

Announcer:

Welcome to The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast, a podcast all about leadership, change and personal growth. The goal? To help you lead like never before in your church or in your business. And now, your host, Carey Nieuwhof.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, hey everybody, and welcome to episode 430 of the podcast. My name is Carey Nieuwhof, and I hope our time together today helps you lead like never before. I have been looking forward to this episode for a while. I have Amy Edmondson on the podcast today and we talk about a concept that if you study management and leadership at all, you've probably heard of, psychological safety. Adam Grant talks about it a lot. And the originator of that theory or the popularizer of it is Amy Edmondson, and we talk all about that today. So if you want to build trust on your teams, if you want to have employees who enjoy working for you for a long time, well, listen up. And if you're in a company and you're wondering what's wrong with the culture, well, I think you're going to enjoy it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

This episode is brought to you by Lead a Better Team. It's my new course that will help you build trust, efficiency and productivity into your team without having to micromanage people. You can get it at leadabetterteam.com, and we do talk about culture there. And by BELAY, you can get a free download of their resource, 13 Ways to Build a High Performing Remote Team, by texting CAREY to 55123.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Amy Edmondson is the Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School, a chair established to support the study of human interactions that lead to the creation of successful enterprises and make society better. She's been recognized by the biannual Thinkers50 global ranking of management thinkers since 2011, and was recently ranked number three in 2019. She has received the organization's Breakthrough Idea Award in 2019, their talent award in 2017.

Carey Nieuwhof:

In addition to many academic accomplishments, her most recent book, *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth* has been translated into 11 different languages. And before her academic career, she was director of research at the Pecos River Learning Center where she worked on transformational change in large companies. And prior to that, she was the chief engineer, architect inventor at Buckminster Fuller, and her book of Fuller Explanation clarifies Fuller's mathematical contributions for a non-technical audience.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow, it's quite a bio, isn't it? And we have a great conversation too. The other thing where we started in this was I heard a TED Talk of hers, I think, where she talked about how to build a high performance team when you're pulling people together ad hoc. For example, think about a movie. Those people haven't made movies together for decades or years. And often you bring different actors, directors, crew together, and you create an academy, award-winning film. Like how you do that? So we go there and all over the place. Teams are pretty close to my heart because you know what I hear about, like if you read my inbox, as we hear from thousands of you every single year, you know what you tell us? It's like, "I don't like my job and I don't like my job because of the team."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Or we hear from frustrated managers who are like, "I do not know how to get more out of my team. I feel like firing everybody, or I just can't get them to perform at the level I want them to perform in." So before we jump into today's content, let's talk about that. When you have a team that isn't performing at the top level, they not only cost your organization time and money. They take away from the time you should be spending with your top performers. Now, if you want to reduce the impact on your organization, I can help. I've got an on-demand course called Lead a Better Team online on-demand and it gives you proven strategies and behaviors that build trust, efficiency and productivity into your team and you don't have to micromanage them anymore. In fact, they will, at the end of Lead a Better Team, own responsibility for better results.

Carey Nieuwhof:

How do you get there? Well, if you want to get there, it's time to act now because you're moving into a brand new season. The fall is coming, you know it's a new world. Get your team ready. Enroll in my course, Lead a Better Team, by going to leadabetterteam.com. Every single product I offer comes with a 30 day full money back guarantee. So check it out. Do the course. If it doesn't help, just let us know. We'll give you your money back. That's leadabetterteam.com.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And speaking of productivity, today's work environment, as you know, is different than it was a year ago. And for many, it shows no sign of returning to how things have always been done. So, how do you gauge productivity in the midst of this? Productivity can actually soar for a hybrid workforce. The key is for you as a leader to learn how to equip your team to maximize their productivity to maximize results. Our friends at BELAY understand this completely. They're the incredible organization that is revolutionizing productivity with our virtual assistants, bookkeeping and social media strategist services for growing organization. They have a free resource for you. It's called 13 Ways to Build a High Performing Remote Team, and it's free for all of our podcast listeners. You can get this download today by just texting my name, CAREY to 55123. Thanks so much for our partners. Hey, we vet them carefully. We believe in them. Hope you'll check them out. And in the meantime, let's jump into my conversation with Amy C. Edmondson.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Amy, welcome to the podcast.

Amy Edmondson:

Great to be here.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. You've spent a lot of your career studying teams, and I thought that was kind of interesting. Almost everyone listening to this podcast is either leading a team or is part of a team. But you really made me think like every time you watch a movie, you watch a movie and it could be like one of the best movies of all time and these people haven't worked together for 20 years. Like it's this ensemble of technical people, directors, producers, actors, who haven't worked together before. You mention the same thing happens in healthcare. First responders, it's a whole bunch of strangers who kind of come together. What are some keys to getting relative strangers to function as a team? I thought that was

really interesting because I always try to build a team and like keep all the people I know. But that's like a really fascinating dynamic.

Amy Edmondson:

First of all, I think it is I'm not against the stable team. If you've got a stable team, more power to you. It can be an incredibly powerful thing to have people you know well, you can sort of second guess each other's moves, you know what skills they have. But I have been observing the workplace for many years. For example, healthcare delivery being one setting or movies as you just raised where it turns out you just don't have that option. Like it or not, you're going to be working with people you haven't worked with before in shifting configurations in an ongoing way. I call that teaming, to distinguish it from the stable team or the entity of a team, to say these are the processes of a team, the activities of a team.

Amy Edmondson:

I think to do it well, like all teams, you have to clarify early and often what it is we're trying to do. What's the mission? And then you've got to quickly get up to speed with these relative strangers. That doesn't mean you need to know everything about their childhood or their professional history even. You just want to know a couple of things like what are you passionate about? What are you trying to do here? And what are you up against? What are you worried about, and what do you bring? What skills, what resources do you bring? I think if you have the answer to those three questions, you're often running. You're prepared to team.

Amy Edmondson:

And of course you have to just, this puts a real premium on communication. You got to stay in touch. You've got to keep checking in. You've got to keep especially checking the impact that you're having on others and giving them feedback about the impact they're having on you and on the task.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. It's really interesting to me because I've always worked in a more stable team, normal team, whether that was a law firm, a church, or now my own staff. You kind of hire people you hope to hang onto them for years. That's sort of the goal when you're hiring.

Amy Edmondson:

You're the leader, that's going to happen.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, exactly. But there is that like a lot of leaders and they say 2021 is a year of turnover. And so we've seen an awful lot of people who are leaving because of geography, family, post COVID. It's like I'm going to make a change. I know that's been a frustration for a lot of leaders where when they have high churn or some leaders I'm sure are in like restaurants or that kind of thing where turnover happens an awful lot. What are some keys to building trust quickly on a team? You mentioned a few, but is there anything deeper on that? Like if you've got a whole bunch of new people on your team, how do you build rapport?

Amy Edmondson:

How do you build rapport? To me, I always want people to start with the mission. Start with the tasks, start with the work itself, the big why of bringing us together, because it's... I think you can get bogged down on the interpersonal. I study the interpersonal. I'm a big fan of the interpersonal. But the interpersonal works better when we know what we're doing and why and we're passionate about that. Because then when things aren't going well, it's not about you. It's not me saying, "You're inadequate," in some way. It's me saying, "I don't think that worked for the project and here's why." This puts a real premium on interpersonal skills, which I think is no more or less than learning how to tell the truth from a place of humility. This is what I see.

Amy Edmondson:

Truthfully I'm worried about this or that, or I'm wondering about this or that, or I have a question or I have a different view, and that has to come from a place of recognizing that my reality is just a partial reality. I don't know everything. I'm not omniscient. So I'm going to tell you what I think and feel, but I'm going to recognize as I do so that I only have part of the picture. You have the other part.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Pat Lencioni has been on this podcast numerous times and we've talked about this, but I'd love your take. What do most dysfunctional teams seem to have in common? If I'm consulting you, helped me build a really bad team. What am I doing?

Amy Edmondson:

Remind everybody that they're in it for themselves. That their own career comes first, their own personal needs and preferences come first and they should not give an inch based on what other people might need or want. So, you see where I'm going here.

Carey Nieuwhof:

The whole I'm in it for myself.

Amy Edmondson:

The number one thing is a kind of me versus we attitude. And I don't mean that in a moralistic way. It's actually quite natural. It is as a human being, we instinctively have our needs, we want the met. We have our goals, we want to achieve them. And it's quite easy inadvertently to lose sight of the fact that other people do also. They have needs, they have goals. It's not that I think good teams completely have no individuality at all. I'm not saying that good teams have no individuality or that the needs of the individuals don't matter. They do. But the team goal has to come first, because ultimately that feeds back to help each individual. If we do great work on this team, our careers, our needs, our emotional needs will be better served.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's true. You spend a lot of your time at work. Okay. What else do I do if I want to build a dysfunctional team? What are some dysfunctions of teams?

Amy Edmondson:

Make sure they don't learn. I mean, they don't recognize that other people with other backgrounds and maybe other areas of expertise might see the world differently. And so, fail to recognize that we could

each have unique information. And so if I sort of come to a team assuming that you know what I know because it's reality, it's basic, then I will fail to share the unique things that only I bring and you'll fail to share the unique things that only you bring. And so we will be prey to what's called the common information effect, which was studied by a psychologist named Garold Stasser at first. And it was that when diverse teams come together with lots of unique information, they still tend to spend most of their time discussing the common information or the things that all of us knew going in. So with the result that they're wasting the potential synergy. Think about how much knowledge that team had. Well, only a tiny sliver of it actually came out.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That is new information for me. I hadn't heard about that study. So what you're saying is there's sort of a viewpoint maybe as a boss that I would bring to a dialogue or a manager would bring to a dialogue, and that sort of becomes a dominant narrative. And meanwhile, you're leaving all this wisdom of on the table or off the table.

Amy Edmondson:

You could imagine a bunch of circles, Person A, Person B, Person C, Person D, and we each have all this information and skills to offer, but very naturally as human beings, one of the things we do is we find we start talking about something and we immediately glom onto something we have in common. And then we spend our time talking about that and we agree wholeheartedly. "Oh yeah, that's the way it is." And then boom, the time's over, and we have failed to share that information that was unique that could have enriched the project. You haven't taught me something I don't know and I haven't taught you something I don't know.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So is there like a prompting question or something like that that can open that up so you don't just end following the common path?

Amy Edmondson:

I think this is a framing question or a framing task where you say, "Hey, we've all come together with different backgrounds," likely different knowledge to make a decision about such and such or to brainstorm ideas about a new product or whatever it is, to plan the holiday party, I don't know. But whatever it is, "Let's go around and share some of the thoughts we have about this issue or the experiences we've had with respect to this issue." So a deliberate treasure hunt, if you will, that is framed as an opportunity to pull things together and that in fact does just that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Anything else you see in dysfunctional teams?

Amy Edmondson:

Well, of course, a big one for me is that people have ideas, and this is separate from the common information effect, which is just a kind of very natural tendency to glom on to the things we had in common. But in teams, very often people just they have ideas, they have questions, they have concerns and they don't share them. They don't want to be unpopular. They don't want to look bad. They don't want to ask a question that they believe they're already supposed to know the answer to. And so they

have what I call low psychological safety. And so, again, the potential synergy, the potential wisdom of that team doesn't get translated into actual wisdom or synergy.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And this is perhaps what you're best known for is the whole concept of psychological safety. You've spent an awful lot of your career developing that over time. I was sharing with you, we had Adam Grant on a few months ago and you and him have talked about this publicly and he's a big proponent. For leaders who may not be familiar with that term, what is psychological safety?

Amy Edmondson:

Psychological safety is a belief that the context is safe for interpersonal risks, like speaking up about with a question or with an idea or even with a mistake. So it's probably more simply put as a sense of permission for candor. Again, "I can tell it to you straight and I won't be humiliated or made to feel less good about myself as a result."

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. And people are not naturally good at this. Is that sort of the thesis, like most workplaces are not psychologically safe?

Amy Edmondson:

That's right. In fact, that's the thing I think is least well recognized or understood. I think recently there's been a tendency to think of psychological safety as something that any reasonably healthy workplace would have. A good enough workplace would have psychological safety. Actually, I see it as a more rare and kind of higher standard.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What does that feel like? As I've been exploring your work, I look back and I'm like, "You know what? Probably 20 years ago I was not a very psychologically-safe boss." It was like, "Don't bring me bad news," right or wrong about that. And really it's sometimes a phrase I've used as I've learned in this area is, "No, you have permission to speak freely, whereas don't just tell me what I want to hear." But then people don't even believe that they can speak freely either. So can you paint maybe a picture of a psychologically unhealthy workplace and then paint a picture for us for what it feels like to be in a healthy place.

Amy Edmondson:

I think in a psychologically unsafe workplace, you hear a lot of good news. You hear a lot of progress reports. You have people telling you of their successes or their KPIs are being met beautifully all the time. You don't hear a lot of people saying, "Wow, this isn't going very well." Or, "I need help with this." Or, "We've had an unexpected delay with that product launch." Or, "I'm not sure if this is right. Can I check in with you on this?" So the ratio of kind of happy talk to, "I need help, I have a problem," talk is out of whack given that we're in a volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous world. I mean, if you think about the dynamism, the uncertainty, the complexity of the environment in which most organizations are operating, it just can't be the case that everything's good news. That's not logical. So if you're hearing too much happy talk, it's probably an indication you're not hearing enough of the straight talk.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, I'm so glad you clarified that because I think in the popular imagination, it would be easy to say psychological safety is you don't have the ranting boss just throwing things. But what you're saying is it would be easy to deceive yourself as a leader going, "No, everything's great in my church, my company, because look, these people come in with great news all the time. Everything's awesome. Everybody's happy. So we really don't have any problems. So I don't know what you're talking about." But underneath that, you're saying, "Oh no, you have no idea what's really going on."

Amy Edmondson:

I mean, so many people nowadays have the experience because of the speed of change, maybe because they are in growing companies or maybe getting promoted where they're just barely hanging on. I mean, I don't mean that in a sort of unhealthy way, but that they're being stretched, they're being challenged, which by the way is a good feeling. But if you're being challenged, if you're in a stretch assignment, it's probably things you don't know. So how comfortable do you feel asking questions, asking for help? And I think there's a kind of mismatch between our mental models of if you're a good employee, you're supposed to just know what to do and do it and do it well, and our reality which says, "No, if you're a good employee, you're a fast learner." And if you're a fast learner, that means things are going wrong and you're learning from them. And then things are going better and you're learning from that too.

Amy Edmondson:

So we can think about a spectrum let's say from 1-10 where 1-3 would be a truly toxic team. Maybe there's belittling and bullying and it's a pretty miserable place. But then what you were just describing was that zone in the middle, let's say from 3-6 or maybe even 3-7 where things seem to be going just fine. People seem to be happy and engaged in working hard. And so, oh, it must be fine. What's left on the table? What value isn't being tapped into because you're not at 7, 8, 9, 10 where people are just so much more focused on the work, on the goal, on each other that they're not worrying so much about, "Oh, how am I doing and how will I look if I say this or say that?"

Carey Nieuwhof:

How do you cultivate? Give us a picture. Maybe we'll start here, give us a picture of what a psychologically safe conversation would be where let's say I'm not the boss and I'm like, "Wow, we are really missing the boat on this project, this is what I'm thinking, this is what I'm talking to my spouse about at night." Like, "Oh, I don't know how he doesn't see it." But you're afraid to bring that to work. What does it start to look like when you're in a safe environment where you have permission to speak freely?

Amy Edmondson:

A lot of energy, a lot of what I would call interpersonal risk taking. Like, "This might be a terrible idea, but let me give it a try." Or, "I've never done this before, do any of you have experienced this where you could help me?" So you be hearing people saying the kinds of things that we don't say when we're worried about looking good. So you'd hear there's energy, there's engagement, there's some laughter because we're going to step in it at times. We're going to make mistakes, we're going to hear about those mistakes. I stumbled into this whole phenomenon in the first place by noticing real differences across patient care units in the same hospitals in just the frequency and willingness to talk about error. These are very good hospitals. It didn't seem likely to me that they were just making more errors over

there versus over there. These are all highly selected clinicians in very excellent organizations. So it's like, "Well, what's going on here? Why are they talking about errors and they're not?" I didn't believe it would be because they just don't make them.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And if I remember right, that research, Amy, was that what became known as the psychologically safe workplaces reported a higher error rate than unsafe workplaces, which is weird. In other words, excellent... Yeah, okay.

Amy Edmondson:

Right, it's weird. Exactly. And we've seen that in other settings too. In the aftermath of that work, which was early days of the patient safety research and patient safety efforts, people in hospitals started implementing patient safety initiatives. And sometimes one of the main policy things that would get implemented would be a new policy called blame-free reporting where, "You've got to report, you've got to tell us. Don't worry. There won't be consequences for reporting." By the way, military has this too. The military takes it a step further where they say, "There will be consequences for not reporting. If we find out something went wrong in let's say a training flight and you didn't talk about it in a timely way, then there'll be consequences." But there's never consequences for reporting the errors quickly because a team can learn from them.

Amy Edmondson:

So in this one study I did where they put in blame-free reporting, like December, there it is, all of a sudden the safety incident reports start going way up and it's this strange signal because you see that and it's like, "Wait, is that bad news? Does that mean all of a sudden there's all these bad things happening in the hospital that weren't happening before?" Probably not. In fact, it's good news because we're talking about them and when we can talk about them, we can catch, prevent and improve our processes so that they don't happen again.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Right. What I'm picking up from your research and your work in this field is you want to create the kind of environment as a boss where people feel free to tell you the truth. Does that like all across the board, truth about your performance as a boss, truth about how the organization's really doing, not having to cover their butt and like, "Uh-oh, better hide that one before somebody finds out." Like just that radical candor and progress toward the mission, is that getting in the field of psychological safety?

Amy Edmondson:

Absolutely. That's it. I love Kim Scott's work. I love Radical Candor. I sometimes think the word radical might scare people because it might sound like brutal candor, which I don't think we're ever going to do too well as humans with brutality. We don't want to be brutal.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's a good point.

Amy Edmondson:

Maybe compassionate candor. "I'm going to do the best I can, but I'm coming from my own perspective. I could be missing something. I'm almost certainly missing something." So it's humble candor. It's compassionate candor.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So you're reading the mail already of thousands of leaders who are here and some of them are realizing, "Uh-oh, I don't think we're a very safe place psychologically." Speak to bosses. Bosses are realizing like, "I only want good news. Don't tell me this stuff. Sometimes I get defensive if people bring me stuff I don't want to hear, or I never really ask for feedback." I've seen that too. It's like, "You can't really give me feedback, just praise. Like if I'm doing a good job, let me know." How do you change that as a boss? How do you change the temperature?

Amy Edmondson:

First, hashtag human. Recognize this is part of the human condition. We all prefer praise to criticism. That's okay. That's just a given. But we're willing to learn to handle the criticism and the bad news because our aspirations are greater than just maintaining the status quo. And so why would I be willing to take criticism? Because I want to be better. I want to be better tomorrow than I am today. Why, as a boss, am I willing to hear bad news even though it's not fun? Because I want us to be better. I want us to figure it out. Problem solving is a team sport. Problem detection is quite ably done by individuals.

Amy Edmondson:

One of my least favorite sort of management sayings that I think many people think are good sayings for obvious reasons is, "Don't come to me with problems, come to me with solutions." And of course the intent of that well-known saying is, "Use your head, think, and be constructive and be productive." And of course, we all want that. But what's the message you think that people really hear, "Don't come to me with problems." And people are good at seeing problems because they're close to the customer or close to the work. But the solutions may actually require a team to come together. The solutions are often not local. You have to get the coordination of that group over there and the cooperation of that group over there. So, when you inadvertently send the message, "Don't come to me with problems until you've really got at least a partial solution going," you're harming the organization because that solution is going to be better developed if we work on it together.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Are there some steps, like do you just walk into a meeting and say, "Hey, I listened to this podcast or maybe they read your book and it's like, guess what, we're not a very psychologically safe workplace." Like if you come to that realization as a leader, how do you usher in a different climate that people come to trust?

Amy Edmondson:

I've identified three categories of behavior. This is all words really, but the three categories of leadership action are in a sense before, during and after, although that's an oversimplification. But the before part is setting the stage. And setting the stage to me consists of two things. One, reminding of purpose early and often. We at Harvard Business School, we had a prior dean a couple of deans ago, Kim Clark, who would start every faculty meeting with our mission as a school. You'd say, "We're here to educate leaders who make a difference in the world." Now, don't you think the faculty already knew the mission? Of course they did. But somehow starting the meeting that way sort of makes it nobler. It puts

you on that same page. It makes you think less about yourself and more about why this matters. Again, why this matters to the world what we do, why we work hard, because of that mission. So kind of periodic reminding of people of the excitement and the importance of what we do for whom we do it is part of it.

Amy Edmondson:

But the other part, which is much less well-recognized I would say, I call it framing the work, which is really about getting people on the same page about the nature of the work we're doing. Is this high volume well understood playbook kind of work where we're excited about excellence, we're excited about six sigma, we're excited about finding those small imperfections so that we can correct them immediately and deliver only perfect products to our customers? Or is this complex system work like supply chains or patient care delivery? Or is it innovation work? And as we move toward innovation work and as we move from routine work to more innovation work, we are encountering much higher levels of uncertainty. So, why does that matter? Well, because if there's uncertainty, guess what, things are going to go wrong. We're not going to know how to do something. And so we have to distinguish between kind of executing unknown formulas and discovering new formulas and everything in between.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Where the margin for error is going to be much, much higher. That's a really good point.

Amy Edmondson:

And just reminding people, "Guess what, things will go wrong." What I say is that a good framing statement, like Julie Morath, chief operating officer at Children's Hospital and major leader in the patient safety movement would say all the time, "Healthcare delivery by its very nature is a complex error-prone system." Now, it's kind of a gloomy thing to say. But no, because what she's saying is, "Guess what, things will go wrong. The only question is, are we going to hear about them in time to help our patients avoid harm?" But if you go into before she came in, most people in the hospital, like so many other hospitals, thought about when something goes wrong, there's a culprit. When something goes wrong, there's someone who's obviously just not as competent as they need to be.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Who is going to lose their job?

Amy Edmondson:

Right. So you've got to reframe it from the default model, many of which are kind of inherited from the industrial era and are no longer serving us. We have to reframe the nature of reality or the nature of the project to the messy reality it really is. "No one's ever done anything like this before. And if no one's ever done anything like this before, we're going to be trying things out. Some of them are going to work, some of them aren't." So I'm framing the work in a way that basically says, "Your voice is mission critical." You might say things like, "All of us are smarter than any of us." Whatever your favorite thing to emphasize, do it often, because it just reminds people.

Amy Edmondson:

I think the number one result here is to have people genuinely understand why candor might be an acceptable behavior because keep in mind, again, the default is it's not. The default is, "You're better

safe than sorry." The default is, "Nobody ever got fired for silence." So, what you have to do is kind of sell the reason why this reality that we all face together is one that's going to require us to be speaking up candidly. And then you invite. The second thing is super quick. That was one.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Okay. This is the third part, yeah.

Amy Edmondson:

The second thing is sort of be proactive, ask good questions. Master the art of the good question. "What are you seeing out there? Who has a different perspective?" Like the open ended but focused on the topic at hand kind of question. The what questions, the who questions, "flesh that out for me" questions. And so you're inviting it. You're basically saying, "I'm all ears."

Carey Nieuwhof:

I'll often say, "What are we not seeing? What am I not seeing?"

Amy Edmondson:

What are we not seeing? That's it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's a good question.

Amy Edmondson:

You might even say things like, "I've never done anything like this before, I'd love to have your thoughts." You're just, you're issuing the invitation explicitly. And then finally let's say you start hearing a bunch of stupid stuff or unhappy stuff or bad news stuff. How do you respond? And I like to say, "Respond productively." Well, what does that mean? Well, that means fundamentally, appreciative and forward-looking. Appreciative might be, "Thanks for stepping up to come up with some ideas." Or, "Thanks for that clear line of sight," whatever it is. It's a genuine statement. No happy talk, no fake talk, but it's a genuine statement. Say it's bad news, let's say we have a product delay. You say, "Thanks for that clear line of sight."

Amy Edmondson:

And then forward looking, "How can I help?" So that makes something that was for the other person almost certainly challenging, almost certainly they would like to be anywhere but here bringing you this bad news, so you take something that's inherently a not fun experience and you turn it into a good experience. You turn it into an experience where there's like, "Oh." They're sort of coming away thinking, "That wasn't so bad and I got help with the plan forward." So life goes on and we're mastering some of this novelty together.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, that's super helpful for the leaders who realize, "Okay, I need to become more psychologically safe and I've taken a few notes." But I imagine there's even more people listening who are not the boss who are going, "But I am in a psychologically unsafe environment and if I speak up, I get kicked out of offices

or the boss doesn't want to hear it or my manager just isn't open to that." What advice do you have for that person?

Amy Edmondson:

I almost want to step back for a second and say I suspect that more people believe that to be the case than is actually the case. We believe we can't speak up. We believe people don't want to hear from us or only want to hear good news from us when in fact we haven't tested it. So I want to respond to that by saying, "Test it. Don't take wild-eyed risks that you're really terrified to take, but take smaller risks. Test the gradient, see what happens." And I think more often than not, it won't be so bad. And then you're sort of inching forward. And I want to say I recognize and I think everybody recognizes that the manager or the boss's behavior has a greater influence on the climate of the team than a team member's or a peer's behavior or your own behavior, let's say, if you're not the boss.

Amy Edmondson:

But do not underestimate the positive impact that you can have. In fact, the same three leadership skills. And keep in mind that leadership is different than leader. Like leader is a role, leadership is behavior that influences others in a positive way. So some of those same leadership behaviors can be done by anyone, any team member. Calling attention to the novelty of this project, anyone can do that. You can do that. You say, "Well, have any of you ever done anything like this before? I haven't." Call attention to it. "This is like a really cool opportunity, but we're going to certainly face challenges along the way." You can do things that frame the work.

Amy Edmondson:

You can also, and this to me is the most, I should start here because it's so powerful. Any time you ask a fellow team member a question, a genuine question, "How do you see it?" You're, A, conveying respect, and B, giving them that little moment of psychological safety because you've said, "I want your voice." And then they speak because it's very awkward when someone asks you a direct question to remain silent. So they speak, you listen. And in that moment, you're further demonstrating the respect and you're listening, so you're learning, and those kinds of things get reciprocated. And so it can bubble up. Unless you have a really difficult dysfunctional manager, I think anyone on the team can start to create let's just call it a more learning oriented culture where just there's more deliberate curiosity, deliberate ideation, where you're just almost treating each day as that opportunity to learn from each other and do good work.

Carey Nieuwhof:

No, that sounds like great advice because you can always find psychological safety with a coworker, with your own team. You can build that with the people that you happen to be leading even if you're not at the top of the organization. I'm thinking about the leader who wants to walk in and tell the boss what's really going on, and you're not used to that kind of candor, even a gentle gracious candor in their organization. Do you have a couple of strategies on like a good way to try that without being thrown out of the office or fired creating that fearless organization you write about? Like what would you say if I'm walking into my boss's office and I'm going to give feedback, what's a good way to frame it?

Amy Edmondson:

I would say, first, make a few notes before you go in there. Get your sort of thoughts together because this is hard. You could think of this as like Olympic level athletics. This is not something you do casually

or in your sleep. You want to have thought it through and not because I am trying to convey that power differences matter, but that giving feedback to anyone, a peer or a subordinate, a manager, those are all challenging tasks. So jot down a few notes. And then be as concrete as you can about what you have observed. Not what you think about it, not what your opinion of it is, but what you've observed and what impact do you think it's having on the project or on the work.

Amy Edmondson:

The shortcoming or the improvement opportunity is a gem. Your intentions are to be helpful and you are motivated by the work. This isn't you trying to fix another human being, that never works. This is you observing some dynamics or actions or responses or what have you, that might be, might be place of humility, harming the progress of the team. So as concrete as possible, focus on what you observed, what the impact was. And then all important, stop and check in like, "How does that sound?" And sort of try to find out what they're hearing because we're never quite as clear as we mean to be.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. I'm thinking about times where I've had to kind of break the ice with difficult news. Would you open with something like, "Hey, I'm noticing a few things about this project. Would you be open to some feedback on it?"

Amy Edmondson:

I mean, you don't want to blindsides them. You want to kind of frame the conversation as one that is going to be difficult for you and might be difficult for them too. "Is now a good time?" "Are you in a place right now where we could talk about some of the challenges that I'm seeing on the project?"

Carey Nieuwhof:

No, that makes a lot of sense. We've got a whole new generation coming into the workplace. Gen Z is now graduating from places like Harvard, moving into the workplace. Are there generational differences in psychological safety? I think I have seen arguments that it's even more important the younger workers are. Any thoughts on that?

Amy Edmondson:

I don't have any systematic data on this and I'd love to get some. I think it's an important question. I suspect there's going to be a lot of variability within Gen Z. I don't mean just the individuals because this is a very contextual phenomenon. It isn't Carey who has psychological safety or who doesn't. It's a context of a particular group, a unit. But I think there's likely to be real differences. Some pockets of just absolute straight talk and others where there's a worry about because as we've been discussing, straight talk and being candid includes a healthy mix of good and bad news and there's some worry, at least for some portions of this generation, where they've never gotten a bad grade and they've gotten a trophy for showing up. And so they might not have the muscles for the healthy failure muscles, if you will. But I'm always wary about generalizing an age group because I think we have such stunning differences in the experiences that people have gone through and the skills that they've learned and the resilience that they've developed.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Do you notice any differences, and you may not want to comment on this, but just you've taught for a number of years now at Harvard, so you've seen... You've probably taught Millennials, you've taught Gen Z now, are you seeing differences from decade to decade, half decade to half decade?

Amy Edmondson:

I'm probably going to get in trouble here, but there has been an inexorable trend toward let's just say a desire on the part of the students that we not give them quite so much homework or that... So they are both very eager for feedback, like that's a healthy thing. They'll come in, they'll get feedback. They want to get better. And at the same time, they also want this experience here at Harvard Business School to be just super energizing and super fun all the time and that doesn't always include reading three 14-page cases tonight and running some numbers and all the rest. So there's been a kind of steady, I don't know, I always think of it as a decline in tolerance for the workload, I suppose.

Carey Nieuwhof:

On the workload, I didn't go to Harvard Business School, but going to Osgoode Hall Law School, I can tell you I still remember admin lawn. It's like I shutter when I think about 800 pages of case law and like it was-

Amy Edmondson:

Right. And it's 11:30 and you haven't even started to prepare for your third class yet.

Carey Nieuwhof:

How do you navigate that with students? Do you end up just saying, "You're right, we'll reduce the workload." Do you talk them into that?

Amy Edmondson:

I think there's a kind of collective trend to reduce it because there's this strange thing in academia now, I think this is somewhat new, to view the students as the customers. I think historically the future employers were the customers. We wanted to give them the very best products. We still do. Of course, we still want that very much. But there is a desire to have the students be happy. And I'm sure from your law school experience, you wouldn't report that you were happy the whole time, but you learned a lot.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Oh no, we were not happy at all. I can tell you that. It was tough. I'm glad I did it, but man, it was brutal at times.

Amy Edmondson:

Yeah. And at times where you just thought, "I don't think I can do this. I hate this. I can't wait for the weekend."

Carey Nieuwhof:

I hate this, but it was like, The bar is here and if you want to pass and you want a degree from this institution, this is what you have to do." Most people adapt and they figure it out and that turned out to be a really good training for life in my case.

Amy Edmondson:

I mean, I think you feel so good about yourself when you have seen the mountain, climbed it. Didn't think you could, but you climbed it. And then it's like, "Wow, yeah, I did do that. I rose to the occasion with my friends."

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's a good law school and I'm proud of it because I had to work so hard to get that. Like harder than my undergrad, harder than seminary. Not that seminar was a breeze. But like relatively speaking, it's like, "Okay, that means something." I mean, it shaped me, it shaped my work habits, it shaped my resilience, it shaped all kinds of things. And it was, yeah, could they have done things better? Sure. They could have done things better. But yeah, I hear you.

Amy Edmondson:

We're talking about challenge right now. It's like we've come around to it, which is kind of the other part. I talk a lot about psychological safety because that's what I've been studying. And so that comes out in the foreground. But psychological safety is clearly not enough. It's not a recipe for excellence. I think of it as a means to excellence in a complex, fast changing world. But I think of the optimal state as high psychological safety, high challenge, because then you've got an ambitious goal, you've got something exciting, you care about it. Not quite sure you're going to be able to pull this off, but you do pull it off and you pull it off in part because you're able to speak up and ask for help.

Amy Edmondson:

You're able to sort of find and catch and correct errors quickly. You're able to share wacky ideas and then fine tune them until they're better. So that space where you have both real challenge, really engaged by that challenge, and you're not so tied up in knots of, "How do I look? How do I come across?" You're in fact just willing to say it like it is. And that's a very powerful domain.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. And that's one of the criticisms that you've addressed in the past about psychological safety is without high challenge, it's kind of meaningless because, again, you end up picking apart something that's going nowhere and having candor for no purpose. On the other hand, if I read this right, if you only have high challenge and people are terrified of missing the goal, you can create up a culture of fear.

Amy Edmondson:

Right. And then they're terrified and they don't ask for help and they don't report errors or things, and then things go spiraling out of control and you don't even know it's happening. So a lot of valuable time is lost. So this is one of the things. I think we were talking earlier about leaders who don't know that they might have a psychological safety problem. Everything seems to be fine. And here's the biggest challenge is that you don't know about the value that you left behind. It doesn't announce itself. It doesn't sort of raise its hand and say, "This project could have been 10% faster or 10% better or 10% more lucrative." Just the ideas that didn't get shared, the concerns that didn't get raised are invisible. They don't announce themselves. They're invisible. So you finish, "Here's the project, looks pretty good." And you don't know it could have been that much better. So that's the tricky part. It's like a lot of the sort of okay psychological safety zone doesn't announce itself as a problem.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Interesting. Yeah. And I can see like to flesh this out a little bit, but if you've only got high challenge and you don't have psychological safety, you may have super high turnover because it's just a meat grinder of an environment or people don't feel safe, or you might've been able to accomplish a lot more because you left so much on the table. So you think you're high challenge, but you've actually stunted growth because people aren't bringing their full self. Am I getting that right?

Amy Edmondson:

That's exactly right. And to be honest, I mean, I will say that there's an exception to that, which is if the work is the kind of work that can be done by individuals acting alone, then the psychological safety might not matter so much. If you can do your thing, I do my thing, separate lanes and it's really clear what good looks like, I can be super challenged and not at all psychologically safe and I can execute to spec.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What kind of environments have that, because I'm thinking that doesn't sound like my workplace.

Amy Edmondson:

Not many. Maybe some aspects of sales. But any kind of complex organization, sales are usually a team sport too because you're sort of out there meeting with customers, but then you need to coordinate delivery dates with... Certainly B2B sales are absolutely a team sport. So there aren't too many. I mean, I think the world has gotten more and more interdependent or the work is more and more interdependent over the years.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah. I would say as soon as there was two people on the team and I was solo staff at the very beginning, then you're kind of into that interdependent framework. And I find myself relying very heavily on the feedback of my team these days. What is one question about workplaces, Amy, that you wish more leaders were asking?

Amy Edmondson:

Oh gosh. About workplaces?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Just about, well, most of us either work or we're leading a workplace, so what do you wish we were paying attention to that we're not paying attention to?

Amy Edmondson:

People are at work to help get the mission accomplished, to help get the work done. But they're also there to grow and develop as people. I think when that latter emphasis isn't a part of the workplace, you're more at risk of higher turnover. You're more at risk of not developing your people so that they will be even more valuable in future than they are today. So it's thinking about the workplace as a deliberately developmental place, like Bob Kegan at Harvard Ed school talks about the deliberately developmental organization that is very rare, unusual kinds of organizations where they take seriously the opportunity not only to get the work done, but to grow and develop the people because that's what

we all at some level really yearn for and work is a place where we can and I think must do that. So thinking about how to really recreate your organization or your team as a learning team or a learning organization is probably the question I'd love to see even more attention to.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's a great place to live it. I think John Maxwell piqued that idea in me. He talks about people development, that people live your workplace. Whatever that is, whether that's after a year or a decade or a lifetime. And they're better people, not just better workers, as a result. So that's awesome. Amy, I know people are going to want to dive into your work a little bit more, where can they find you and your research online?

Amy Edmondson:

Well, hbs.edu, our faculty page. Amy Edmondson. I can send you the actual link.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yeah, we'll put it on in the show notes.

Amy Edmondson:

That'd be great. We'll put it in the show notes. So that's where you can see the many publications. I think for more on psychological safety, my book, *The Fearless Organization*, is a really good place to start.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, Amy, thanks for helping us all get a little bit better and creating a lot better workplaces in the process. I really appreciate it. I appreciate you. Thank you.

Amy Edmondson:

Thank you for having me.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, if you want more from that conversation, you can head on over to get the show notes. You can find them at careynieuwhof.com/episode430. Thank you for all your encouragement, for all your support. Man, I just read a letter today from a listener in Germany who discovered us about a year ago. I know we have a goal. I think this podcast is in like, I don't know, 150 countries. How many countries are there? It's in most of them. I think there's like 10 countries where people don't listen to this podcast. But man, so grateful. Thank you. Your encouragement means the world. When you share it on social media, we really appreciate it. And of course, subscribers, you get it all for free week after week after week.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I want to give you a sneak peek into who is coming up. We have Amy Porterfield. So excited for that. I have followed her for years. Going to talk about Netflix's culture with Erin Meyer, Horst Schulze, Chris McChesney, David Allen from *Getting Things Done*, Louie Giglio, and many more. But next time, Chris Hodges, and we get really personal. He talks about a very dark period in his life and here's an excerpt.

Chris Hodges:

And Carey, it just got the best of me. I mean, I wasn't ever going to take my physical life, but I was on the doorstep of ministry suicide. I was done. I was done. I didn't feel like I signed up for all of that and just one of my greatest pet peeves is to be misunderstood and I felt like I was being misunderstood. I took responsibility for what I thought I was responsible for. It didn't seem like it was enough and, I don't know, it just, and it hurt.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's next time on the podcast. And yeah, we're going to go there. I mean, mental health is a significant issue and we just want to help you through this, man. I have been there. I've been in a tough season. Chris has. You can battle back and we want to help you with that. It's time for What I'm Thinking About. Before we get there, I'm going to tell you a little bit about how we're changing it up next month. Starting in August, we're going to be in a brand new segment. Instead of What I'm Thinking About, we're going to do Ask Me Anything About Productivity. I will take your coaching questions from you and answer them live on the show.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So if you have productivity questions about like, "I can't seem to get things done." Or, "How do I handle people who keep interrupting me?" Or, "I'm working all the time, have no family time, what do I do? I have five kids." Whatever your question is about productivity, go to careynieuwhof.com/podcast, click on the "start recording" button under the Ask Me Anything About Productivity segment and record a message there. I will start coaching you on this podcast starting in August. So excited to do that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Hey, make sure you check out Lead a Better Team if you want to build a better team for the fall. You can get my course, Lead a Better Team, at leadabetterteam.com, and BELAY wants to help you to get a free resource called 13 Ways to Build a High Performing Remote Team. Just text CAREY to 55123.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, I want to talk to you a little bit about psychological safety today and some signs that maybe you need to do some work. One sign that you need to do some work on psychological safety is that your workplace is political. I hear about this from so many people in business and even in church leadership. And how do you know that things have gotten political in your organization? Well, maybe decisions rarely get made the way they're supposed to be made. In other words, they're supposed to be made in the meeting, but they happen in the meeting after the meeting, or most decisions happen outside of any agreed upon process. Here's a sign things are political. You can't get a yes without offering something in return. You're always bartering between departments or you have to lobby to be heard. You don't really get heard. That's signs of a political organization and you know what, it's not fun to work there.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Another thing that is a sign that you have some work to do on psychological safety is that what gets said publicly is different from what happen privately. We do live in an age of spin and often you know what gets said from the platform, what's gets said on social media is not actually true, and that creates a real dissonance and a lack of integrity in your organization and your team feels that. In the end, the product that you're selling, sharing, the mission that you're fulfilling should never be the opposite or even different from what actually happened. And so be really careful of the spin. I always think spin is close to sin, don't spin it. When what gets said publicly is different from what happen privately, things get toxic.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Here's another one, and I'll leave it at this today. You deal with conflict by talking about people, not to people. This is a huge culture maker for us at our company and I've led the church that way, I lead my company this way. If somebody comes to me, and listen, if this is part of your culture, it'll never happen. I can't remember the last time it happened. But if somebody came to me with a complaint about let's say Josh, so they're mad at Josh, and first question out of my mouth is, "Have you talked to Josh?" You know what? In an unhealthy culture, the answer is no and I'm like, "Okay, well, you need to go talk to him. You need to leave and go have that conversation." And if they say they can't, now it's different in the case of abuse or where they're not safe.

Carey Nieuwhof:

But if they're just like complaining about Josh, Josh missed a deadline or Josh did this or Josh did that, you know what I would do? I would just say, "No, you go talk to Josh." So one of two things is going to happen. Either, number one, they're going to go talk to Josh and deal with it directly, which is the way it's supposed to happen. Or number two, they're going to say, "Well, it's really not that important. Well, if it's really not that important, why are you coming to me to talk about that?" So we've got to be better at handling conflict.

Carey Nieuwhof:

So those are some ways to create better safety at your workplace, a less toxic environment. Hope that helps. Amy Edmondson's stuff is gold and really grateful for you. Hey, if you haven't done it yet, head on over to careynieuwhof.com/podcast and leave me a voicemail. Okay. I want to start coaching you on productivity. Ask Me Anything About Productivity starting next month. Leave the voicemails there. My team and I will be working through those. Thanks so much for listening and I hope our time together today has helped you lead like never before.

Announcer:

You've been listening to The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast. Join us next time for more insights on leadership, change and personal growth to help you lead like never before.