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Psychological Safety for Employee Feedback





3 steps to conquering feedback fear


“Open feedback will never work here.” You see nods of agreement in the room around you. No one will give open feedback. They just *won’t*. The risk seems too high. But anonymous feedback robs your organization of the transparency it needs to grow and scale. It also reinforces a bad employee experience. In this e-book, we’ll talk about psychological safety and three steps to conquering feedback fear for you to improve your employee experience, productivity, and retention.

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The argument for open feedback

Open feedback represents a shift in the way people interact and discuss feedback. And since leadership is, at its core, a relational and interactive skill, open feedback facilitates a change in the way leaders discuss issues big and small.



“I’ve observed many instances when a leader was able to create an atmosphere of openness and trust, which changed the way colleagues interacted and discussed performance issues.”

— Ed Batista

Unlike anonymous feedback that commonly lacks depth or isn’t fully clear, open feedback helps everyone to fully understand each other, even when people may not completely agree.

What anonymous feedback costs you

Anonymity suggests some dangerous underlying assumptions:

- Open feedback puts employees at risk because leaders will seek retribution.
- Employees aren't being candid and can't be trusted to speak up.
- Hearing concerns or negative feedback will cause distress or anger.
- Feedback given anonymously is more accurate than feedback given openly.

While these may be true, when you assume that these conditions make anonymity necessary, you aren't factoring in the cost of anonymity.

What are those costs?

- You get criticism instead of critiques.
- There is a failure to take responsibility and instead spread blame.
- Important skills go undeveloped.



What open feedback gets you

Open feedback promotes transparency and responsibility. Here are a few things you will discover about open feedback:

Employees feel empowered and it encourages communication and sharing

It's important for leaders to model transparency at work. When upper management is open and communicative with their entire workforce, employees feel empowered to share ideas. They may bring innovative ideas or design new processes to improve workflows. Organizations flourish when employees trust that they can safely suggest new ideas and feedback.

Better employee engagement and happiness

Open feedback helps you recognize employees' hard work and successes, and builds trust between management and employees. And trust leads to more engaged workers. It's no surprise that engaged and happy workers benefit your company's bottom line.

Demonstrate that management trusts, respects, and values employees for stronger workplace culture and values

When an organization actively shares knowledge and feedback, it's showing that management trusts, respects, and values employees at all levels. Leaders need to be responsible for modeling the value of transparency across the entire organization.

Better customer relations

Engaged employees create better customer relations because they care about your organization. Employees who feel trusted and respected will want the best for the customer because it reflects well on them.

Build trust and transparency

Organizational transparency builds growth in employee engagement and company culture. It fosters psychological safety, which allows employees to freely communicate. A transparent work environment also helps employees feel valued and encourages creativity. When everyone owns their feedback, they can work with their leaders to create positive change.

Immediate and visible opportunities for action

Feedback works best and continues to work when managers can show they are taking action. Anonymous feedback means you don't know who has the concern. With open feedback, you can have an immediate conversation, which helps employees see that their concerns or kudos are heard.

Feedback delivered where and when it's relative

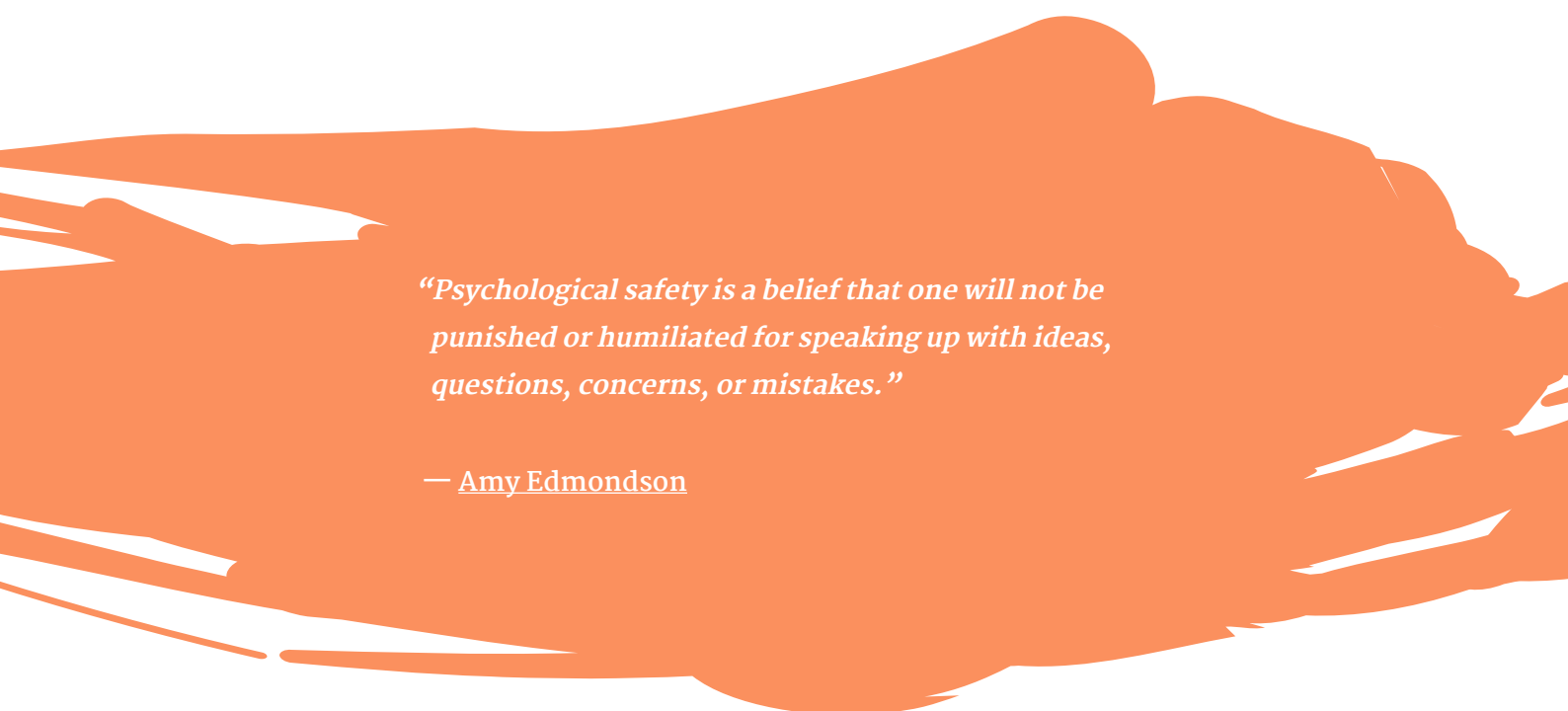
Open feedback ensures one-to-one communication. The right manager is directly involved and action can be taken or the person sending in the feedback is able to take responsibility and offer solutions based on their expertise.



Psychological safety

Psychological safety is at the root of your culture and your employee experience. In this tumultuous employment era of increased turnover and talent scarcity, the mental safety of employees at work should be priority one. Let's take a look at what it is and why it's important:

What is psychological safety?



“Psychological safety is a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes.”

— Amy Edmondson

Why psychological safety is important

Psychological safety powers:

- Increased innovation
- Better reliability and performance
- Higher employee retention and less churn
- Increased profitability
- Better health and safety
- Improved company reputation
- Increased engagement and happiness

Need to know more? [Get our guide.](#)



3 Steps to conquering feedback fear

You've seen the advantages of psychological safety at work and how open feedback is better feedback. But now you need to figure out how to begin to build a transparent culture. We have three steps to get you on your way.



1.

Create psychological safety within your organization

In no way are we saying that it's easy to create psychological safety from scratch, but leadership can have a huge impact by modeling appropriate behaviors. A strong culture is driven by leadership.

Here are some ways for leaders to make it better.

Actively solicit questions

As a leader, you need to make a point of consistently soliciting questions from your employees. Make a plan based on business objectives such as process improvement or employee retainment. Then consistently invite conversations and open feedback.



Provide multiple ways for employees to share their thoughts

Not every employee has the same level of comfort when it comes to speaking up, but that doesn't mean the quiet ones don't have good ideas. Create avenues such as pulse surveys, emails, and face-to-face interactions that encourage everyone to participate. This is not a one-and-done culture builder; make it continuous.

Explain reasons for change

Employees care about their work. They want to know: What's going on? What are the business goals? What is this month's objective? Why are you changing things and what is the value of these changes? Be clear and consistent in any change that happens.

Show value and appreciation for ideas

Take the attitude that no idea is a bad idea. Ask questions. What is their thought process? Why is it important to them? How does it help our goals and objectives? Ensure that they know they are heard and valued. Give kudos and recognition to those who are open to ideas and feedback.

Own up to your mistakes

No one is perfect. Even the highest-paid CEO makes mistakes. If your employees see you taking responsibility for your mistakes or misjudgment, they will feel better about owning up to their mistakes when they happen. Create a safe culture where mistakes are considered part of the process — not a disaster.

Promote positive dialogue and discussion

Leaders need to facilitate conversations and turn things positive. "Well, that didn't work, but now we know not to go in that direction." Or keep disagreements cordial by saying, "I hear what you're saying, and that is a good or interesting thought. But here is the direction we want to go to meet this goal or objective." Do not tolerate bullying or people dominating the discussion.

Demonstrate concern for team members as people

Employees want to be part of your team; the best managers understand this. They also want you to have an ear for the problems they are facing such as health or elder care or child care. Celebrate birthdays and anniversaries. Let them know that you see them as a whole person.

Be precise with information, expectations, and commitments

This may be as important as listening. Be consistent with information, expectations, and commitments. If you need a cellphone-free zone, be sure that you are also cellphone-free there. If you are making a change in procedure, explain what the change is, why you are doing it, the value it brings, and what you expect of your employees. Keep your commitments. If you commit to fast meetings, make sure you train your people and then ensure you consistently have fast meetings.

A psychologically safe work environment starts and ends with leaders. It is the first step toward engaged and happy employees. It allows you to receive feedback that can deeply improve performance and customer satisfaction.



2.

Set an organizational goal to get and keep your culture in the learning zone



In the traditional top-down approach to management, we are taught to stay quiet while managers and other leaders tell us how to solve problems. It's often even considered polite not to speak up, but this means we aren't taking responsibility for what happens in our workplace and the work we put out. It takes time and psychological safety to get employees to step into the uncomfortable learning zone where true transformation can happen.

What is the Learning Zone?

The Learning Zone is where psychological safety is balanced with high accountability. Although it might be uncomfortable at first, it can lead to better transparency and organizational growth.

Why is it important to go there

People in the learning zone have a growth mindset with:

- A desire to learn
- A need to innovate
- A want to develop

Coupled with the belief we are safe to say what we think, we can work to overcome the discomfort of speaking up. We might offer the solution to a problem, highlight a flaw in a process, or propose a more efficient way of working. It makes sense for organizations to create a work environment that encourages these contributions.



3.

Train, train, and train

Culture change happens from the top down; it's important for leaders to be trained in how to keep themselves and their employees in the learning zone.

Key areas of training for leaders and employees include:

Learn to listen to feedback and respond in a calm and rational manner

A good way to signal the importance of speaking up is for leaders to explicitly ask for their teams' thoughts and ideas.

Listen to feedback and respond in a calm and rational manner, even if the feedback is negative. This reinforces the belief that it's safe to say something, especially when it's uncomfortable. Use feedback as a learning opportunity.

Learn when and how to use asynchronous communication

Consider using asynchronous communication to gather non-urgent feedback. Platforms like email or online messaging give everyone a way to have their say and let people take the time they need to get their thoughts in order.

Learn when and how to use open feedback

When leaders and their teams can work together to solve problems, everyone benefits. When people hide behind anonymity – either because they're too anxious to risk exposing their identity or they feel too comfortable to bother – it's very hard to move the organization into the Learning Zone.

Learn how to model the desired behavior

Model the desired behavior to your people. If someone brings up an issue, first acknowledge their input. If you don't have the answer to the issue right away, say so. Show people that their feedback is valued – even if you can't act on it immediately.

Follow up where necessary. You might want to continue an online conversation face to face if appropriate. Even if there's no further discussion required, showing people where their feedback has led to action or change is good reinforcement that encourages future contributions.



Anonymous feedback actually robs your organization of context and responsibility. Fear of open feedback means you haven't created a culture of psychological safety and you are not addressing a main component of employee engagement and retention. We've shown you how to take the steps you need to create teamwork, transparency, and responsibility that open feedback thrives in and build a better employee experience.

Ready to explore open feedback in your organization? Get a demo and we'll show you how.

[Schedule a Demo](#)



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