

TRUST AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Team Safety and Voice

Edmondson · Lencioni · Detert · Nembhard

PAPER 02 / 02

A Furtherance reference compendium on the intellectual traditions behind organisational design, leadership, execution, and culture.

IN THIS PAPER

Trust established, the series closes on what it enables inside a team: the safety to take interpersonal risks, and the willingness to actually speak up. The question it answers: what makes a team one where people report errors, challenge the plan, and say the uncomfortable thing – and what makes them stay silent?

Edmondson defines the enabling condition – psychological safety – and its link to learning. Lencioni shows what its absence does to a team. Detert explains why people stay silent even when safety seems present. Nembhard identifies the leadership behaviour that builds safety across differences of status.

Amy Edmondson b. 1959

Organisational behaviour · psychological safety · Harvard

CORE THESIS

Psychological safety is a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking – that speaking up with a question, concern, mistake or idea will not be punished or humiliated. It is the enabling condition for **learning behaviour**, and it is distinct from trust: it concerns how the *group* will react to *my* voice, here and now.

FRAMEWORK

Safety is not comfort. Paired with **accountability**, it defines the zone where teams perform and learn:

Low accountability	High accountability
Safe + low bar = comfort zone	Safe + high bar = learning zone
Unsafe + low bar = apathy zone	Unsafe + high bar = anxiety zone

METHODOLOGY

Field studies of teams – originally in hospitals, where better teams counter-intuitively *reported* more errors because they felt safe to – alongside extensive survey research. The construct also underpinned Google's Project Aristotle finding on team effectiveness.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

The dominant construct in the field, with a strong and growing evidence base. The critique: it is widely misread as niceness or lowered standards, when the evidence ties it firmly to candour *and* high performance.

Patrick Lencioni The Five Dysfunctions of a Team, 2002

Practitioner model · team dysfunction

CORE THESIS

Teams fail through a connected pyramid of **five dysfunctions**, and the root of them is an absence of **vulnerability-based trust** – the willingness to be open about weakness and error. Remove the base and everything above it collapses.

FRAMEWORK

Dysfunction (base to top)	Shows up as
Absence of trust	Invulnerability; hiding weaknesses and mistakes
Fear of conflict	Artificial harmony instead of honest debate
Lack of commitment	Ambiguity; decisions that never really land
Avoidance of accountability	Low standards tolerated among peers
Inattention to results	Status and ego above collective outcomes

METHODOLOGY

A practitioner model, presented as a leadership fable and refined through consulting rather than empirical study.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

Hugely popular and genuinely useful as a shared language for team problems, and it correctly puts trust at the base. The critique, noted below, is that it is not empirically derived or validated – its authority is clinical and rhetorical, not evidential.

James Detert b. 1968

Organisational behaviour · voice and silence

CORE THESIS

Even where conditions look safe, people frequently stay **silent** – withholding concerns, ideas and dissent. The reasons are **fear** (of consequences) and **futility** (the belief that speaking changes nothing), reinforced by taken-for-granted **implicit voice theories** about the risks of speaking up.

FRAMEWORK

Driver of silence	The belief behind it
Fear	Speaking up will be held against me
Futility	Nothing will change, so why bother
Implicit voice theories	Unspoken rules: don't skip the chain, don't embarrass the boss
Competent courage	Speaking up well is a skill – timed, framed, evidenced

METHODOLOGY

Organisational research combining surveys and qualitative study of why employees speak or stay silent, and how leaders shape the choice.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

Sharpens the practical mechanics of voice that psychological safety leaves general, and shows silence is often rational. The critique: voice and silence are difficult to measure, since the most consequential silences leave no trace.

Ingrid Nembhard Leader Inclusiveness, 2006

Health-care management · safety across status lines

CORE THESIS

Leader inclusiveness – the words and deeds by which leaders invite and value others' input – builds psychological safety, especially across differences of status and profession. Where hierarchy would otherwise silence people, inclusive leaders make it safe to contribute, and engagement in improvement work rises.

FRAMEWORK

Element	Effect
Leader inclusiveness	Explicit invitation and appreciation of input
Psychological safety	The mediator through which inclusiveness works
Status and professional diversity	The barrier inclusiveness must overcome
Engagement in improvement	The outcome – participation in change and quality work

METHODOLOGY

Field studies of diverse health-care teams – where status gaps between professions are stark – testing how leader behaviour shapes safety and participation.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CRITIQUE

Pinpoints the specific, learnable leader behaviour that produces safety in mixed-status teams – a practical lever, not just a condition to hope for. The critique: the research is rooted in health care, though the mechanism generalises well.

A NOTE ON EVIDENCE

A note on the evidence: psychological safety and leader inclusiveness (Edmondson, Nembhard) rest on solid empirical research, whereas the five-dysfunctions model (Lencioni) is a practitioner framework – valuable as a shared language but not validated. Note too the most common misuse: psychological safety is not comfort or the lowering of standards, but the safety to take risks *in service of* high performance.

Synthesis

Theorist	Focus	Key construct	Evidence
Edmondson	The enabling condition	Psychological safety	Strong; field and survey
Lencioni	The cost of its absence	Five dysfunctions	Practitioner; not validated
Detert	Why people stay silent	Fear and futility	Strong; mixed methods
Nembhard	The leadership lever	Leader inclusiveness	Strong; health-care field

FOR THE OPERATOR

Safety and voice decide whether trust becomes candour: psychological safety enables interpersonal risk (Edmondson), its absence triggers the dysfunction cascade (Lencioni), silence is driven by fear and futility (Detert), and inclusive leadership builds safety across status lines (Nembhard). For the operator, the deliverable is concrete – an environment where people report errors, dissent and speak up – engineered through leader behaviour, not exhortation. That closes the Trust and Psychological Safety series, and connects directly to execution's rule that cadence without candour is mere ritual.