SUMMARY

THE FEARLESS ORGANIZATION

AMY C. EDMONDSON

Summary of "The Fearless Organization" by Amy C. Edmondson

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Learn how to cultivate a safe and fearless environment in your workplace.

Introduction

Have you ever felt nervous about speaking up at work? Have you ever gotten a bad case of the jitters before delivering a presentation? Maybe it's because you're worried that your co-workers will make fun of you. Maybe you're struggling with imposter syndrome and you feel that your ideas aren't as good as everyone else's. Whatever the reason, most people struggle with some form of fear or nervousness in the workplace at one time or another. And if you've ever experienced it yourself, you already know that it can really hold you back. In fact, fear can keep you from achieving your best performance or from pursuing promotions. It can even keep you so paralyzed that you underperform at work and feel depressed or anxious as a result.

But Amy C. Edmondson believes that it doesn't have to be this way! Her research explores the concept and function of psychological safety and outlines why it's crucial to the development of a successful workplace. By providing practical examples and actionable tips, Edmonson demonstrates the value of psychological safety and what we can do to create a fearless work environment.

Don't be Afraid to Look Silly

Are you afraid of being perceived as silly, weak, or stupid? Don't worry about saying yes if it's true; pretty much everybody in the world struggles with this feeling! And if you think back through your childhood, I bet you can probably pinpoint its origin. At some point in your life, perhaps as a kindergartner or first-grader, you realized that people laugh at you when you get the answer wrong. You realized that people make fun of you if you look different, if you fall down, if you don't have the coolest new things. And although we're supposed to grow out of this anxiety, transcending peer pressure with our rise into adulthood, sometimes we can't quite fully shake it off.

That's probably because most people haven't shaken it off either. The kids who were bullies in kindergarten or in high-school, who laughed at others to avoid being the target of derision themselves, are now adults who do the same thing. Maybe they shoot down your ideas in board meetings. Maybe they take the credit for your hard work. All of these behaviors are examples of emotional immaturity, but that doesn't mean they aren't hurtful. And if we aren't careful, we can easily find ourselves giving into that pain and making ourselves smaller to avoid ridicule. It's even easier if your boss appears to be clueless or if your company culture encourages competition and verbal sparring.

The author observes that sometimes the pressure to avoid ridicule can lead to unethical choices. None of us are at our best when we're scared and, instead of thriving, many people crumple under pressure. Under the crippling weight of fear, we often make decisions that we might not even consider under different circumstances. For example, let's imagine that you knew about a problem in your company. Maybe you knew that your manager had made a gross miscalculation on her quarterly reports, skewing the results and creating a problem with significant ramifications if the error was discovered. So, if you were in that situation, what would your first instinct be? What if your relationship with your manager was characterized

by open and honest communication? What if you felt that you were both equally free to deliver kind and constructive feedback? Would you speak to her about it? Of course you would! Knowing the potential ramifications, it would be natural for you to speak to her in private and discreetly call her attention to the error. And if you did so, she would likely be grateful because you saved her and the company a great deal of embarrassment!

But what if your relationship was completely different? What if, instead, your manager had a reputation for being brutal and sadistic to anyone who spoke up or criticized her in any way? What if you knew that calling her attention to the problem would result in institutionalized bullying or even the loss of your job? Would you feel comfortable speaking up? Or would it be easier to keep your head down, say nothing, and hope for the best? Certainly, this wouldn't be the best course of action for your company or even for your boss, but it would be an understandable act of self-preservation. Is it the most ethical thing to do? Definitely not. But under immense pressure from a hostile work environment, the author aptly asserts that many people do not feel capable of making the best or most ethical decisions.

So, there's no doubt about it: our fear of being humiliated or looking silly impacts our performance at work. But whether we realize it or not, our hesitation to speak up isn't a sign of weakness; rather, it's an evolutionary trait that human beings developed to further our survival. We have learned to be so in tune with our environment, to scan for dangers and test them against our fight or flight response, that we've adapted to psychologically unsafe situations even at our own expense. And, more often than not, our work environments feed this fear. So, what can we do to break free of the cycle? How can we stop being afraid of looking silly?

How Psychological Safety Can Help

So, if we have a company culture that's characterized by comfort with competitive and hostile behavior, what can we do to eliminate it? How do we create a safe zone that will encourage others to do their best? Well, let's imagine a couple of hypothetical scenarios. For starters, we'll consider a workplace without psychological safety practices in place. So, let's say you have to give a presentation at work and you're scared to death. You're afraid of being ridiculed by your colleagues. You're afraid that someone will pipe up with, "Why didn't you think of...?" or phrase a critical comment in the form of a question. You're afraid that your boss will encourage or engage with this criticism. So, before you give your presentation, you're a bundle of nerves. And because we often tend to create self-fulfilling prophecies as a result of our anxiety, there's a strong chance that you won't do your best or that you'll make a mistake that will trigger the cycle of events you fear. Needless to say, it's unlikely that you'll be at the top of your game.

But in contrast to this scenario, let's imagine a different outcome. Let's say that you feel comfortable around your colleagues and your supervisor. Perhaps you have an established pattern of open and constructive communication. You value their feedback and you trust them to give you honest and helpful critiques on your performance. How would that change your attitude going into your presentation? Would you feel confident and at ease? Would you be excited to debut your hard work and eager to discover new ways you can grow? It's easy to imagine that, if your presentation was characterized by these feelings instead, you would do a much better job! In fact, at the end of your work day, you would likely feel energized, encouraged, and accomplished!

So, what made the difference in this scenario? Does this mean that you and your colleagues have to be the best of friends? Do you all have to like each other well enough to go out for drinks outside of work? Do you have to love every single aspect of your job? Fortunately, the answer is no! That's because psychological safety isn't dependent on being best buds with your

co-workers. Rather, the difference is simply characterized by positive and effective communication practices. Many of the world's leading companies-- including Google-- have recognized the value of implementing psychological safety practices in the workplace. In fact, a 2016 article from the New York Times reported on Google's experiments with psychological safety and made an intriguing discovery. They observed that Google was doing so well that many leading sociologists and psychologists had come in to observe their team-building strategies. At the end of the study, both the researchers and the Google employees concluded that psychological safety was the most important ingredient for crafting a healthy and effective workplace.

Why? Well, if you've ever worked with other people-- whether in a professional capacity or on a group project in college-- you know that working together can be hard! It can be difficult to blend a variety of different cultures, languages, opinions, and learning styles. And it's especially tough if some people refuse to pull their weight! Psychological safety practices work to eliminate these difficulties and replace them with open communication, mutual trust, and honesty. So, keep reading because in the next chapter, we're going to learn more about what psychological safety looks like in practice and how we can apply it in our workplaces.

Restructuring Your Office

What does the current social structure of your office look like? Is it a hierarchical structure like a pyramid, with your manager on top? Unless you work in a very progressive office that is already implementing psychological safety, there's a very strong chance that this is the current power structure in your workplace. As a result, you may feel that your boss is in a position of seemingly untouchable power, that they are "in charge" and the rest of you are beneath them, on very unequal footing. Unsurprisingly, you might not feel comfortable criticizing someone who appears to be above you, even if your desire is simply to offer constructive feedback.

But psychological safety seeks to undermine this imbalance of power by restructuring the social hierarchy of your office. Because psychological safety is predicated on the value of open communication and a free exchange of ideas, this practice posits that a manager's role should be defined. For example, instead of being a godlike figure who gives orders from on high, proponents of psychological safety believe that a manager should be responsible for setting a positive tone in the workplace. This can still mean offering guidance and leading the team in the right direction, but the core attitude of their role will be different. For example, this structural shift might mean that a manager would present their ideas for the team's goals and-- instead of expecting their orders to be obeyed without question-- they would then encourage contributions from the team.

But of course, this approach only works if the manager sets the right tone. Because anybody can say, "Feel free to come to me with your suggestions," even when they don't really mean it. (And, as you probably know from firsthand experience, people can tell if you mean it or not!) That's why the author believes that a manager's primary responsibility is cultivating a culture of safety. So, if you're a manager, this means that instead of barking out orders, you should encourage collaboration, communication, and a

spirit of openness. You can also promote a company culture of equality by ensuring that everyone genuinely has a voice. How can you do that?

Well, the author believes that a culture of psychological safety emerges when you start encouraging failure. (Yes, you really read that right!) Encouraging failure might sound foreign to us, because we've probably never encountered that attitude before. You get congratulations cards and balloons and parties when you pass the test or graduate. But no one throws you a party for failing. And as a result, we internalize failure as being one of the worst things that can happen to us. In fact, people often live in such crippling fear of failure that they refuse to try new things in case they fail. The author believes that this is one of the most toxic attitudes for a workplace to have. However, she's also quick to point out that encouraging failure is not the same thing as encouraging your employees to underperform. It's also not the same thing as saying, "We have no standards at our company! We never try to do anything!"

Many managers-- and many highly motivated employees-- believe in this misperception, however. In fact, a lot of people misidentify failure as the number-one thing to avoid at all costs. This is often what causes managers to promote highly competitive or fearful environments; without the presence of fear, they believe that people will slack off or lack the motivation to work hard. But as we've seen in the previous chapters, that's not necessarily the case! Fear can also generate some truly toxic results, like poor performance, unethical decision-making, and an increase in depression and anxiety. That's why the author believes that we should learn to embrace failure instead. Because, even if failing is unpleasant at the moment, we almost always learn something from our failures. We learn what doesn't work. We learn how not to do something. And if we open ourselves up to embracing our failures, we can use them as learning opportunities! We can use our failures as launching pads to explore new possibilities and new avenues of success.

This means that if you encourage your employees to avoid failure, you're ultimately telling them to avoid learning. That's probably not what you

want to communicate, right? So, the next time an employee makes a mistake or gets an answer wrong, don't jump on them or make fun of them in front of the entire office. Instead, praise them for speaking up or making a guess. Encourage them to keep finding a solution. And, as a manager, make it clear that you don't always have the answers! By showing that you're vulnerable and fallible too, you're communicating that it's okay to get things wrong sometimes and that it's safe to fail around you.

Final Summary

Many managers use fear as a motivator in the workplace. This often occurs due to a misguided belief that fear of failure will encourage people to do their best. But when people are afraid of being mocked or belittled at work, it actually sparks the opposite reaction; instead, people underperform or try to make themselves less noticeable. Sadly, this means that many offices are missing out on valuable ideas and contributions from employees who would like to perform at their full potential! Psychological safety encourages growth in the workplace by eliminating this culture of fear and replacing it with open and honest communication. Psychological safety is founded on the belief that giving everyone a voice enables people to work together in a culture of harmony and mutual respect. So, if you want an office full of healthy, happy, high performers, start by making sure everyone feels safe to speak up and shine!

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