found that the most important factor contributing to productivity was psychological safety.

I was curious to understand more about it so I spoke with the international thought leader in this area, [Amy Edmondson](#) for my podcast, [The Leadership Diet](#). Amy is the Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School and her most current book is [The Fearless Organisation: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for learning, innovation, and growth](#) In the podcast, I talked with Amy and her colleague [Kieran White](#) of People Talking.



While the term is becoming increasingly familiar, I sense there is a degree of confusion about the concept of psychological safety and how its power can be harnessed. This is increasingly important in the context of the pandemic as we navigate through the uncertainty and flux. Here are some key points.

## What is psychological safety?

*“Psychological safety is an expectation that you can speak up at work. It is a sense you can be yourself”*  
**Amy Edmondson**

At a basic level, human beings are social creatures and have a desire for acceptance. As a result, we may be reluctant to show ourselves and stand out from the crowd as we don't want to rock the boat and risk rejection or to look dumb in front of the group. At work, this can be amplified where the risks and consequences include employment security, advancement, and reward implications.

The ability to feel safe to be able to speak up / ask a question / admit a mistake is not a personality trait, it is an environmental construct. It needs to be enabled by processes and practices not just reliant on whether someone is wired the right way to make it happen.

### **The Psychologically Safe environment is a climate that allows:**

- Candor
- Being OK to disagree
- Productive conflict to enable learning
- Giving the immediate “benefit of the doubt”
- Everyone to benefit



## What are the core skills required to enable psychological safety?

- **Self-awareness is always the starting point.** Being aware of your habits, biases and preferences and working constantly on self-improvement. Have a growth mindset.
- **Candor.** Provide and be open to transparency about issues and situations. Be kind and courageous to hear and do the difficult things. Hold yourself and others to account. Participate in positive conflict. Make failure safe.
- **Listening.** Practice humble listening - seek to understand, use multiple lenses to view situations, seek contrary views, suspend judgment.
- **Intention** - employ and promote the intention to create this safe space. Role model and coach others. Give the benefit of the doubt. Care for others.

## “The Cost of Silence” AKA “Why it matters”

People in the workplace will hold back if not comfortable. If your primary focus is keeping yourself safe, you are not going to have much cognitive capacity to engage in robust and challenging debates. In a physically unsafe environment, this culminates in physical injury, in a psychologically unsafe environment it is the opportunity cost where the best of people are not being harnessed. Everything is being done at a suboptimal level. In Amy's work, this is referred to as “the cost of silence”. At its worst, it creates avoidable failure when people don't speak up and the consequences can be disastrous e.g. the VW emissions scandal or the Challenger disaster.



## Why is it more important now? The Covid Context

The shift is to knowledge work. Rather than discrete individual effort, much of this is team-based where effectiveness relies not on the collective. Technology has enabled the globalisation of workplaces where teams are not necessarily geographically co-located and as a result are remote, disparate, and diverse. As a result, we are working with a broader range of people, in different ways and from different backgrounds.

This pandemic is the first time most people have had the visceral experience of the VUCA world, where everything changed and is changing from one week to the next. It has made us realise how dependant we are on each other (often through absence). It has forced a coming to terms with our behaviours and mindsets and the implications for them in operating in this unprecedented circumstance. I detail below how some instances where this will show up and how enhanced psychological safety can support and enable.

### **1. Hybrid workplaces**

The hybrid workplace exacerbates these challenges. Our colleagues are coming in to contact with all of our lives not just what we show at work.

*“The boundary between work and personal life is minimised and that will sometimes mean that we find ourselves having to talk about things that in the past would not have been appropriate to talk about. So, if we are going to navigate this thoughtfully we need to respect and care about each other to do this well.”*

**Amy Edmondson**

### **2. Lack of Certainty**

As human beings, we are seekers of safety and certainty. This is not new, but the events of the moment are amplifying it. Employees look to their leaders to provide them with certainty, but the reality is that leaders are unable to give it a lot of the time at this moment.



Leaders need to offer certainty where they can; admit where they can't and give assurance that they will when things are known. Leaders need to decipher *"What kind of certainty can I give? What kind of certainty are people looking for that I can't give? And how can I tell the difference?"*

What is apparent is the need for us to develop a mindset that is comfortable with not knowing. This is difficult. Avoiding the conversation in an attempt to avoid the discomfort and trying to "stay safe" is not the right way to go. This is where it is vital to have a psychologically safe workplace so that all the concerns can be aired, and the realities and opportunities can be explored to deliver a positive outcome.

### **3. Collective Intelligence**

Where we cannot have certainty and it is clear that we are unable to do it alone, we have to do it together. Historically, too much focus has been on individuals working on their own to solve challenges. The pandemic has shown this is an outdated model.

If we are only using the "old" ways we are not creating the space to include others and as a result, will be frustrated in our efforts to solve problems well in the new world. We will only get what we have always got and that is not enough anymore. Leaders who are only relying on what they have always done, with only those they have always done it with will be found wanting.

What is needed is a paradigm shift to the collective. Of course, there is individual accountability, but the required shift is to make space for the "we" to be most effective rather than the "I".

The key is to harness collective intelligence. It allows us to tap into the wisdom required to solve the most complex problems. It requires a diversity of thought and experience to enable the best outcomes. This releases resources and is this environment where we are challenged to do more with less or at best, to make the best of what we've got, having a psychologically safe environment creates a space where potentially under or unutilised resources can be released and realised.



*“Teaming is a contact sport.  
If we want diversity to be an expansion of the system  
rather than a contraction, we need to realise we are  
going to bump into one another. It releases resources  
when we are doing it well.”*

***Kieran White***

## Myth Busting about Psychological Safety

So, the need to create a psychologically safe environment is clear. But there are some misconceptions surrounding it. Here we bust some of the myths.

- **It's just another term for trust**

Trust refers to our expectations about another (whether that be a person or an organisation) on whether they will deliver on their promise. In comparison, Psychological Safety describes a climate - the emergent property of a group - rather than our perception of another.

- **It's about being nice**

*“Psychological safety is not just about being nice  
or comfortable it is about candor and enabling  
constructive conflict”.*

***Amy Edmondson***

Psychological safety is far more than being nice. Being nice puts a pause on conversations and does not address the issues. Being 'nice' just drives the issues underground, leads to frustration, and can even be a form of cowardice.

While it is not the same, a closer comparator is “kindness”. To be kind often requires courage. Being kind can mean calling out or raising what is not going well, what could be done better, or is what is not in the best interest. It is closely linked to respect, which manifests in the workplace, where when we trust each other “enough”, we can work constructively on achieving our goals and outcomes.

A principle Tennen in psychological safety is granting others the 'Benefit of the Doubt' as a starting point. We generously give this to ourselves, creating an environment of psychological safety demands that we afford others the same courtesy.



- **It's soft on performance**

*In a climate of psychological safety “We care deeply and challenge directly.”*

**Kieran White**

Psychological safety is an enabler of performance, not a free pass. In a performance culture, there are 2 sides of the one coin. One side has psychological safety (the ability to speak up without fear of negative repercussion) and accountability and discipline on the other. Both are necessary and are a powerful enabling force for a team to work together in service of the collective.

- **I'm not a leader, it's not up to me**

There is a distinction between leadership and the titled position of being a leader. While the role of the leader is undeniable, Amy encourages us to stay away from the trap of victimhood, of waiting for someone else to create the space of psychological safety. Anyone can exercise leadership. You do not have to be a titled leader. The mere gesture of asking a sincere question of a colleague is giving them a voice, it is a small invitation to speak up. This is something everyone can do to foster a psychologically safe environment.

In our challenging world, having an environment where people feel comfortable to be themselves, and are able to utilise the full potential of their intellect and experience seems absolutely sensible. Yet, this is the opportunity many teams and organisations are missing including the Executive team mentioned at the beginning of this article.

The potential is there - are you open to making it happen?

Pod O'Sullivan is a partner with [The Leadership Context](#), a boutique consultancy that works with CEO's and leadership teams to help them scale their leadership to enable the organisational strategic imperatives, particularly during complex times. His podcast, [The Leadership Diet](#) is widely regarded as an intimate and insightful look at senior leadership for all its aspirations and realities.





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