

# Reduce the Risk of Ridicule



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The topic of psychological safety at work has been of interest to me since I read *The Fearless Organization* and *Teaming*, two terrific books by Harvard Business School professor Amy C. Edmondson. Both books present the many relevant reasons why leaders should create environments that are safe for personal risk-taking. I've just finished reading a book offering a practical bridge from the 'why' to the 'how': *The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety: Defining the Path to Inclusion and Innovation*, by Timothy R. Clark.

Clark defines psychological safety as a condition in which you feel:

1. included,
2. safe to learn,
3. safe to contribute, and
4. safe to challenge the status quo—all without fear of being embarrassed, marginalized, or punished in some way.

He reminds us that that “An organization that expects employees to bring their whole selves to work should engage the whole employee.” According to Clark, this type of work environment isn't just a trend or a perk of employment. It's a practice that is gaining traction and precedent as an expectation. He forecasts, “In the twenty-first century, high psychological safety will increasingly become a term of employment, and organizations that don't support it will bleed out their top talent.”

At NRMC, we coach consulting clients to cultivate psychological safety to ensure that team members at all levels of a nonprofit can lift up their concerns about present and future dangers as well as opportunities. Yet in many organizations, staff worry that discussing the 'what ifs' of organizational life will lead to negative, personal consequences, such as:

- The perception of not being a team player
- Being labeled a negative Nancy/Ned
- Exclusion from teams and conversations about bold moves, innovation, and risk-taking

In rare instances, we have been told that staff fear that their jobs could be on the line if they speak up to raise the alarm about possible danger, lack of preparedness, or the potential for serious harm to people, assets, or the organization's stellar reputation.

## The View is Clearer with a Team's Perspective

Clark cites the 'speed of change outside an organization' (what our team refers to as the Risk Landscape) as a compelling invitation to extend our 'field of vision.' How? He writes, "Increasingly we will not look upon our leaders as having the answers: we will look upon them as those who can draw out those answers by tapping the creative potential of the organization." Answers to the toughest challenges your organization faces currently and in the future may be discoverable: within the minds and imaginations of your *current team*.

How does 'the risk of ridicule' cloud that view? Clark explains that "Risk and fear are closely associated with formal authority. People will want to flatter you and not upset, disturb or ruffle you. They will filter what they feed you." The hard truth that many leaders need to grasp is that the fear of ridicule, resentment, and rejection may be at the core of why people on your team don't speak the difficult truths you need to hear.

## Make Status an Artificial Constraint

Clark offers a handful of noteworthy tips for inspiring psychological safety and banishing the risk of ridicule. Each tip is a way to "make your organization culturally flat even though it's not structurally flat." Here's our take on these sensible suggestions:

1. Rotate the role of team leader; for example, present everyone on your team an opportunity to lead team meetings.
2. Double-down on learning by making it a regular event: rotate responsibility for leading short training segments and make learning part of most team gatherings.
3. When soliciting views about risk, risk management, or any controversial or difficult topic, make sure everyone on the team has weighed in—and you've considered their views—before you share your opinion. Remember to never follow-up an idea with 'but'; try 'and' or 'tell me more!' Build on what colleagues have shared or suggested. Adding to the conversation is more effective than launching into an explanation of why the idea isn't feasible.
4. When sharing your own ideas or solutions, display no pride of authorship; the goal is to reach the best possible decision for your mission; welcome the dismantling of your proposal and don't gloat if your idea prevails.

On the last topic, Clark writes: "Sometimes you will see something they can't. Sometimes they will see something you can't. If you jealously guard your own ideas, they will do the same thing."

Studies on engagement in the workplace and bad boss behaviors tell a worrisome tale. In their article "The Price of Incivility," in the January-February 2013 edition of the *Harvard Business Review*, Christine Porath and Christine Pearson found that 98 percent of workers have experienced uncivil behavior at work, and half reported being treated rudely at work at least once a week. "That couldn't happen here!" you say? When you dismiss a colleague's idea, or ridicule what you perceive to be excessive worry about 'unknown unknowns,' you slowly but surely reduce their motivation to bring their best selves to work. Team members who don't feel safe being fully present and have undue worry about raising concerns may be more inclined to bury issues that impact strategic priorities, instead of offering up innovative solutions. Too much energy goes into the worry and not enough is left in the tank for creativity.

Deciding to shift cultural norms to foster psychological safety is easy. Certainly, the advantages are compelling. However, establishing new tenets takes dedicated effort and time to assimilate policy and behavior into an authentic culture. Often, team members who have previously felt the effects of ridicule will need time to see and experience the demonstrable evidence that a new culture has permeated the organization. Consider these questions:

- What changes will you make to ensure that psychological safety becomes habitual?
- How will you invite your team to become innovators and challengers?
- Do you strive to be agnostic about title, position, or authority when someone challenges the status quo?
- What constraints does your organization have that are hindering the perception of a culturally flat organizational structure?

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