

The Fearless Organization

Amy C Edmondson



WHO WROTE THIS BOOK?

Amy C Edmondson, who is the Professor of Leadership at Harvard Business School and regularly appears near the top of lists of the greatest management thinkers on the planet.

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

Edmondson's area is psychology in the workplace. Specifically she talks about psychological safety. It is an all too common phenomenon, says Edmondson, that employees are scared of pitching ideas or reporting worries because they are worried about looking stupid or losing their job. This damages everyone. It's not good. People should be fearless, says Edmondson.

WHY?

Research proves that when businesses make mistakes and discuss them openly, they perform better. What a sense of psychological safety does is help one person's idea become one of two things: a successful idea or an opportunity to discuss ways to improve.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

If someone at work felt psychologically unsafe, they would hesitate to their work with their colleagues. Though this would prevent them feeling self-conscious in the short-term, in the long-term it would mean that both they and their colleagues were unable to learn what might have made the idea a successful or unsuccessful one. Good managers understand that their employees are there not to be compared with one another but to learn from one another.

HOW CAN THIS GO WRONG IN PRACTICE?

One word: Nokia. Once dominant in the mobile phone game, the downfall of the Finnish company was arguably brought about by its employees feeling unable to talk openly about the fact that it was falling behind companies like Google and Apple. In a psychologically safe environment, colleagues would want to share concerns like this so that they could act on them; with no psychological safety, everyone is more afraid of being dismissed or mocked than they are of the competition their company faces.

SOUNDS LIKE LEADERS NEED TO BE ON THE SAME LEVEL AS THE PEOPLE THEY LEAD.

In a way, that's right. Edmondson uses the example of Cynthia Carroll, who used to be in charge of Anglo American, a mining company. When trying to reduce the number of mining fatalities as much as possible, Carroll met thousands of miners, rather than just issuing an edict from on high. This isn't just heartening in theory; it works in practice, and Carroll successfully brought mining deaths down by 62% in five years. It would be surprising if it didn't make employees feel more connected to Anglo American's leadership, and more psychologically safe as a result.

I SUPPOSE THEY'RE LEADERS BECAUSE THEY HAVE THE ANSWERS.

No, not necessarily. Another characteristic of a psychologically safe workplace is one led by people who aren't afraid to admit that they don't have the answers. After an admission like this, there might be an awkward silence. But a good boss will elicit information and answers from their expert employees by asking open questions, encouraging participation, and ideally implementing formal structures in which information can be shared.

THAT DOES SOUND PRODUCTIVE.

And what's more, it doesn't just reap rewards in the short-term. If a leader becomes known for responding to concerns and reservations, then in future they are more likely to be approached with concerns and reservations. Every encounter makes a more productive encounter more likely, creating in the long term what Edmondson calls a 'fearless organization'.

WHAT CAN I TAKE AND USE FROM THIS?

Edmondson recommends 'emphasising purpose': identify what's at stake, why it matters, and who is involved.

Whatever your seniority, one way to instil a feeling of psychological safety is by acknowledging to others when you have made a mistake. This can calm people down and make you more relatable.

Don't think that you simply have to agree with people in order to be psychologically safe.

If other people have owned up to ways in which they may have failed, offer them help. Try to encourage open discussion of failure and problems wherever you go. Whether these are your own or those of the company you work for, being honest and transparent is the only way for a healthy system of any sort to operate.

WHAT AM I MOST LIKELY TO SAY AFTER READING THIS BOOK?

I'd like to ask a few questions.

WHAT AM I LEAST LIKELY TO SAY AFTER READING THIS BOOK?

Good leaders strike fear into the hearts of their employees.

