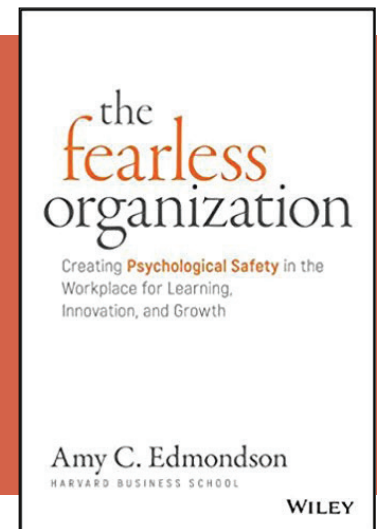


# The Fearless Organization

## Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth

A book excerpt by Mobius Senior Expert and the Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School, Amy Edmondson



### MAKING IT HAPPEN

#### Excerpts from Chapter 7

#### Reframing Failure

Because 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. Recall Astro Teller's observation at Google X that "the only way to get people to work on big, risky things . . . is if you make that the path of least resistance for them [and] make it safe to fail." In other words, unless a leader expressly and actively makes it psychologically safe to do so, people will automatically seek to avoid failure. So how did Teller reframe failure to make it okay? By saying, believing, and convincing others that "I'm not pro failure, I'm pro learning."

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. In his book *The Game-Changer*, published while he was still CEO of Procter and Gamble, A.G. Lafley celebrates his eleven

most expensive product failures, describing why each was valuable and what the company learned from each. Recall, also, Ed Catmull's assurance to Pixar animators, that movies always start out bad, to help them "uncouple fear and failure." Here, Catmull is making a leadership framing statement. He is making sure that people know this is the kind of work for which stunning success occurs only if you're willing to confront the "bad" along the way to the "good."

Learning to learn from failure has become so important that Smith College (along with other schools around the country) is creating courses and initiatives to help students better deal with failures, challenges, and setbacks. "What we're trying to teach is that failure is not a bug of learning, it's a feature," said Rachel Simmons, a leadership development specialist

in Smith's Wurtele Center for Work and Life and the unofficial "failure czar" on campus. "It's not something that should be locked out of the learning experience. For many of our students – those who have had to be almost perfect to get accepted into a school like Smith – failure can be an unfamiliar experience. So when it happens, it can be crippling." With workshops on

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MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR

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impostor syndrome, discussions on perfectionism and a campaign to remind students that 64% of their peers will get (gasp) a B-minus or lower, the program is part of a campus-wide effort to foster student resilience.

Note that failure plays a varying role in different kinds of work. At one end of the spectrum is high-volume repetitive work, such as in an assembly plant, a fast-food restaurant, or even a kidney dialysis center. Failing to correctly plug a patient into a dialysis machine or install an automobile airbag in precisely the right manner can have disastrous consequences. So in this kind of work it's vital that people eagerly catch and

correct deviations from best practice. Here, celebrating failure is a matter of viewing such deviations as "good catch" events and appreciating those who noticed tiny mistakes as observant contributors to the mission.

At the other end of the spectrum lies innovation and research, where little is known about how to obtain a desired result. Creating a movie, a line of original clothing, or a technology that can convert seawater to fuel are all examples. In this context, dramatic failures must be courted and celebrated because they are an integral part of the journey to success. In the middle of the spectrum, where much of the work done today

## LEADERSHIP SELF-ASSESSMENT

The practices described here are dominated by complex interpersonal skills and thus not easy to master. They take time, effort, and practice. Perhaps the most important aspect of learning them is to practice self-reflection [including the following illustrative questions explored further in the book]:

### I. SETTING THE STAGE

- ▶ **Framing the work.** Have I clarified the nature of the work? To what extent is the work complex and interdependent? How much uncertainty do we face? How often do I refer to these aspects of the work? How well do I assess shared understanding of these features? Do I point out that small failures are the currency of subsequent improvement?
- ▶ **Emphasizing Purpose.** Have I articulated clearly why our work matters, why it makes a difference, and for whom? Even if it seems obvious given the type of work or industry I'm in, how often do I talk about what's at stake?

### II. INVITING PARTICIPATION

- ▶ **Situational Humility.** Have I made sure that people know that I don't think I have all the answers? Have I been clear that the situation we're in requires everyone to be humble and curious about what's going to happen next?
- ▶ **Proactive Inquiry.** How often do I ask questions of others, rather than just expressing my perspective? Do I demonstrate an appropriate mix of questions that go broad and go deep?
- ▶ **Systems and Structures.** Have I created structures to systematically elicit ideas and concerns? Are these structures well designed to ensure a safe environment for open dialogue?

### III. RESPONDING PRODUCTIVELY

- ▶ **Express Appreciation.** Have I listened thoughtfully, signaling that what I am hearing matters?
- ▶ **Destigmatize Failure.** What more can I do to celebrate intelligent failures? When someone comes to me with bad news, how do I make sure it's a positive experience?
- ▶ **Sanction Clear Violations.** Have I clarified the boundaries? Do people know what constitute blameworthy acts in our organization?

falls, are complex operations, such as hospitals or financial institutions. Here, vigilance and teamwork are both vital to preventing avoidable failures and celebrating intelligent ones.

Reframing failure starts with understanding a basic typology of failure types. As I have written in more detail elsewhere (see for example "Strategies for Learning from Failure" in *HBR*), failure archetypes include preventable failures (never good news), complex failures (still not good news), and intelligent failures (not fun, but must be considered good news because of the value they bring).

- **Preventable failures** are deviations from recommended procedures that produce bad outcomes. If someone fails to don safety glasses in a factory and suffers an eye injury, this is a preventable failure.
- **Complex failures** occur in familiar contexts when a confluence of factors come together in a way that may never have occurred before; consider the severe flooding of the Wall Street subway station in New York City during Superstorm Sandy in 2012. With vigilance, complex failures can sometimes, but not always, be avoided. Neither preventable nor complex failures are worthy of celebration.
- In contrast, **intelligent failures**, as the term implies, must be celebrated so as to encourage more of them. Intelligent failures, like the preventable and complex, are still results no one wanted. But, unlike the other two categories, they are the result of a thoughtful foray into new territory.

Some failures are genuinely good news; some are not, but no matter what type they are, our primary goal is to learn from them. ■



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Out of the Blue by Jim McManus, Mobius featured artist