Psychological safety as a foundation for improvement

Pete Gordon and Nick Holding

Aims for today

- Understanding psychological safety

- Recognising barriers and enablers

- Impact on patient care and outcomes

- Effective communication and feedback

- Leadership's role in cultivating safety

- Case studies and best practices

the fearless organization

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

Amy C. Edmondson

HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL

WILEY

# Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams

Amy Edmondson   View all authors and affiliations

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Abstract

This paper presents a model of team learning and tests it in a multimethod field study. It introduces the construct of team psychological safety—a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking—and models the effects of team psychological safety and team efficacy together on learning and performance in organizational work teams. Results of a study of 51 work teams in a manufacturing company, measuring antecedent, process, and outcome variables, show that team psychological safety is associated with learning behavior, but team efficacy is not, when controlling for team psychological safety. As predicted, learning behavior mediates between team psychological safety and team performance. The results support an integrative perspective in which both team structures, such as context support and team leader coaching, and shared beliefs shape team outcomes.
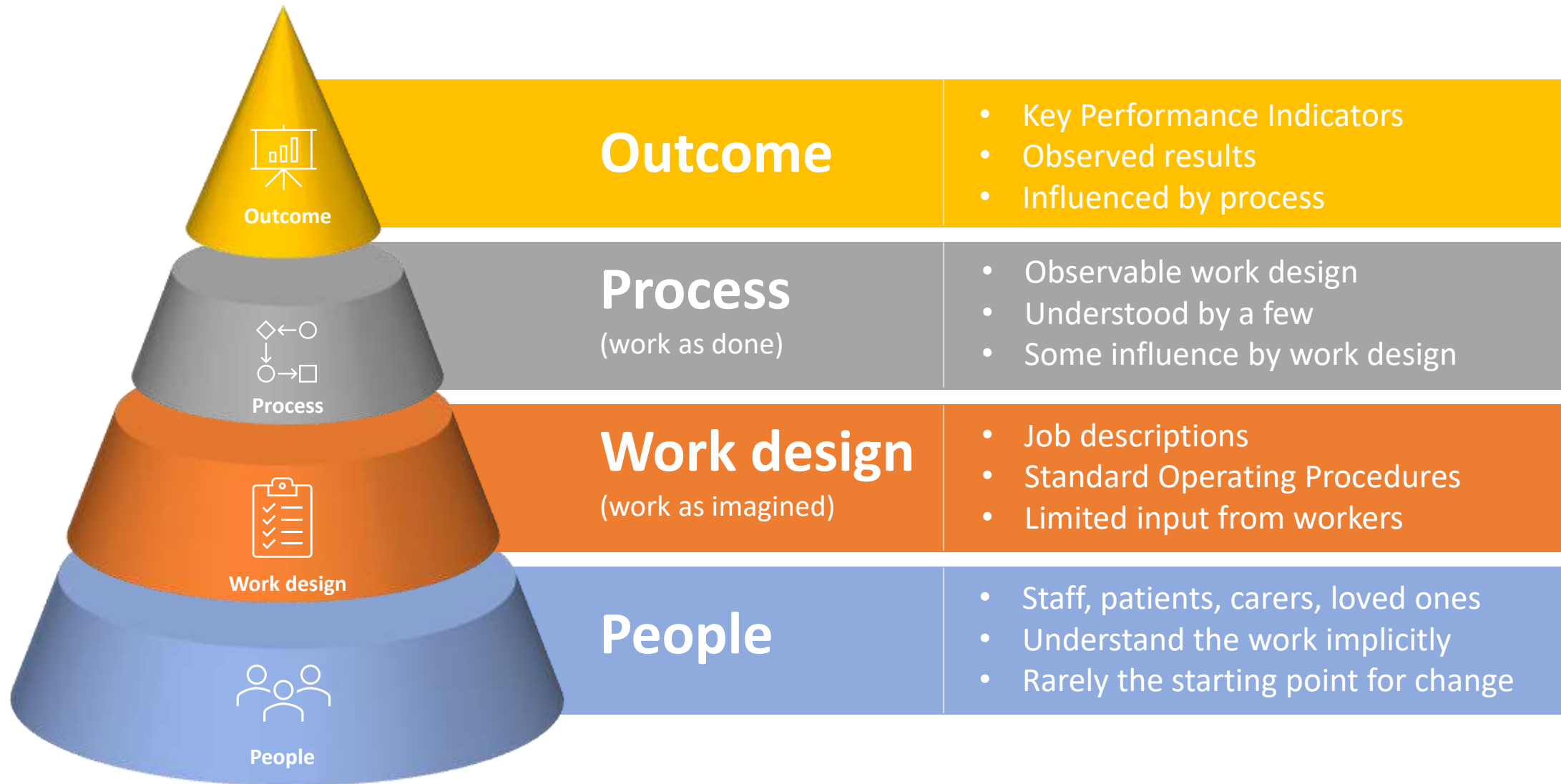
Psychological safety as a foundation for improvement

"If you look after your staff, they'll look after your customers."

"It's that simple"

Richard Branson

People-Centred Improvement Model

Outcome
- Key Performance Indicators
- Observed results
- Influenced by process

Process
(work as done)
- Observable work design
- Understood by a few
- Some influence by work design

Work design
(work as imagined)
- Job descriptions
- Standard Operating Procedures
- Limited input from workers

People
- Staff, patients, carers, loved ones
- Understand the work implicitly
- Rarely the starting point for change

"The understanding and learning which the process produces for individuals and groups is **more important** than any change as such."

Kurt Lewin, 1940s

Translation
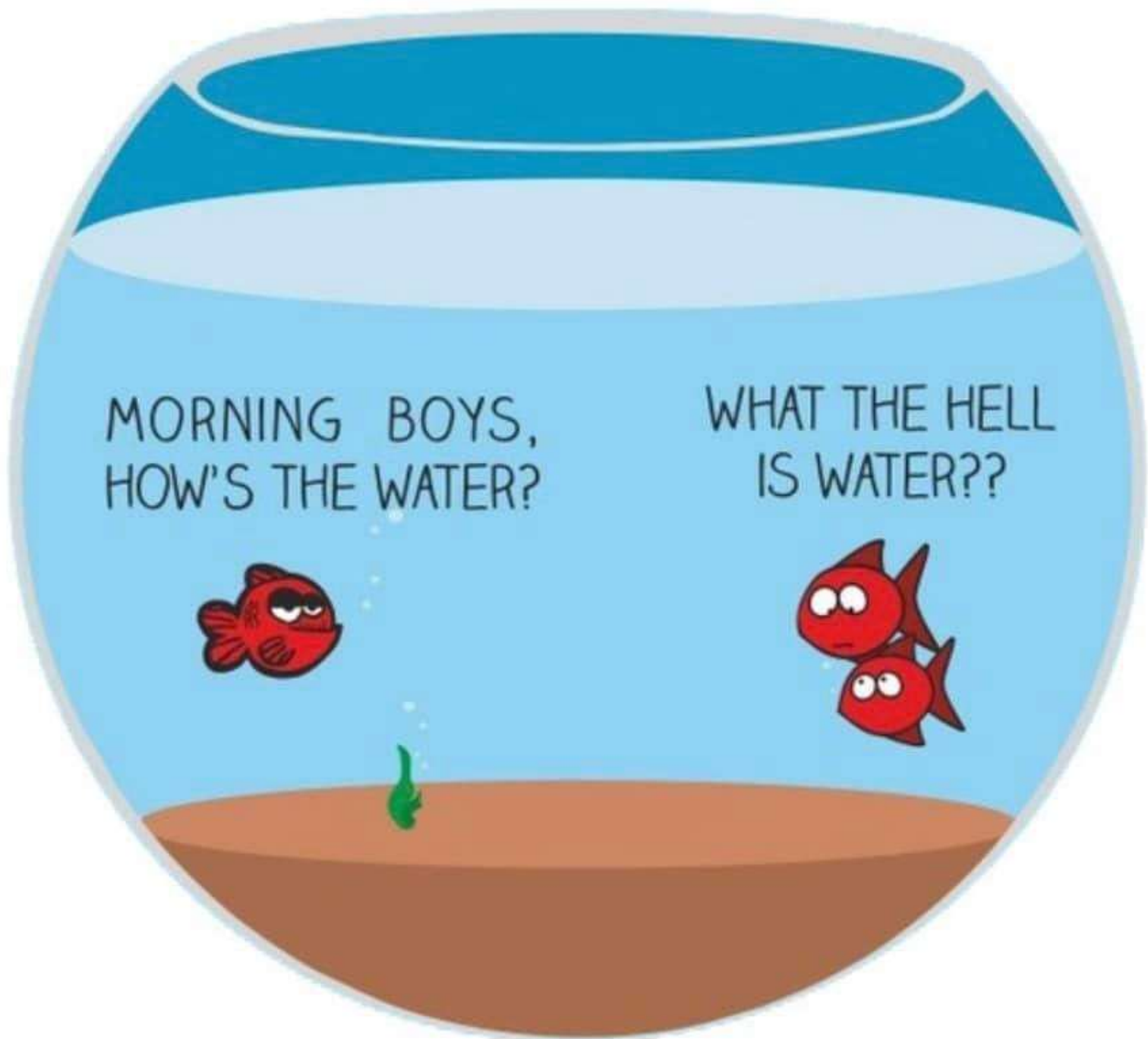"The way we go about change is more important than the change itself"

In the final analysis, change sticks when it becomes the way we do things around here

John P. Kotter

Understanding psychological safety

The only thing of real importance that leaders do is to create and manage culture. If you do not manage culture, it manages you, and you may not even be aware of the extent to which this is happening.

— *Edgar Schein* —

What is culture?

"A pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems."

Edgar Schein

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the
fearless
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Creating **Psychological Safety** in the
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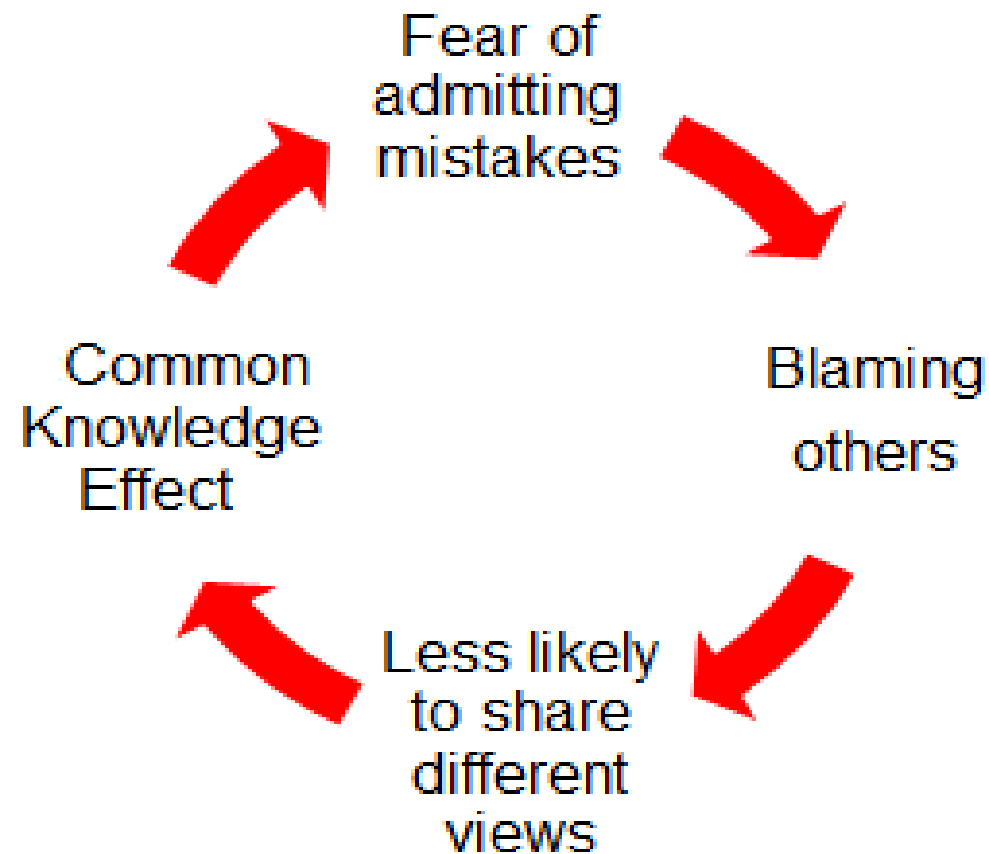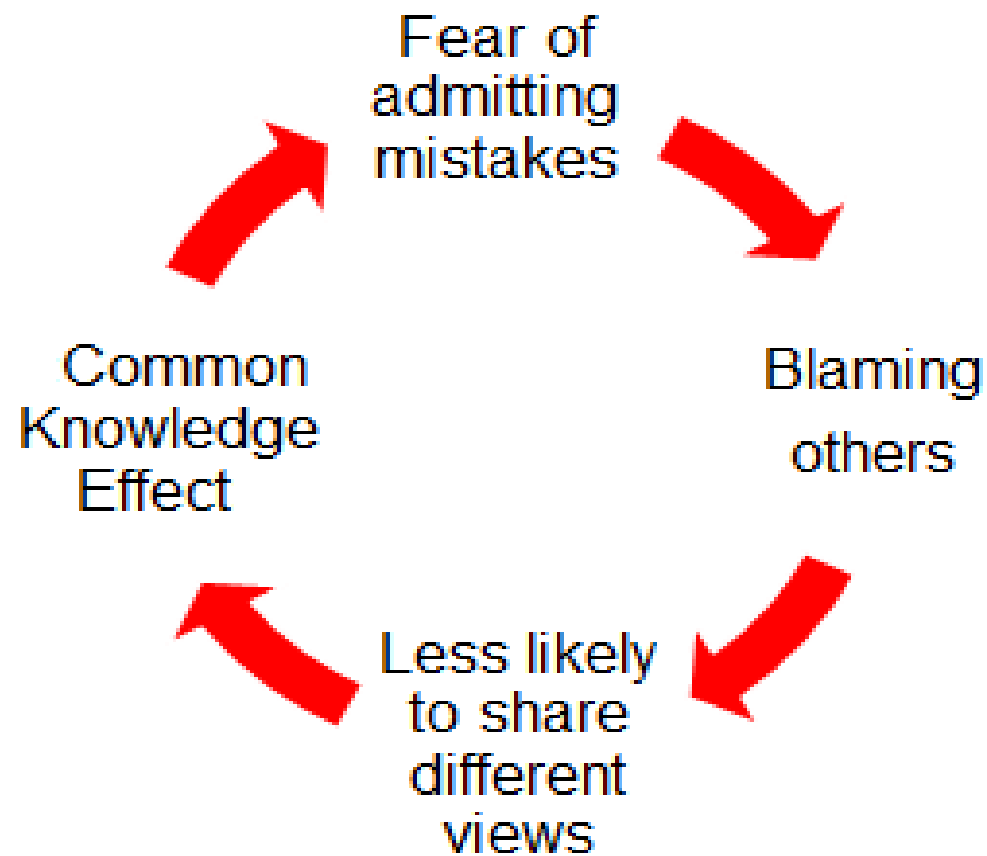
Amy C. Edmondson
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Psychological safety

Namely: **the *belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes,*** *and the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking*
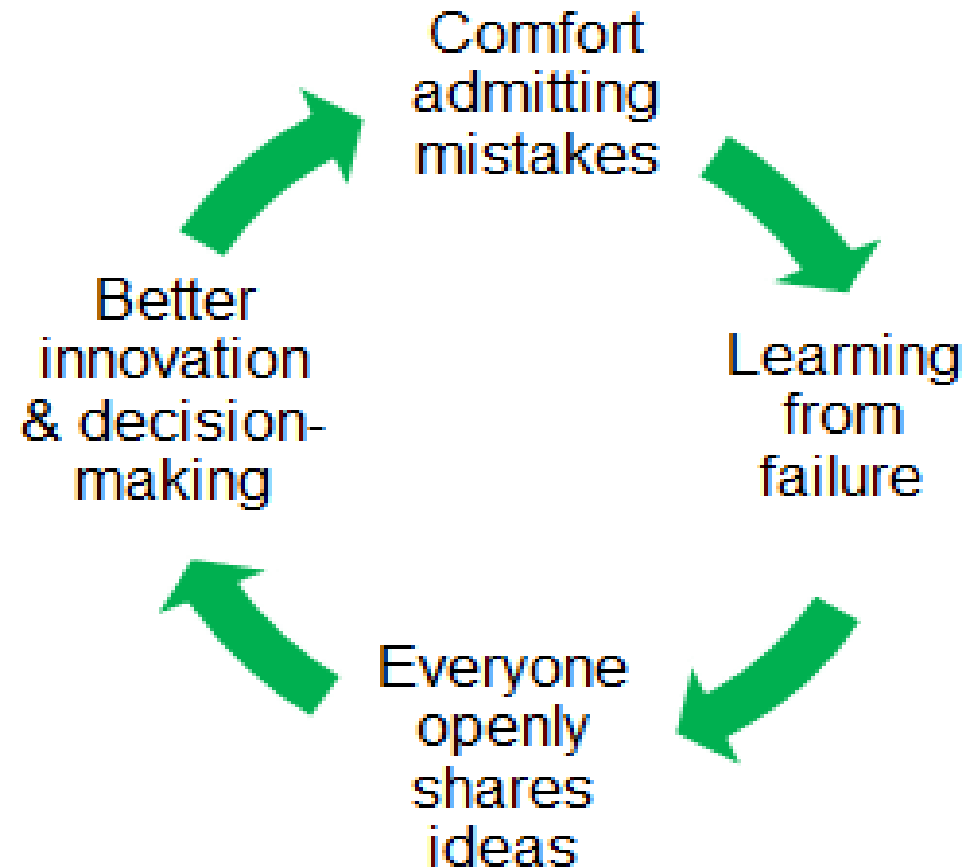
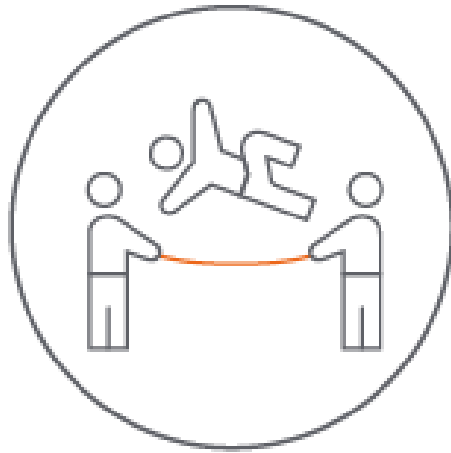Edmondson, A. (1999) Psychological Safety and Learning Behaviour in Work Teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly, Vol. 44, No. 2 (June, 1999), pp. 350-383.*

Psychological Danger

Fear of admitting mistakes

Blaming others

Less likely to share different views

Common Knowledge Effect

Psychological Danger

Fear of admitting mistakes

Blaming others

Less likely to share different views

Common Knowledge Effect

Psychological Safety

Comfort admitting mistakes

Learning from failure

Everyone openly shares ideas

Better innovation & decision-making
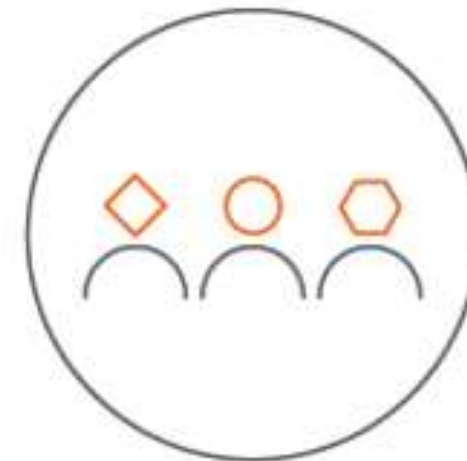
The four domains of psychological safety

Attitude to Risk and Failure

Open Conversation
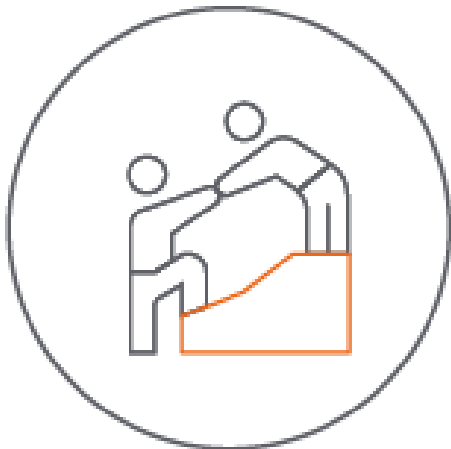
Willingness to Help

Inclusion & Diversity

Psychological safety (vertical axis)

Motivation and accountability (horizontal axis)

COMFORT ZONE

LEARNING ZONE

APATHY ZONE

ANXIETY ZONE

Edmondson (2018)

Psychological Safety and Learning Behaviour in Work Teams

Engaging in learning behaviour in a team is highly dependent on team psychological safety...

..The implication of this result is that people's beliefs about how others will respond if they engage in behaviour for which the outcome is uncertain, affects their willingness to take interpersonal risks

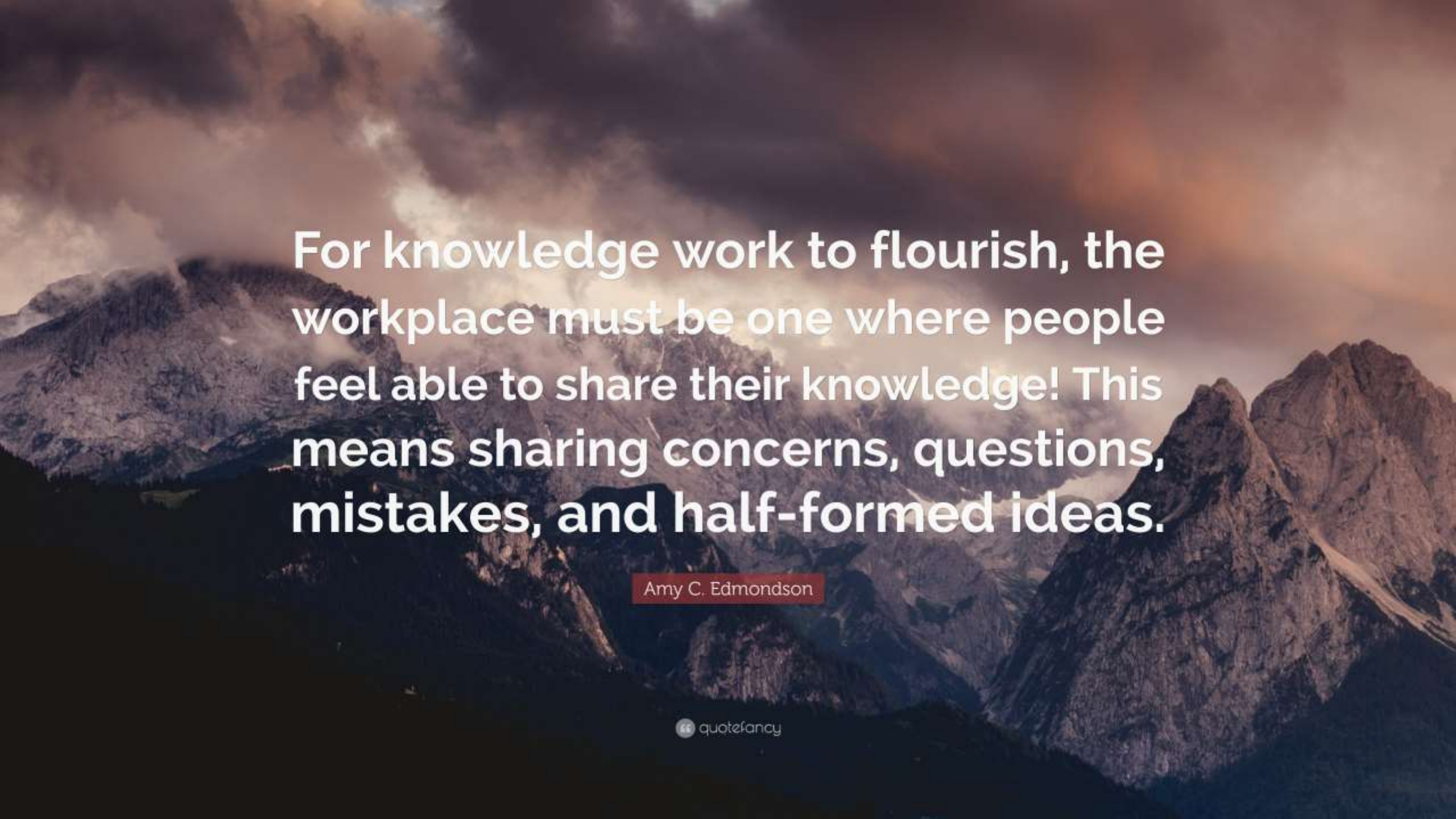Fast-paced work environments require learning behaviour to make sense of what is happening as well as to take action

The need to ask questions, seek help, and tolerate mistakes in the face of uncertainty, **while team members and other colleagues watch**, is probably more prevalent today than ever before

Barriers and enablers

If you bake a bad cake, you can cover it with beautiful icing, but its still a bad cake

For knowledge work to flourish, the workplace must be one where people feel able to share their knowledge! This means sharing concerns, questions, mistakes, and half-formed ideas.

Amy C. Edmondson

People are afraid to speak truth to power and we see it all the time. Steep power gradients inhibit information flow. When we flatten the Power Gradient, we create a culture where it is safe for everyone to share ideas, ask questions, and voice concerns. Here's @ldavidmarquet

Intent-Based Leadership®
Leadership Nudge
#313 - The Vasa Story

Psychological safety

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"Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again, this time more intelligently"

Henry Ford

Avoiding ridicule begins at an early age

Inspired by
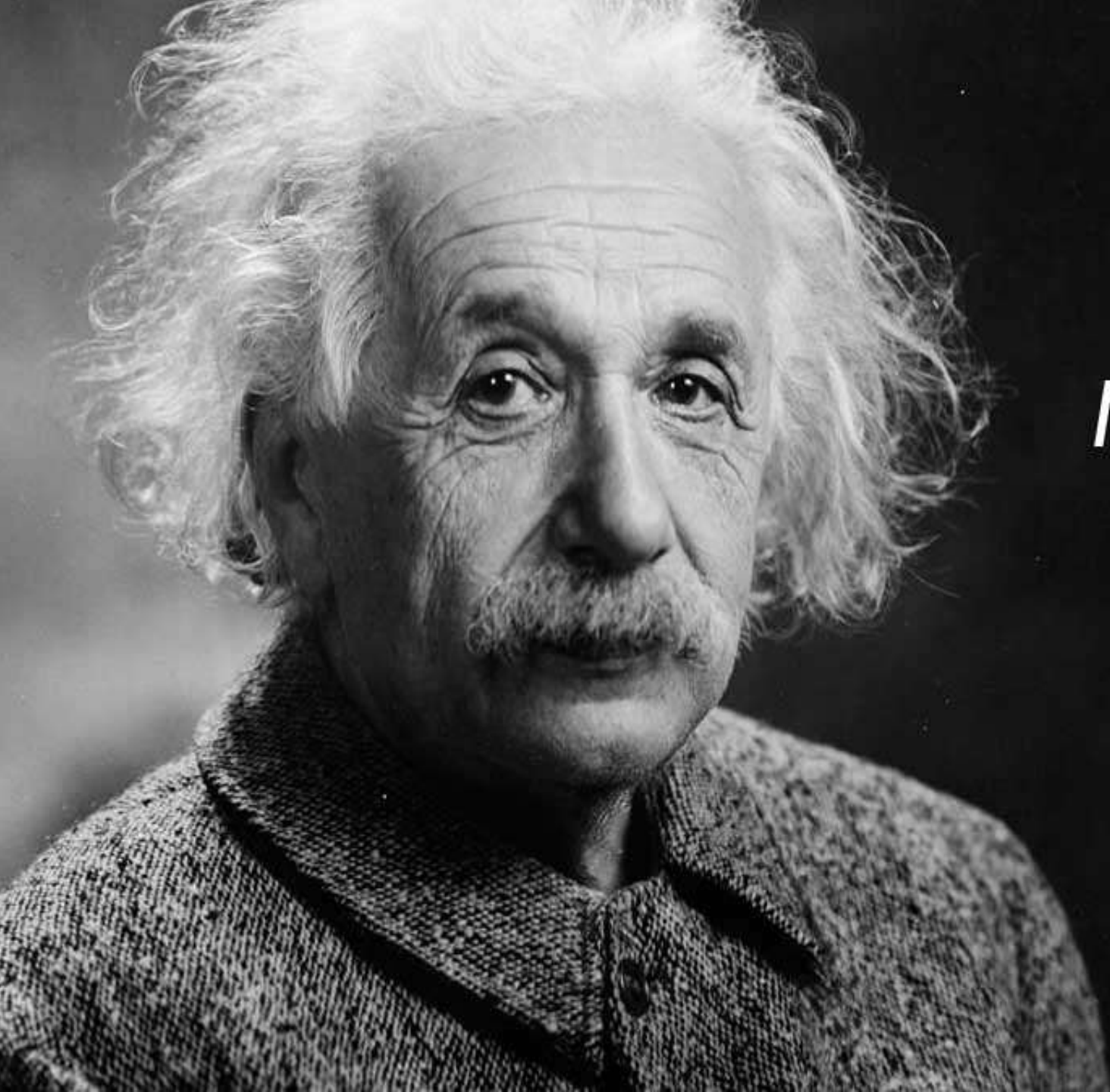
"A PERSON WHO NEVER MADE A MISTAKE NEVER TRIED ANYTHING NEW."

ALBERT EINSTEIN

WHAT I KNOW
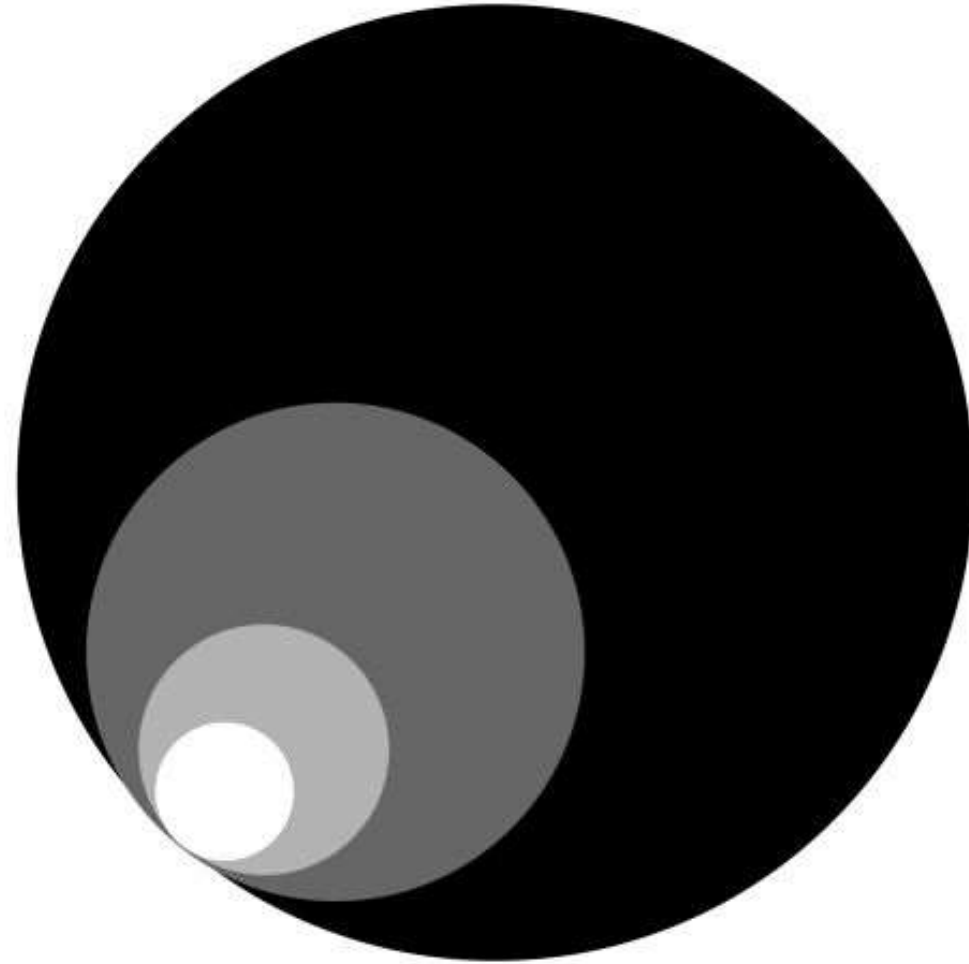
Things I know I know
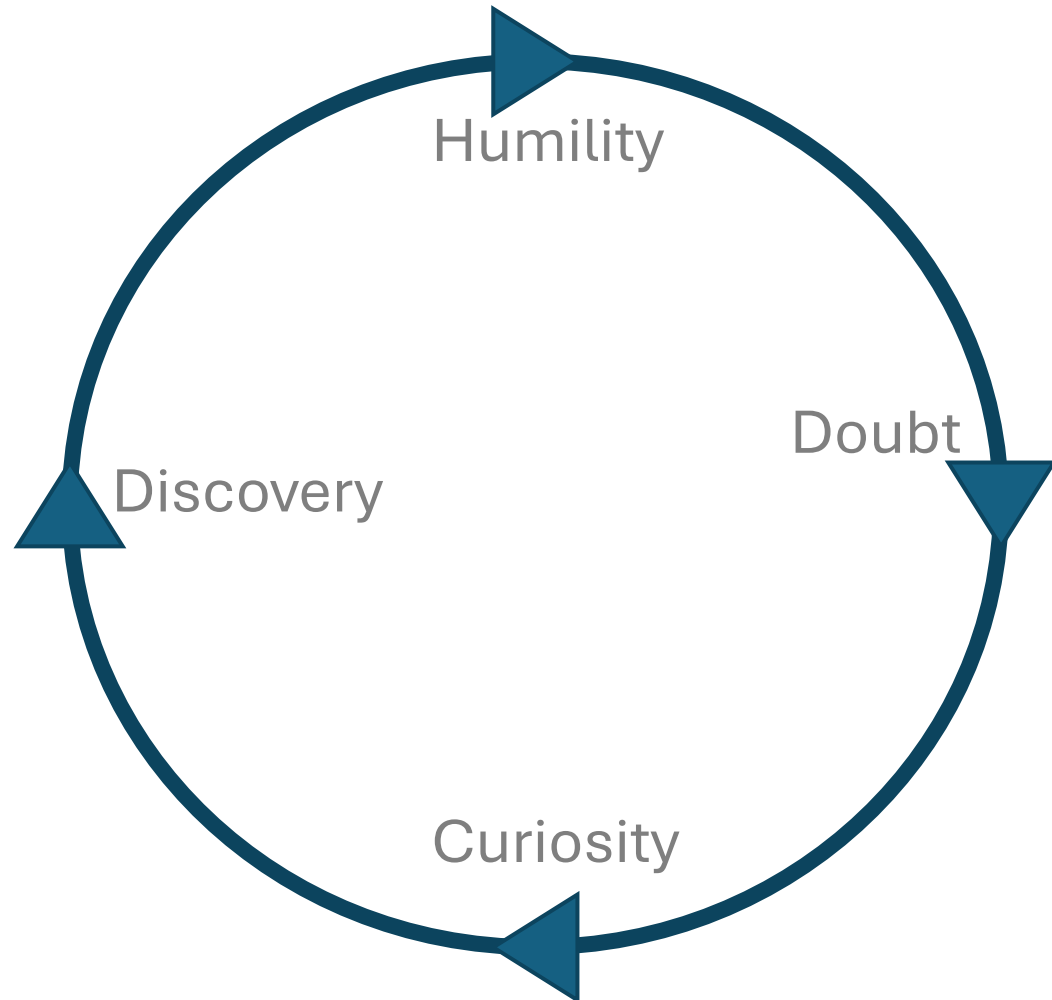
Things I know

Things I think I know

Things I don't know

THINK
AGAIN

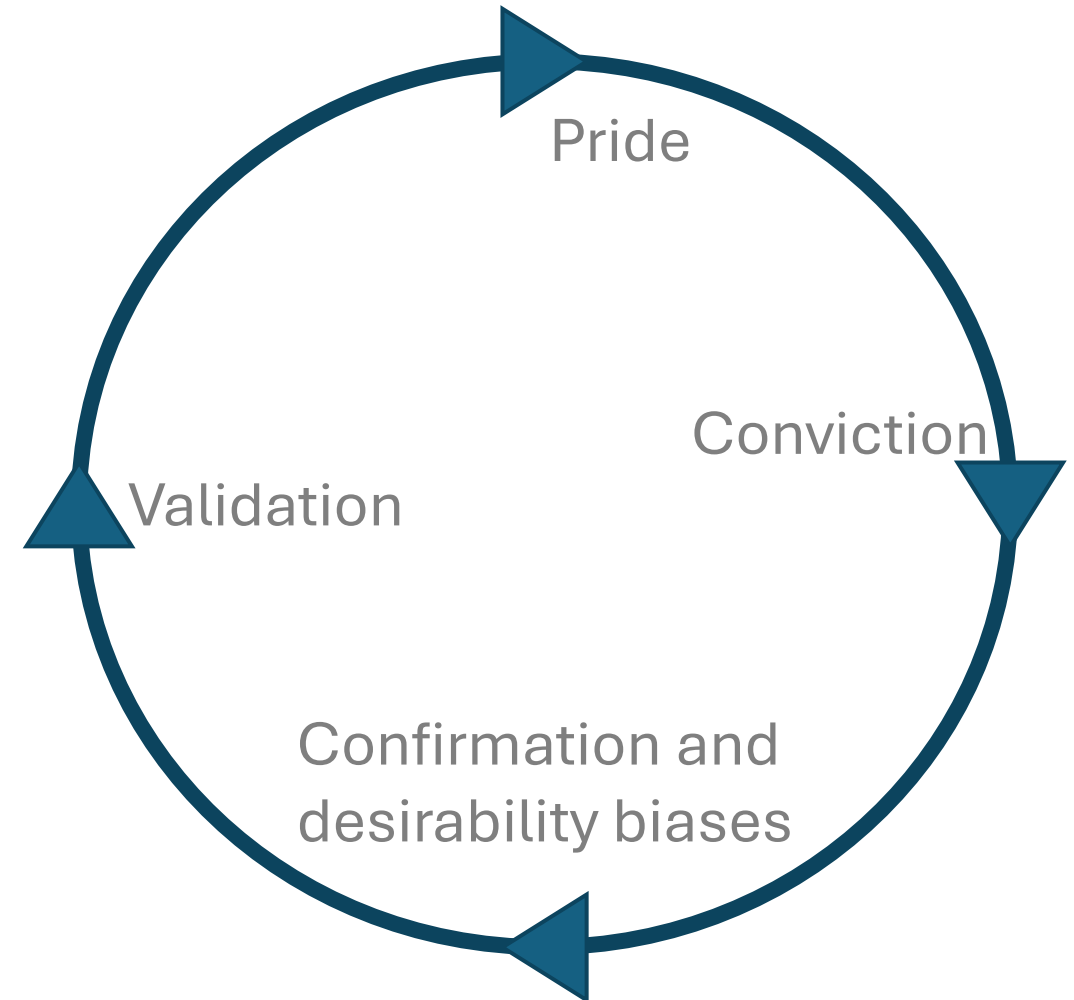ADAM
GRANT
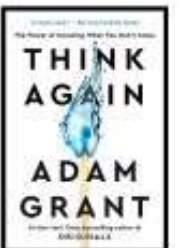
Overconfidence

If you think you're right, how do you know?

Grant (2021)

The Rethinking Cycle

Humility

Doubt

Discovery

Curiosity

The Overconfidence Cycle

Pride

Conviction

Validation

Confirmation and desirability biases

"Scientific thinking favours humility over pride, doubt over certainty, curiosity over closure. When we shift out of scientist mode, the rethinking cycle breaks down, giving way to overconfidence cycles"
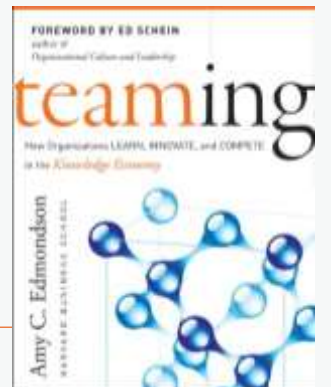
Grant (2021)

Prof. Amy Edmondson, Harvard

Organise to learn
or
Organise to execute

Then....

Execute to learn
or
Execute for efficiency

Impact on patient care

Elaine Bromiley

- Elective routine nasal procedure

- Fit and well 37 year-old, normal airway assessment in prep-op

- Post anaesthetic, unexpected o2 sats difficulties and prolonged attempts to secure airway. 40 mins in total

- Suffered catastrophic brain damage

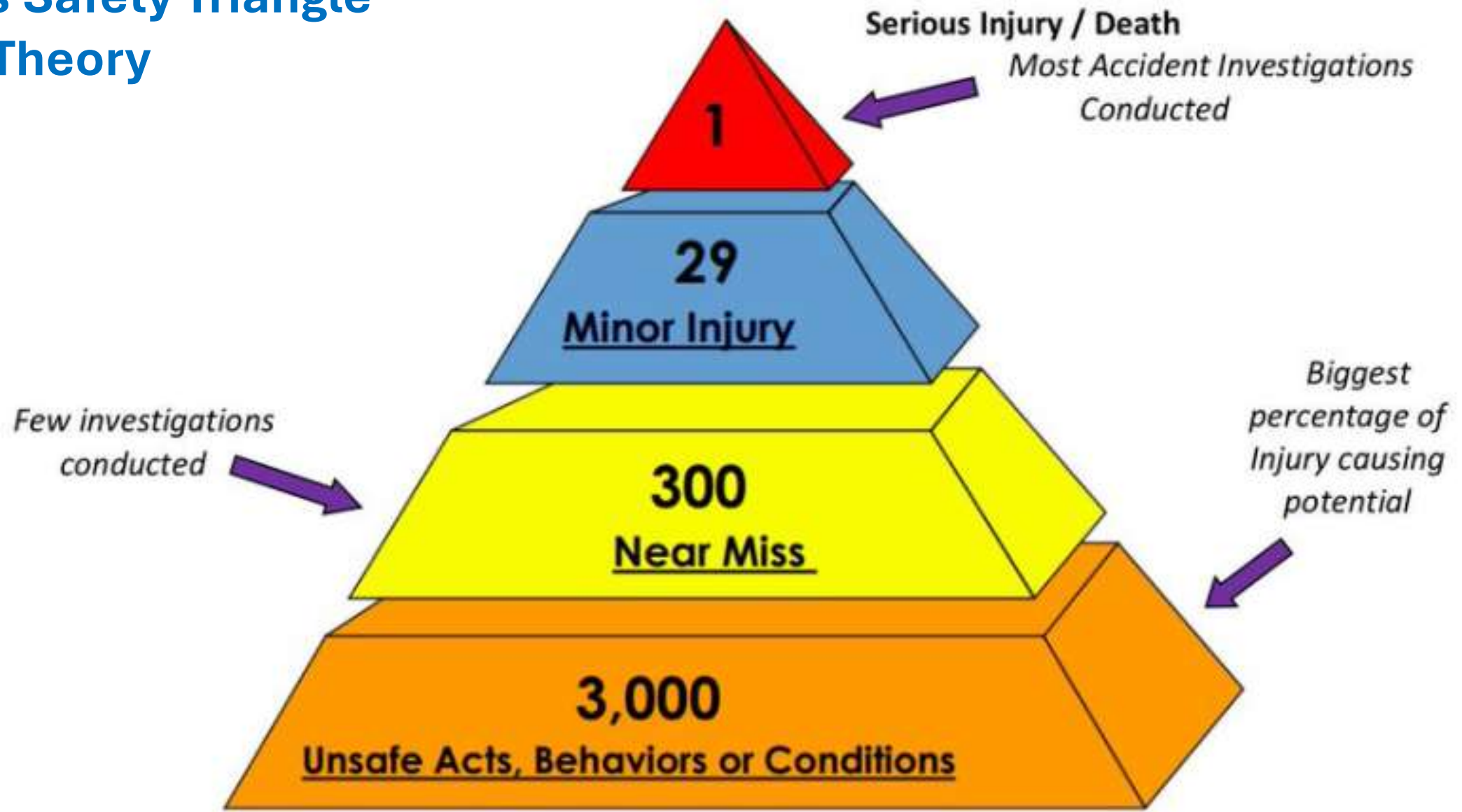- Died 13 days later in ITU from irreversible hypoxic brain injury

- Clinicians appeared to become oblivious to the passing of time

- Theatre nurse suggestions to perform tracheostomy and admit the patient to the ITU were not acknowledged

- ITU bed made available, and clinicians again made aware

- Due to status and seniority of clinicians, theatre team did not feel able to raise concerns or challenge

https://emcrit.org/wp-content/uploads/ElaineBromileyAnonymousReport.pdf

Psychologically **un**safe

Namely: **the *belief that one will* ~~not~~ *be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes,*** and the team is **NOT** safe for interpersonal risk-taking

Edmondson, A. (1999) Psychological Safety and Learning Behaviour in Work Teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly, Vol. 44, No. 2 (June, 1999), pp. 350-383.*

Heinrich's Safety Triangle Theory

Serious Injury / Death
Most Accident Investigations Conducted

1

29 Minor Injury

Few investigations conducted

300 Near Miss

Biggest percentage of Injury causing potential

3,000 Unsafe Acts, Behaviors or Conditions

Yorio PL, Moore SM. Examining Factors that Influence the Existence of Heinrich's Safety Triangle Using Site-Specific H&S Data from More than 25,000 Establishments. Risk Anal. 2018 Apr;38(4):839-852. doi: 10.1111/risa.12869. Epub 2017 Aug 2. PMID: 28768045; PMCID: PMC6238149

INCIVILITY
THE FACTS

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SOMEONE IS RUDE?

80% of recipients lose time worrying about the rudeness

38% reduce the quality of their work

48% reduce their time at work

25% take it out on service users

Less effective clinicians provide poorer care

WITNESSES

20% decrease in performance

50% decrease in willingness to help others

SERVICE USERS

75% less enthusiasm for the organisation

Incivility affects more than just the recipient IT AFFECTS EVERYONE

CIVILITY SAVES LIVES

The price of incivility. Porath C, Pearson C. Harv Bus Rev. 2013 Jan-Feb;91(1-2):114-21, 146.

CIVILITY SAVES LIVES

RESEARCH STUDY

Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams

Amy Edmondson
Harvard University

The intelligent failure that led to the term

'Psychological Safety'

1999

Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. Administrative Science Quarterly, 44, 350–383.

Does better teamwork in hospitals lead to fewer errors?

- Was there a correlation between error rates and team effectiveness in hospitals. Statistically significant but not in the expected direction.

- Additional question added "If you make a mistake in this unit, it won't be held against you".

- Double blind result check.

Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. Administrative Science Quarterly, 44, 350–383.

Eureka moment

Better teams probably don't make more mistakes, but they are more able to discuss mistakes (psychological safety).

" For example, a nurse in one team explained matter-of-factly, "Mistakes are serious, because of the toxicity of the drugs [we use]—so you're never afraid to tell the Nurse Manager"; in contrast, a nurse in another team in the same hospital reported, "You get put on trial! People get blamed for mistakes . . . you don't want to have made one."

Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. Administrative Science Quarterly, 44, 350–383.

Purpose – identify the factors that makes teams successful?

- Half a century of academic studies reviewed.

- Similar interests, motivated by rewards, socialise, similar hobbies, educational backgrounds?

- 180 teams – no patterns.

- Teams with identical make ups differed in levels of effectiveness.

- Group norms – lots seemed important for some but not for others.

Along the way – looked at collective IQ
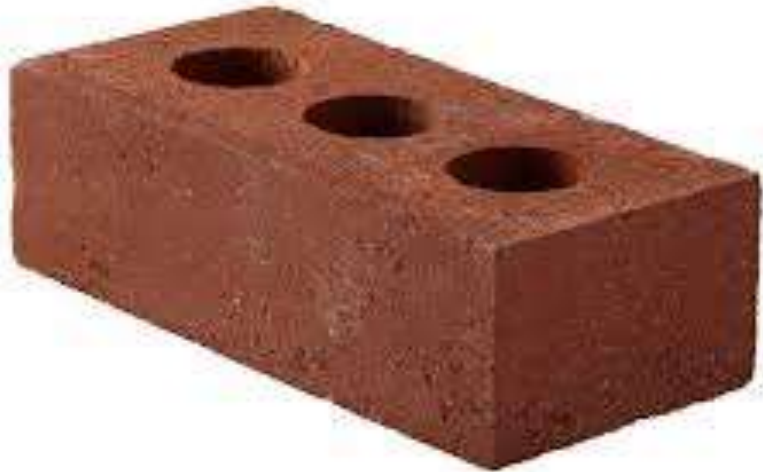
Small groups given assignments that required different kinds of cooperation.

Still not 100% clear

- Some higher performing teams had lots of 'smart people' and worked out how to split work evenly.

- Some higher performing teams had 'average' people who worked out how to take advantage of everyone's strengths.

- Some had one strong leader others more fluid leadership.

- **But** – **on higher performing teams, all people spoke in relative proportion by the end of the day. If only one person or a few people spoke, the collective intelligence declined.**

They then came across the extensive Psychological Safety evidence

Google's Project Aristotle

1 Psychological Safety
Team members feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other.

2 Dependability
Team members get things done on time and meet Google's high bar for excellence.

3 Structure & Clarity
Team members have clear roles, plans, and goals.

4 Meaning
Work is personally important to team members.

5 Impact
Team members think their work matters and creates change.

re:Work

- 4 years
- 50k people surveyed
- 180 teams
- 100+ variables

ALL data showing the most important lever of high performance to be Psychological Safety

VOLKSWAGEN AKTIENGESELLSCHAFT

DIESELGATE

2015

Diesel Gate

- Sept 2015 Environmental Protection Agency found 'defeat devices' used when testing.

- Huge pressure, low psychological safety – no one spoke up.

- Get it done and get it done now.

- What was the cause?
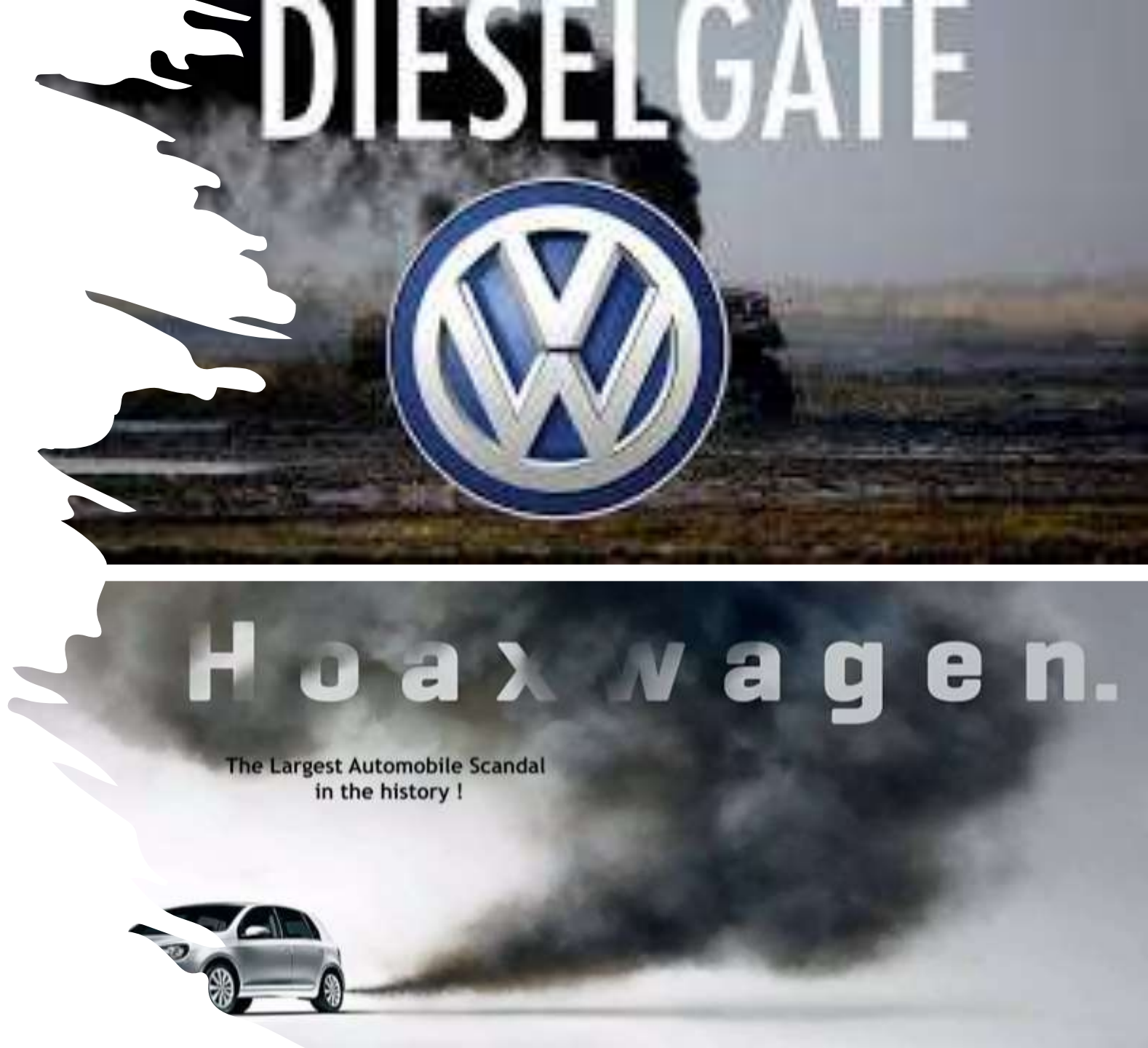
Bernard Osterloh – VW Supervisory Board Member

Letter to VW staff 2015:

"We need in future a climate in which problems aren't hidden but can be openly communicated to superiors. We need a culture in which it's possible and permissible to argue with your superior about the best way to go"

What Happens in a PIXAR BRAIN TRUST Meeting?

PIXAR
ANIMATION STUDIOS

Braintrust – foster creativity through candor

- Pixar was developing *Toy Story 2* and it was not going well.

- They decided to get together a group of directors and storytellers to watch early cuts of the movie, eat lunch and discuss what worked and what didn't. Braintrust started.

- **Rules** - feedback must be constructive and focus on the *project*, not the people making it. The filmmakers need to be open to hearing the truth and have a tough skin not to take the criticism personally.

- But at the end of the day, the director is ultimately responsible to heed the criticisms or not. They are only suggestions and not enforceable - **the director is responsible for the film regardless i.e. the braintrust has no authority.**

HOW TO RUN A BRAINTRUST

Ed Catmull

Former President of Disney Animation
Co-founder of Pixar
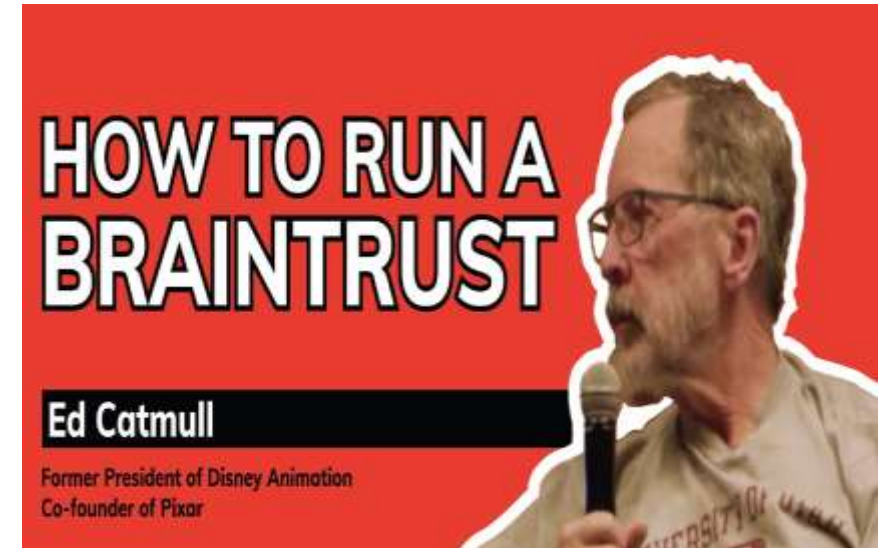
Andrew Stanton
- Pixar Director

"If Pixar is a hospital and the movies are the patients, then the Braintrust is made of trusted Doctors. It's as if they've gathered a panel of consulting experts to help find an accurate diagnosis for an extremely confounding case. But ultimately, it's the filmmakers, and no one else, who will make the final decisions about the wisest course of treatment"

2023 NHS staff satisfaction survey v emergency department performance
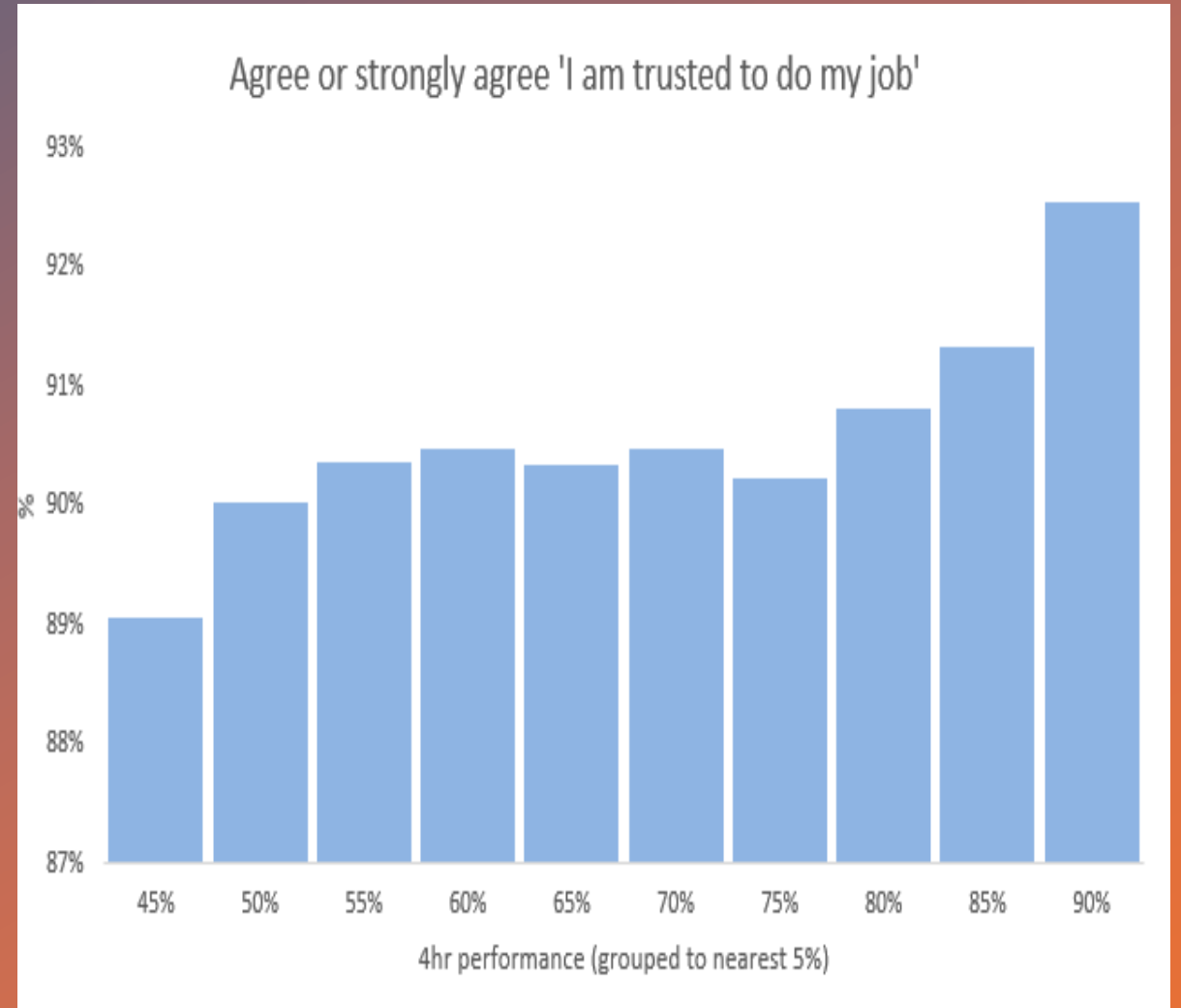
Agree or strongly agree 'I am trusted to do my job'

4hr performance (grouped to nearest 5%)

2023 NHS staff satisfaction survey v emergency department performance

% team have freedom to act / improve

4hr performance (grouped to nearest 5%)
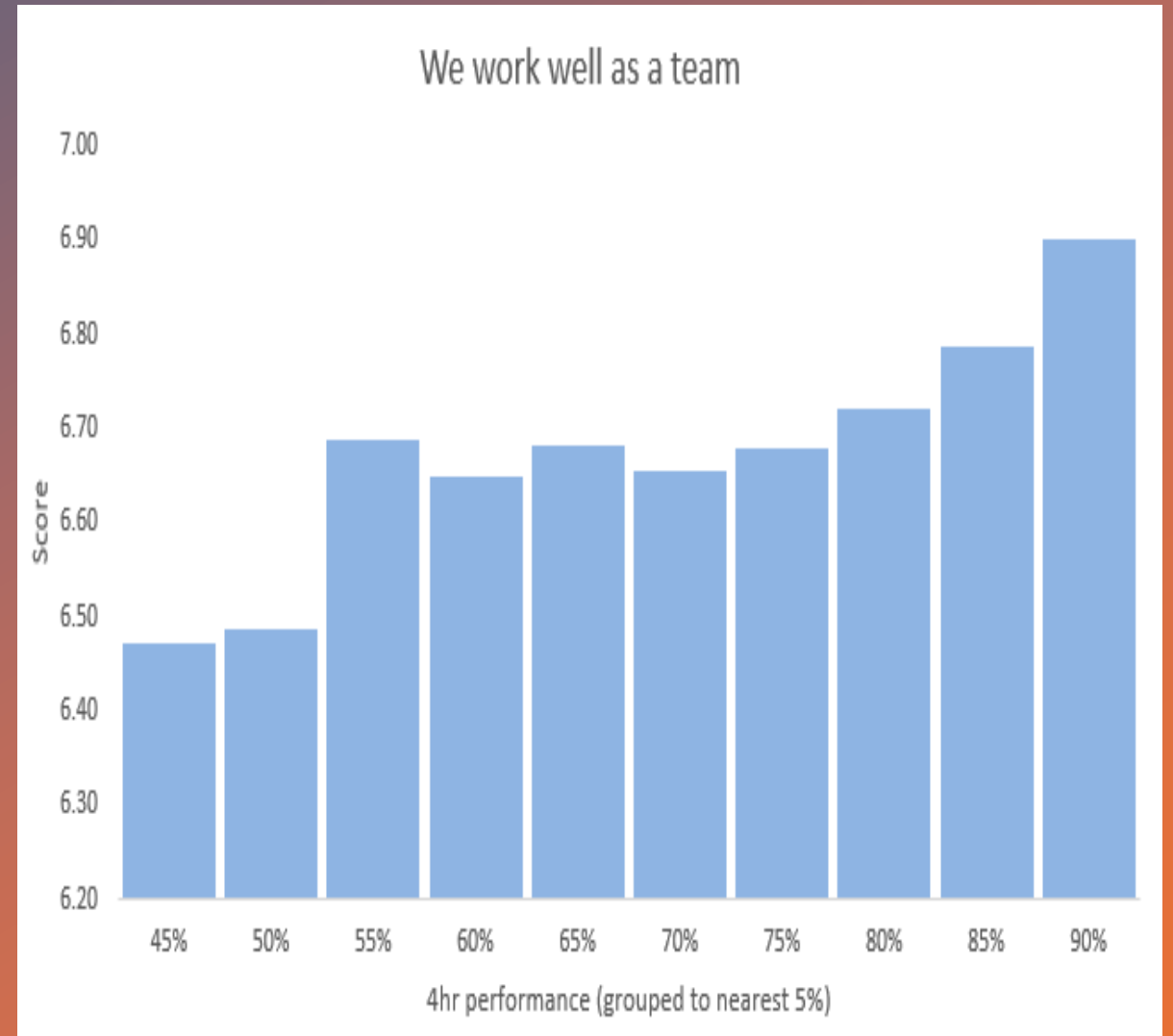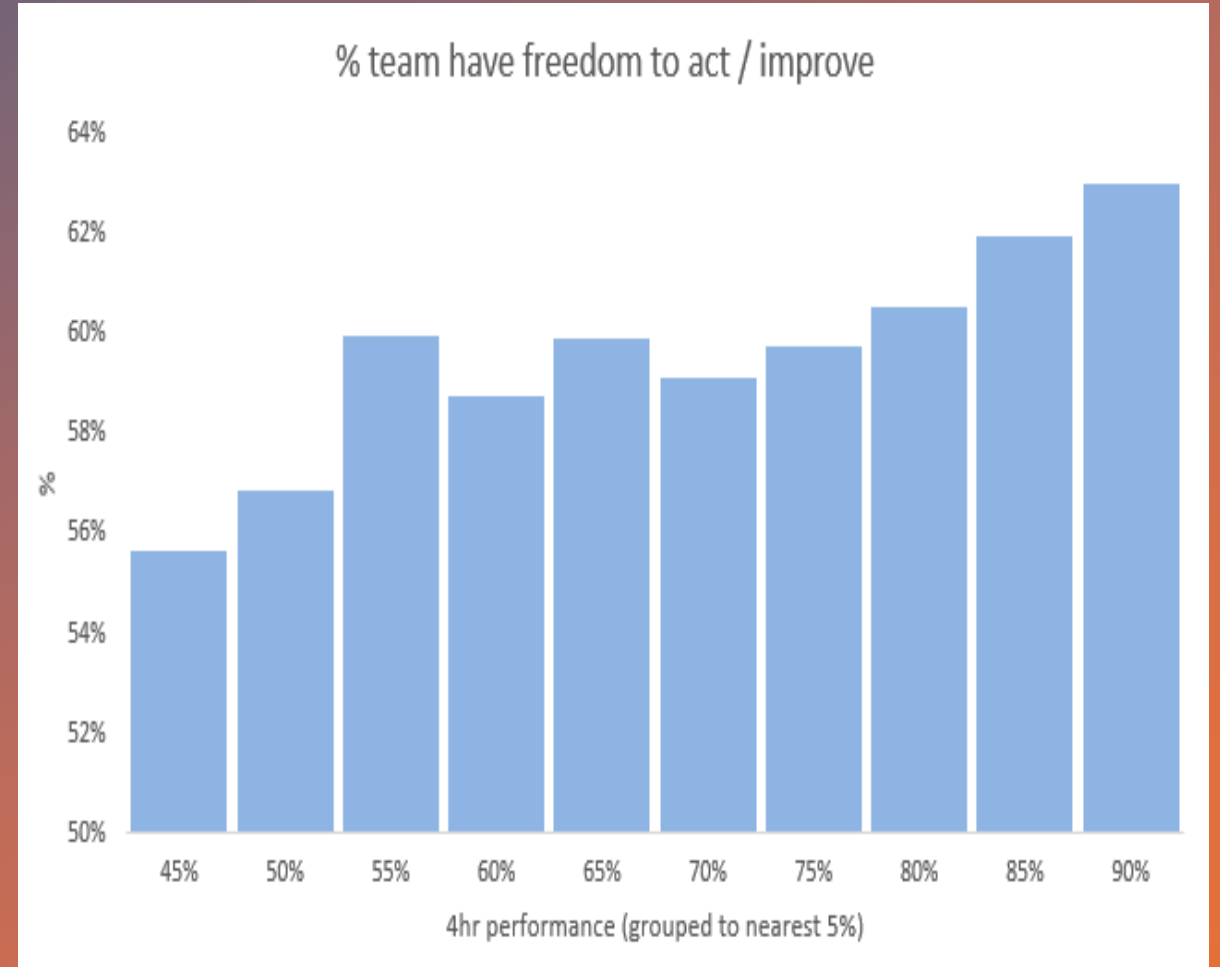
2023 NHS staff satisfaction survey v emergency department performance
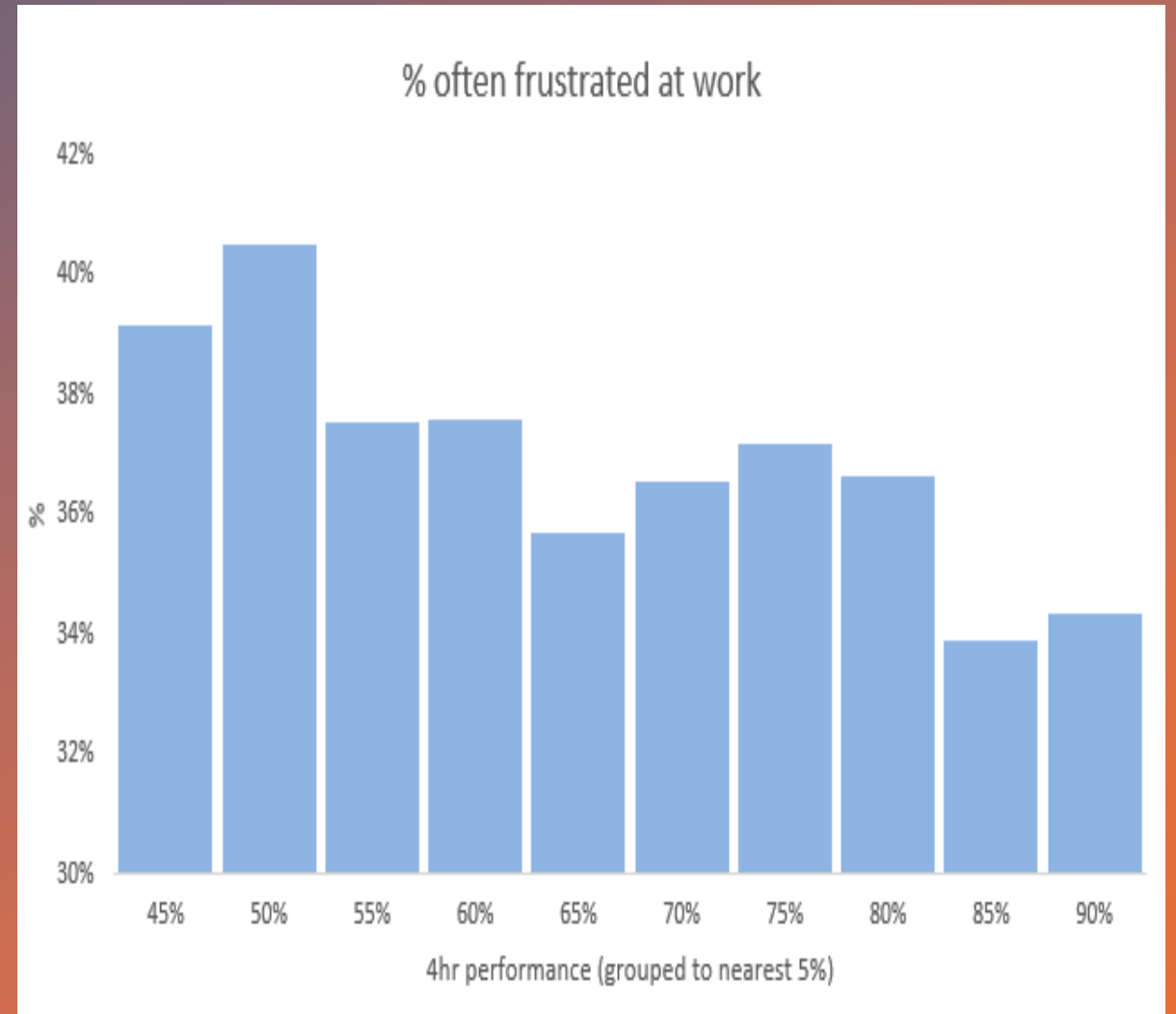
How do you create psychological safety?

- **Set the stage** – be clear that everyone's perspective is important and needs to be heard. Reframe the role of the boss.

- **Invite participation** – humble enquiry, situational humility and encourage curiosity.
  - I'm not sure of the best way to proceed, what do you think?
  - What concerns do you have about what's being proposed?
  - What might we be missing?
  - I'm curious about how you came to that decision. What influenced your thinking?
  - How might we do this even better?

How do you create psychological safety?

- **Respond productively**
  - Express appreciation – whether the comment / idea is good, bad or indifferent.
  - De-stigmatise 'intelligent failure' (by product of healthy experimentation).
  - Manage clear violations e.g. poor behaviour and performance.

Other useful phrases

- I don't know.
- I need help.
- I made a mistake.
- I am sorry.

All expressions of vulnerability. Removing you mask helps others remove theirs.

- What can I do to help?
- What are you up against?
- What are your concerns?

Be vulnerable as well as interested and available.
With modest goodwill colleagues will respond positively.

Can you have too much psychological safety?

- Common concern - people will talk and talk, uninformed sea of chatter, derailed projects, good ideas lost, people will be sloppy.

- You can't have too much **however you can have not enough discipline. Psychological safety is not about being nice.**

- It's about reducing fear, making it less heroic to ask a question.

- It doesn't mean you have a good strategy for getting the work done.

- It doesn't mean everyone is motivated and well trained.

Can you have too much psychological safety?

- Interpersonal fear is never good - fear of your boss or speaking up is never great. We often hold back with thoughts or questions even though we think they are important, can help and add value.

- People talking too much – this is never good, provide feedback about their impact.

- It's not a panacea - it's one of many factors for success.

- It's a big enabler to influence how work gets done, encourage confidence and diversity. It encourages talent and thought.

- It's rare people focus and encourage more voice / speaking up.

Will it take too much time? Will meetings will go on and on?

- Confuses psychological safety with bad process, managing meetings is about skill, discipline and design to focus on the task.
- It should save time and be more efficient.
- Decisions which previously have taken months can be resolved in hours.

Do we have to be transparent about everything?

No – if there's a good reason not to.
- It needs to be situational e.g. in the operating theatre v someone's attire.
- **BUT** - most of us would prefer to work in an environment where we feel psychologically safe.

Remember – the fact is hierarchy naturally creates fear

- Research shows that people constantly assess their relative status, monitoring, mostly subconsciously, how they stack up against others:
  - Those lower in status in a hierarchy experience stress in the presence of those with higher status.
  - Hierarchy, unmanaged, naturally gives rise to fear.
- Leaders (at any level) can find ways to engage people by reducing fear. It's your job.

Why fear is not a good motivator

"Fear defeats more people than any other one thing in the world."

Ralph Waldo Emerson

- Research in neuroscience shows that fear diverts cognitive resources from parts of the brain that manage working memory and process new information.
    - This impairs analytical thinking, creative insight and problem solving.

- Summarising – people can't do their best work when they're afraid.

- Interpersonal fear reduces employee propensity to engage in learning behaviours (info sharing, asking for help, discussing mistakes and experimenting.
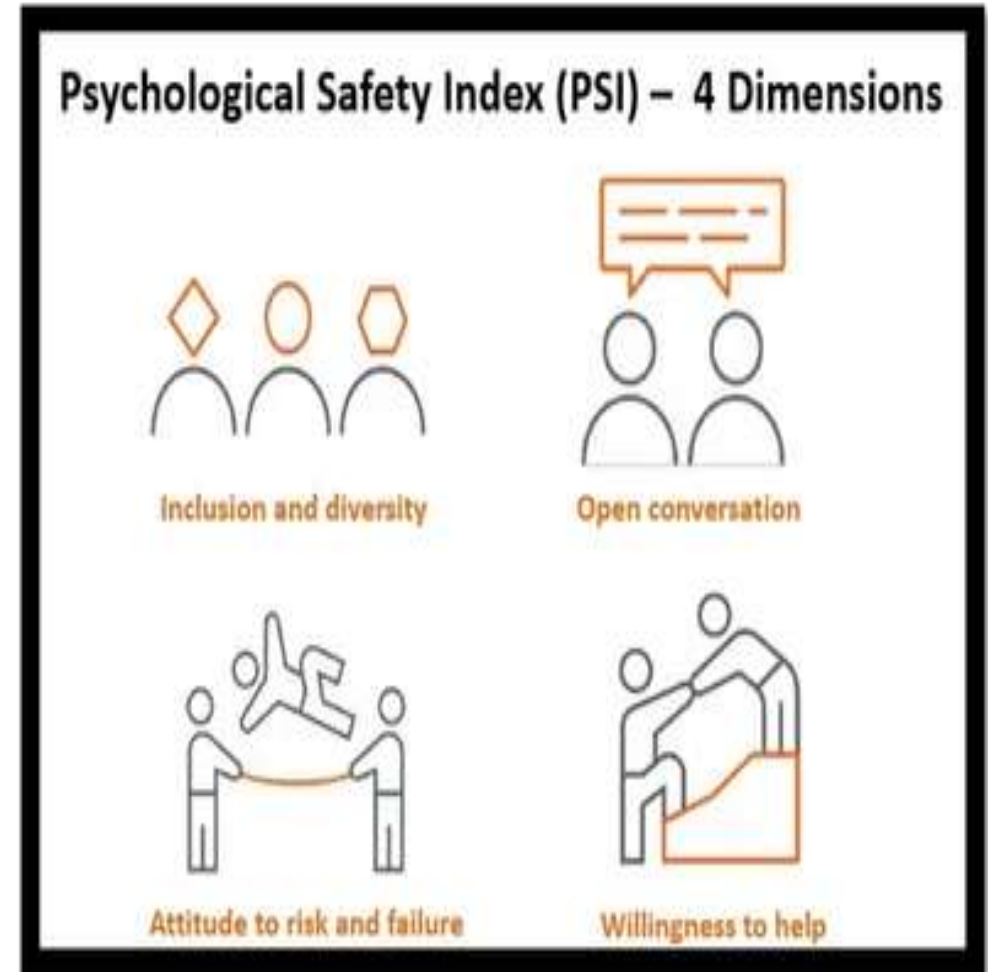
Sacrificing Performance Standards?

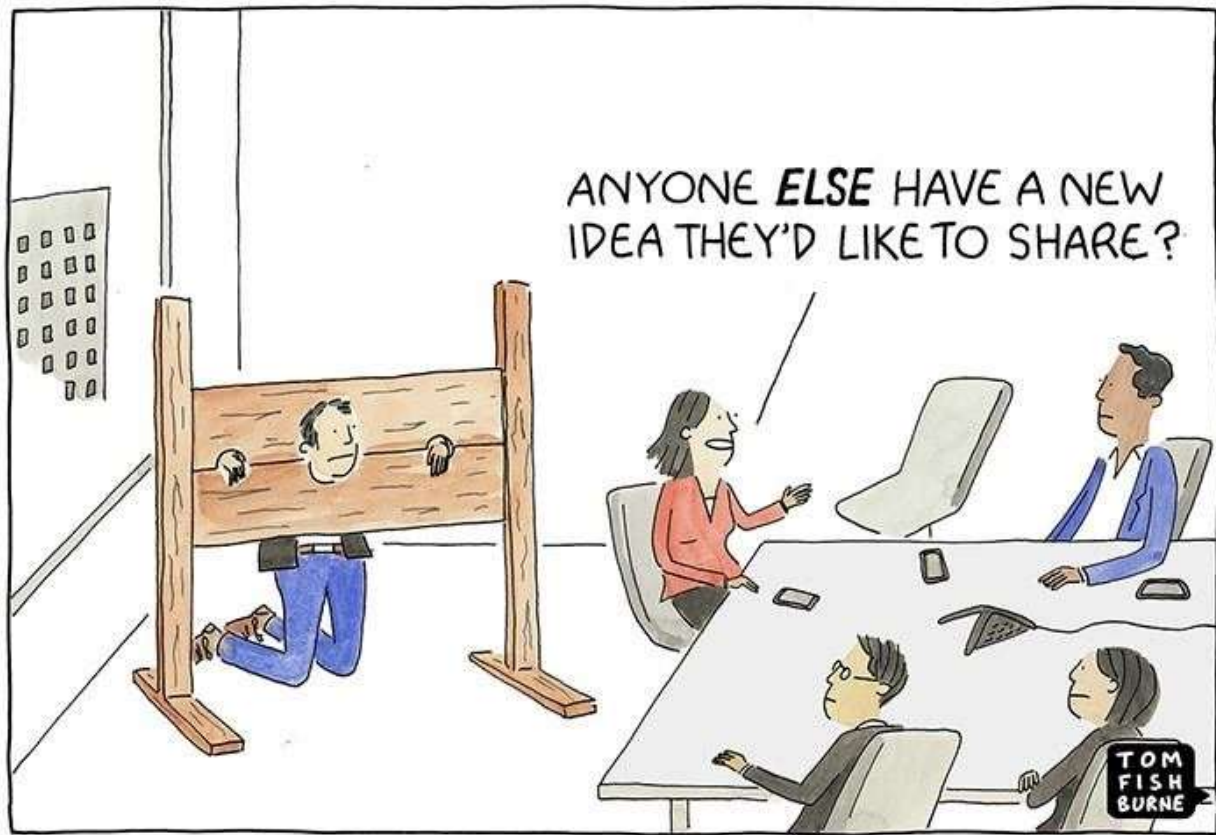Psychological Safety ⟷ High Standards

It's a matter of finding the right point on the balance beam?

You can measure it - a good place to start

1. *If you make a mistake on your team, is it held against you?*
2. *Are you able to bring up problems and tough issues?*
3. *Do people on the team sometimes reject others for being different?*
4. *Is it safe to take a risk?*
5. *Is it difficult to ask other team members for help?*
6. *Do people on the team deliberately act to undermine your efforts?*
7. *Are your unique skills and talents valued and utilised?*

Psychological Safety Index (PSI) – 4 Dimensions

Inclusion and diversity

Open conversation

Attitude to risk and failure

Willingness to help

If someone in your team or organisation had an idea how to improve performance by 50% would you want to know about it?

Thanks for listening

Nick and Pete

Nick.holding1@nhs.net and petegordon1@outlook.com