The strategist's bookshelf

A thundering silence

Harvey A. Hornstein

The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth, Amy C. Edmondson, 256 pp, (Wiley, 2018).

On October 25, 2018, a *Wall Street Journal* article[1] included the story of a woman employed at Netflix who endured almost two years of sexual harassment before making a complaint. Explaining the delay, she said, "I like my job." For nearly twenty-four months this woman was silenced by an unspoken threat that also protected the abuser and prevented Netflix from exploring essential, relevant organizational reforms.

If folks at Netflix had read Harvard Business School Professor Amy C. Edmondson's book, *The Fearless Organization*, there is a chance that these harms might have been avoided. Her book's Part one, "The power of psychological safety" and Part two "Psychological safety at work" examine the many ways in which organizations silence their employees as well as the organizational losses that such silence causes. Professor Edmondson, Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management, then uses Part three of this eight chapter book, "Creating a fearless organization" to provide readers with a detailed discussion about what an organization's leaders can do to produce "psychological safety," freeing employees to speak up and share ideas that might lower companies' costs, grow their profits,

solve problems caused by sexual harassment and even save lives.

After defining psychological safety as "a belief that neither the formal nor informal consequences of interpersonal risks, like asking for help or admitting failure, will be punitive," Edmondson discusses a three-phase strategy for building the fearless organization:

1. Phase one, "Setting the Stage:" leaders are instructed to articulate how employees' jobs involve interdependencies as well as how the jobs contribute to some ultimate organizational purpose;

2. Phase two, "Inviting Participation:" leaders are told to examine the ways in which they themselves are either encouraging or discouraging employees' speech and, also, whether existing work procedures and rules are ones that are likely to stimulate or squelch employees' readiness to share ideas; and

3. Phase three, "Responding Productively:" focuses on how leaders can support desired changes without compromising organizational standards.

Importantly, in describing each of the three phases, the author provides readers with real examples to illustrate leader behaviors that either help their efforts or that can avoid hindering them. In addition, the book offers a Leadership Self-Assessment tool containing a series of questions to stimulate readers' understanding of

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how, for good or ill, they are affecting their subordinates' sense of psychological safety.

The book's closing chapter provides the author's responses to concerns that readers might have about both applying the book's ideas and the effects of psychological safety on organizational performance:

- Can you have too much psychological safety?

- Won't having a psychologically safe workplace take too much time?

- You advocate a psychologically safe workplace. Does that mean we have to be transparent about everything?

- I'm all for psychological safety at work, but I'm not the boss. Is there anything I can do?

- What's the relationship between psychological safety and diversity, inclusion and belonging?

- Is psychological safety about whistle-blowing?

- What about those successful companies run by arrogant top-down dictators who don't listen to anyone and sometimes reduce people to tears?

- Help! My colleague is bringing his true self to work and it's driving me crazy!

- Help! I've started bringing my whole self to work and no one likes me (anymore)!

- What advice would you give to the people who report to managers who can't or won't change?

- Can anyone learn to be a successful leader of psychological safety?

- What about cross-cultural differences? Is it possible to create psychological safety in China? In Japan? In [you name the country here]?

A section labeled "Takeaways" at the end of each chapter highlights and repeats the chapter's important ideas, supporting readers' recall and understanding of the issues that were raised. And, every chapter seems filled with pertinent, easy-to-understand episodes drawn from a wide range of familiar organizations, including Pixar, Bridgewater Associates, Google X, NASA, Boeing, Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant and Uber.

Edmondson's core message: ". . . when people have psychological safety at work, they feel comfortable sharing concerns and mistakes without fear of embarrassment or retribution. . . [knowing they] can speak up and won't be humiliated, ignored or blamed." Edmondson is not some pie-in-the-sky fanatic, arguing that her views about psychological safety are a singular path to organizational success. She is simply saying, look at the evidence. In workplaces, when fear replaces safety, there is silence and failure is more likely.

Note

1. Deepa Seetharaman and Emily Glazer, "Sandberg assesses gender equality", *Wall Street Journal*, updated October 25, 2018, www.wsj.com/articles/gender-equality-stalls-in-corporate-america-despite-metoo-1540375203

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