WHAT DOES IT COST TO SPEAK UP HERE?

Lowering the everyday risks that keep good people quiet

Dr. Adrienne Leslie-Toogood

THE QUIET CALCULATION

Every day, the people on your team make small calculations you never see.

Should I ask that question, or will it look like I wasn't paying attention?

Should I mention the problem I noticed, or will I be seen as negative?

Should I admit I'm behind, or keep quiet and hope I catch up?

Should I disagree with my manager in front of the group?

Most of these calculations happen in seconds. Most of them end in silence. Not because people do not care, but because, in that moment, staying quiet felt safer than speaking.

Multiply those moments across a team and a year, and the cost becomes significant. Concerns surface too late. Ideas are never offered. Mistakes are repeated because no one wanted to name the first one. Capable people slowly offer less than they have.

The question for leaders is not whether these calculations are happening. They are.

The question is: What does it cost to speak up here, and who sets the price?

THIS IS NOT ABOUT COMFORT

Researchers call this psychological safety. Amy Edmondson, who has studied it for decades, describes it as a shared belief within a team that it is okay to take interpersonal risks: to ask questions, raise concerns, offer ideas and admit mistakes without fear of being embarrassed or punished.

The term can make people uneasy. It can sound soft, as though the goal is to keep everyone comfortable and avoid hard conversations.

It is the opposite.

A team where people can speak up is a team where problems surface early, disagreement gets aired and standards can be discussed. Productive teams are not ones where nobody is challenged. They are ones where people are willing to say what they see.

When Google studied what made its most effective teams work (Project Aristotle), this kind of safety came out ahead of everything else. When it is missing, the consequences are predictable: more stress, more burnout, higher turnover and poorer results.

Safety does not mean the absence of accountability. It means people can be honest about how things are going, so accountability has something real to work with.

EVERYONE CARRIES A DIFFERENT RISK

The same action can feel easy to one person and dangerous to another.

For some people, asking for help is simple, but disagreeing with a senior leader feels impossible. For others, challenging an idea comes naturally, but admitting they do not know something feels like exposure. Past experiences, previous workplaces, the way someone is wired and where they sit in the hierarchy all shape how risky a moment feels.

Think about your own team and the ordinary moments when people decide whether to speak asking for help, admitting you don't know, making a mistake, raising a concern, disagreeing, pointing out someone else's error or offering a different point of view.

Which of these come easily to you? Which make you hesitate?

Is that about this team's culture, or about your

own history?

Then ask a harder question: If these are your numbers, what might they be for someone with less power, less tenure or less confidence than you?

Leaders often underestimate the risk others feel, because they rarely pay the same price for speaking up.

FOUR KINDS OF SAFETY

Timothy R. Clark, in The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety, describes safety as building in four layers. Each one asks a little more of people, and each depends on the one before it.

1.Inclusion. Do I belong here? People feel accepted and valued as people, before they have proven anything.

2.Learning. Can I ask, try and get it wrong? People can ask questions, seek out information and experiment without being judged.

3.Contributing. Will my work matter? People are trusted with meaningful work, and their effort is recognized.

4.Challenging. Can I say, "I think we're wrong"? People can question assumptions, disagree and push on the way things are done, including with the leader.

Many leaders want their teams operating at the fourth level. Many teams are still working on the second. You cannot expect people to challenge your thinking if they are not yet sure it is safe to admit they do not understand it.

Vulnerability looks different at each level. It might be acknowledging a colleague's major life event, admitting you do not know, asking for feedback on your own work or inviting someone to challenge your opinion. Each is a small risk. Each makes the next one a little easier for everyone watching.

WHAT GETS TAUGHT BUT NOT SAID

Every team runs on two sets of rules.

The explicit rules are the visible ones: stated values, policies, the purpos of the group and what people say they intend.

The implicit rules are learned by watching. What happened to the last person who raised a concern? Does the leader's face change when someone disagrees? Who gets interrupted? Whose ideas get credit? Which questions get a thoughtful answer, and which get a sigh?

When the two sets of rules conflict, people follow the implicit ones.

A leader can say, "My door is always open," and still teach the opposite with a glance at their phone, a quick "We've already looked at that," or a meeting where only the confident voices are heard.

None of this is usually intentional. That is exactly why it is worth paying attention to.

TWO CYCLES

Speaking up, or not speaking up, tends to build on itself.

The danger cycle. People fear admitting mistakes, so problems get hidden or blamed on someone else. Others notice and become less likely to share a different view. Conversations narrow to what everyone already knows, a pattern sometimes called the common knowledge effect. Decisions get worse, mistakes increase, and the fear grows.

The safety cycle. People feel able to admit mistakes, so the team learns from them. Others see that it is safe and begin sharing ideas openly. More perspectives produce better innovation and better decisions, which reinforces the willingness to speak.

Both cycles are self-reinforcing. Neither starts with a grand initiative. They start with how the next concern, question or mistake is received.

SHOW THE WAY OR GET IN THE WAY

As Clark puts it, when it comes to this kind of safety, leaders "either show the way or get in the way." There is no neutral position.

The good news is that the moves that lower the cost of speaking up are mostly small and repeatable.

Go first. Admit your own mistakes where people can see them. Say "I don't know" out loud. Ask for feedback on your own work. People take their cues about acceptable risk from what the leader is willing to risk.

Explain your thinking. People cannot read your mind. When you share why you are making a call, they do not have to fill the gap with assumptions.

Ask specifically. "Any questions?" usually gets silence. Try "What's one risk we haven't talked about?" or "Who sees this differently?" A specific question signals that you actually want the answer.

Thank the messenger. The response to the first concern teaches everyone whether to raise the next one. Meet it with curiosity before you move to solutions or explanations.

Be predictable and fair. Clear norms and consistent responses lower risk. Uncertainty about how you will react raises it.

Notice who is not speaking. Silence is information. Follow up individually rather than assuming quiet means agreement.

Keep the standard. Respect and accountability are not opposites. People can be held to a high bar and still feel safe telling you the truth about how they are doing against it.

THINK LIKE A FARMER

Alexander den Heijer offers a simple image: when a flower does not bloom, you look at the environment it is growing in before you blame the flower.

Mustafa Sarkar extends it. A good farmer does not shout at the crops or blame them for growing too slowly. They do not pull them up before they have had a chance to take root. They choose plants suited to the soil, water and feed them, and remove the weeds. And they accept that there will be good seasons and bad ones. They cannot control the weather, only prepare for it.

Leaders cannot make people speak up. They can tend the conditions that make it more likely.

As Edmondson notes, this is a climate a team creates together, and not always in ways that can be fully explained. It is built in the small moments, and it can be eroded in them too.

A SIMPLE LEADERSHIP CHECK-IN

This week, ask yourself:

- When someone on my team took a risk by speaking up, how did I respond, and what did everyone else learn from it?
- Which of the four kinds of safety is my team most solid on? Where are we still stuck?
- What implicit rule might I be teaching without meaning to?
- Who on my team has been quiet lately, and what might it be costing them to speak?
- What is one risk I could take first, so others do not have to go first?

THE TAKEAWAY

People are always calculating the cost of speaking up.

You cannot remove every risk. Honest conversations will always ask something of people.

But you can lower the price.

Go first. Explain your thinking. Ask real questions. Respond well to the first concern, so there is a second one.

Because the most productive teams are not the ones with the fewest problems. They are the ones where problems get named early, while there is still time to do something about them.

Spaces will never be brave or safe until we acknowledge and embrace our humanity.

Dr. Adrienne Leslie-Toogood is a licensed psychologist and performance consultant with over 30 years of experience helping people thrive under pressure — from Olympic athletes to emergency responders. She is the founder of Toogood Consulting and specializes in building human-first, high-performance cultures.

SOURCES & FURTHER READING

- Clark, T. R. (2020). The 4 stages of psychological safety: Defining the path to inclusion and innovation. Berrett-Koehler.
- Cooke, M., Paradis, K. F., Sharp, L. A., Woods, D., & Sarkar, M. (2024). Psychological safety: A qualitative study on coach and athlete perceptions. International Sport Coaching Journal. https://doi.org/10.1123/iscj.2023-0115
- Edmondson, A. C. (2018). The fearless organization: Creating psychological safety in the workplace for learning, innovation, and growth. Wiley.
- Fransen, K., McEwan, D., & Sarkar, M. (2020). The impact of identity leadership on team functioning and well-being in team sport: Is psychological safety the missing link? Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 51, 101763.
- Google re:Work. Project Aristotle: Understand team effectiveness.