



Guest

Amy C. Edmondson is the Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at the Harvard Business School.

Amy has been recognized by the biannual Thinkers50 global ranking of management thinkers since 2011, and most recently was ranked #3 in 2019. She studies teaming, psychological safety, and organizational learning, and her articles have been published numerous academic and management outlets. Her most recent book, *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation and Growth* (Wiley, 2019), offers a practical guide for organizations serious about success in the modern economy.

She has been studying Psychological Safety for ~15 years way before it became popular in the blogosphere after Charles Duhigg wrote his piece for the New Yorker about Project Aristotle and Google's lessons from its quest to build a perfect team in 2016.

In our conversation, we speak about the various nuances involved in the way we think about Psychological Safety and how it plays such a crucial role in unlocking value in today's world.

Context to the conversation

Welcome to the 78th conversation at the Play to Potential Podcast. I am your host Deepak Jayaraman. This podcast is a labour of love for the long term where I have conversations with leading practitioners, thinkers, authors, artists, sportsmen and other leading professionals to decode insights around leadership, transitions and careers.

When I am not podcasting, I am working with leaders as a Trusted Sounding Board helping leaders and organizations play to their unique potential. To know more about what is in the podcast archives and the advisory work I do, you could just visit www.playtopotential.com.

My Guest this time is Amy Edmondson, who is currently the Novartis Professor of Leadership at Harvard Business School. She is best known for her pioneering work on psychological safety, which has helped spawn a large body of academic research in management, healthcare and education over the past 15 years. Her books include *"The Fearless Organization - Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth"* and *"Teaming: How Organizations Learn, Innovate and Compete in the Knowledge Economy"*. She has been consistently featured in Thinkers 50, considered to be the equivalent of the Oscar Awards for the best thinkers in the world. In 2019, she was Ranked Number 3 in that rarefied group of people. Her work around Psychological Safety has profound implications on how we organize work now and in the future.

I first got curious about Psychological Safety when I read Charles Duhigg's article in the New York Times back in Feb 2016. He speaks about Project Aristotle, Google's quest to learn about what

separated the great teams from the rest. Clearly one comes across terms like Psychological safety every now and then but I was keen to speak to somebody who has been studying this for 15+ years way before it came into fashion.

This conversation is packed with super nuanced insights around leadership, team development, transitions, culture building, parenting and much more. I hope you find it as valuable as I did. Lets now get to the conversation with Amy Edmondson.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Amy, thank you so much for making the time for the Play to Potential podcast, excited to be talking to you.

Amy Edmondson (Amy): No, it's a great pleasure to be talking with you.

DJ: Amy, just to kick things off, you know, one of the things we are curious about at this podcast is people's journeys and how they got to doing whatever they are doing. Could you talk to us a little bit about how you started getting curious about psychological safety and started researching it?

Amy: Sure, you know, you can't see the big smile on my face but it's... this is a wonderful question and I think like so many people's careers today including yours because we had a little bit of time before we started recording to talk about your journey, there's a great deal of kismet and happenstance in my journey, including my interest in psychological safety. So, I got interested in organizations as a critical context not only where work gets done and value gets created and lives get changed but also where people get developed, where people have the opportunity to grow into who they might be and how they might be able to make a difference with their lives and with their work. And that's what led me back 10 years after my undergraduate work in engineering, that's what led me back to do a PhD in organizational behavior. And in that work, I had hoped to study organizational learning, you know, what are the factors that led organizations learn in a changing world? And so, I was absolutely delighted to have the opportunity to join a study of medical errors at some nearby Harvard teaching hospitals when I was a second-year graduate student and because I thought errors were, just studying errors in general was an important part of learning in the workplace. And I had a simplistic hypothesis, which was the better teams, better healthcare delivery teams would make fewer errors and of course that doesn't seem surprising to you, I am sure. But what happened was in my data set, I got a team survey data that was well developed, I didn't invent it and a robust and effective survey for measuring teamwork and team effectiveness and team leadership. And then meanwhile, trained medical investigators were capturing over a six-month period error rates. And so, all I had to do was put together the team survey data that I had collected in the early part of the study, and then the error rates that were collected longitudinally over six months and I put, I ran the correlation and low and behold I had a statistically significant relationship between error rates and team properties. Unfortunately, and by surprise it was in exactly the wrong direction. The data were suggesting that better teams had higher not lower error rates and I just couldn't be, I couldn't, I couldn't be satisfied with that as a conclusion. I mean, there is certainly no paper I could have written that would say better teams make more mistakes, right, it didn't make sense. And as I thought more about it and thought more deeply about what I knew about work and error and human nature it occurred to me without a whole lot of evidence yet, it occurred to me that may be the result was explained by the fact that better teams were more able and willing to talk about errors. So, that in other words the error rate data might in fact be flawed systematically by

interpersonal climate, right? So, if different teams had different willingness to talk about errors, then the error rates would be easier to assess in those teams than in others. And to make a very long story short that turned out to be a pretty likely explanation of my puzzling results. And I later called those differences in interpersonal climate or differences in willingness to speak up about error, I called them psychological safety and I found a way to measure it with a survey and other ways as well. And that in my next study I tested the idea on purpose and that worked out pretty well. And that sort of surprise accidental discovery ultimately gave rise to many, many papers my own but more importantly those of others in healthcare and in technology and in so many industries around the world.

DJ: Hmm. And just for us to be on the same page, Amy could you define psychological safety the way you see it?

Amy: Sure. So, I define it as an environment where people feel free to take interpersonal risks and maybe I should clarify what an interpersonal risk is. That's anything that you might do or say that creates a risk that others might think less well of you, right? So, if I ask a question, you might think I am stupid. If I offer an idea that you think is really a crazy idea you might think I am not in touch with reality. If I ask for help, you might think I am weak, right? So, all of those are in the category of interpersonal risks, and I would argue those are the interpersonal risks that good employees take every day because if you aren't offering ideas or asking questions or asking for help in a complex interdependent world, you are not doing your job.

DJ: Got it, got it. And I came across psychological safety when I was reading Charles Duhigg's article about Project Aristotle in Google but you have been studying it for much longer...

Amy: Longer, yes.

DJ: ...much longer. I am curious you use the term blogosphere to talk about sort of the street version of psychological safety. Which element of psychological safety do you find being underappreciated in sort of the public realm?

Amy: You know, probably the simplest way to talk about psychological safety is a sense of permission for candor, right? That one believes, you know, the way you are candid with your spouse, you are candid with your best friend but with your boss you might not be so candid. And yet, if you are in a psychologically safe work environment, you just understand that the work is too important, the customers are too important, the purpose is too important to hold back for a fear of not looking good. So, I loved Charles Duhigg's article and it really puts psychological safety on the map and I think he is a wonderful writer and I think he did justice to the study that was done at Google, Project Aristotle. So, that did the feel the big favor I must say. And it led at least some people to, you know, maybe they read too quickly, didn't read carefully and they said, oh, they are talking about you just have to be nice. Whoa, no, that's not right because being nice often means to people not saying what you really think, not saying something that might be perceived as not nice even if it's the truth. And so, there are many misconceptions out there like that.

DJ: One more misconception you talk about in the book, Amy is psychological safety and trust, right? You say that psychological safety describes a temporal... temporarily immediate experience while trust describes an expectation about whether another person can be counted on to do something what they promise in a future moment. Can you talk a little bit about trust versus psychological safety?

Amy: Yeah, and you know this may be more of a semantic difference, a problematic difference but... because I think trust is important and it's a very meaningful part of human experience but it's not the same thing because trust is more... trust is fundamentally more cognitive, trust is my willingness to put myself at risk because I am confident that you will do what you said you would do, right? So, trust is about my perception of your trustworthiness if you will whereas psychological safety describes the environment in a group. I mean, it could, it can refer to a group of just two, but psychological safety is fundamentally about whether I feel it's safe around here whereas trust is fundamentally what do I think about you, are you trustworthy versus am I safe.

DJ: Hmm. And when you describe psychological safety, the other piece I found interesting was you say that it's correlated with learn how behavior in a team as compared to learn what behavior and it ['was super-nuanced so I would love for you to clarify this.

Amy: You are referring to a study that I did with the amazing Anita Tucker who is a professor at Boston University and Ingrid Nembhard who is a professor at Wharton when they were both PhD students and we studied intensive care units in the U.S. and Canada and all of them were actively engaged in quality improvement projects, right? So, we were studying people who already were dedicating themselves to trying to make the care delivery better. And we measured two kinds of learning behavior in these improvement projects, the learning activities that they did, the improvement activities that they did fell roughly into two kinds of categories. And the learn what category was the category of reading the literature, you could think of this as google it right, to sort of find out what do people know, what's best practice, what's the recipe for the best way to do something and then the... and also may be participating in literature reviews and various other things quite... well, I won't say that yet. The other category was learn how, where you had to do things, you had to try something, you had to ask for help, you had to be vulnerable in some way with other people whether they were in your own workplace or in another workplace where you were trying to get information from them about how they did it. And this was an amazing result really from a research perspective because both of those activities as you can well imagine are effortful where people say, okay I am going to, I am going to work hard today and I am going to read the literature or I am going to try something with people or I am going to ask for help, all of that takes effort, but learn what let's just say simply reading the literature has no interpersonal risk associated with it whatsoever. You wanted to google a definition of a word you don't know; you wouldn't be embarrassed to do it because nobody knows you just did it. Whereas, if you were asking a friend, hey, I don't know this word, what does it mean you might be embarrassed? And so, the beauty of this result in this research was that learn how behavior, that interpersonally sensitive behavior, was absolutely related to psychological safety, if psychological safety was high, people in this case nurses felt able to do it. When it was low, they didn't feel able to do it. Whereas, the learn what behavior, psychological safety had no impact because there's no charge to it, there's no interpersonal risk.

DJ: Fascinating. If I link it to another area of curiosity and work Amy, leadership transitions, when a new leader joins a company and comes onboard especially in these times, covid times, what I have observed is derailments often don't happen because of the what of the job, but it's the how of the job on the interpersonal relationships. So, maybe just shining the light in the context of transitions, any nuances in what you have observed?

Amy: Yes, I think that the challenge of transitions is that people they don't know the new context well, they don't know their new subordinates or new colleagues well, and so, they want to make a good impression. So, they are tiptoeing, they are, they may be reluctant to do or say things that will make them look bad. In the way that when we have a group of very familiar colleagues or friends, we are much more relaxed, well in new settings we are not relaxed, right? That's part of the nature of new settings, but then there's a risk there because if you are in a new setting, the very thing you

should be doing is being authentic and revealing that which you know and that which you don't know and asking your new colleagues for help and for insight and explaining the things that you care about and listening carefully to what they care about. Those are the things that you do to build a great team and yet those are the things you may be less willing to do because they are interpersonally risky. So, I think, that the learn how behavior is far more salient in leadership transitions than the learn what behavior. You have already, you have likely, if you are doing a leadership transition, you have probably already read all of the published articles you can read about the new company or the new role and you know that kind of information but you don't know the information that is more people dependent and more subtle.

DJ: And if we distill it to a few insights from both sides, right, the leader coming in and the organization that is sort of welcoming the new leader.

Amy: Yes.

DJ: Any headline themes that occur to you in terms of what to bear in mind to create that safety in the context of a transition?

Amy: Yeah, I think, the two headlines for me are humility and curiosity. And by humility I do not mean false modesty, right? I mean humility about the very real fact that you don't yet know them very well, you don't know the company or the role very well, you are coming in with this wonderful opportunity to do great things but you start without all the knowledge you need to do it well. So, reminding yourself of that and then letting others know that you know that is a tremendously powerful stance for, you know, people will warm up to you, people will want to help you when you are clear and clean about the fact that you know you don't know everything yet. So, that's the humility part where there is a new situation and here, I am ready to learn. And then curiosity is a natural sibling of humility because you are all ears, you are asking good questions, you are listening intently to what people are sharing. And what I have found is when new leaders come in whether in the same organization or a new organization to a new role with humility and curiosity people are on their side, they want them to succeed.

DJ: Hmm, hmm. What I have found Amy is people often worry that if I am humble then will I get the respect and the followership when I transition companies?

Amy: Yeah, and I understand that and ironically, it's wrongheaded meaning that it's the people who come in and fail to be humble that actually lose people, they lose commitment, they lose buy-in because it's just a factual reality that you are new, you came in from the outside, you obviously have much to learn. And when you aren't open about the fact that you have much to learn people are disappointed. So, people... so there's a sort of strange irony that people think they will look better when they are more boastful or arrogant but in fact they look better when they are more humble and curious. And just to illustrate, in the United States about a decade ago, Alan Mulally came in from Boeing to become the new CEO of Ford at a time when Ford Motor Company, when the Ford Motor Company was losing 17 billion with a B US dollars that year and so if you have got this outsider coming in, new role, it's a really tough, really urgent situation. And I have written a case study about this but if you look at so much published material about this, if you look at the things that he did and said he embodies what I am talking about. He embodies a kind of situational humility that says okay team, you know, we are losing all this money, tell me what isn't working and then how can we help, how can we work on this together, what are you seeing, what are you bringing? And that is just when you stop to reflect on it, it's an incredibly powerful, confident stance. So, confidence and arrogance are not the same thing, right? Confidence is a sense that I know I have

skills, I know I am able to learn, I am interested in learning and I am passionate about what's possible. Arrogance is you can't tell me anything I don't already know.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. If Leadership Transitions are an area of curiosity, you might like the Curated Playlist – Settling into a new context where share perspectives from multiple people around how they transitioned into a new context. One of them is Ravi Venkatesan (RV), a seasoned Corporate Leader who had a long stint in Cummins and Microsoft, last two stints as country heads of these two organizations. He speaks about how he transitioned when he took on a Board Chairperson role with Bank of Baroda a few years back.

RV: "I know nothing about banking and I know even less about public sector, but yet Raghuram Rajan and Jayant Sinha felt that it was important that I take it on, so I did. Now, what do you do in this situation? And you know that the place is filled with landmines and you can step on anything without realizing it and get blown up. So, what you have to do is listen intently, and I did. I made a very conscious effort to listen to a bunch of people. The retired chairman of Bank of Baroda so help me understand from your perspective, what I should do, what the issues are, how would you handle them. And you get a certain perspective. I went and spoke to [Narayanan] Vaghul of ICICI and P J Nayak of Axis Bank, because they've been around and seen the evolution of the banking sector. I met a lot of our own employees and so forth. So, from this, you begin to piece together, first, the situation and then, out of that emerges a theory of change, which is, what interventions are really going to make a difference and who are going to be the important allies in this. If you don't listen and you come in with a point of view, you start jumping into action right away, you're going to make a lot of mistakes, because you haven't built this nuanced and reasonably accurate picture of the landscape. So, I am very, very intentional about these things."

DJ: I love the point he makes about discovering and piecing together the theory of change and you can only do that if you focus not just on the Learn What but also on the Learn How as Amy says.

If you are enjoying the podcast, you might want to know that we share bite sized extracts of about a couple of minutes from the Podcast archives that are aimed to provoke reflection and get you to be a better version of yourself. If you are interested, you can send a message to +91 85914 52129. We have about 80+ hours of podcast content and we work hard to mine that to provide the core essence that could be beneficial to you. Lets now get back to Amy Edmondson.

DJ: Marshall Goldsmith actually was on this podcast a while back and he referred to this journey with Alan Mulally as well and we spoke about how, you know, he sort of brought that coachability by role modeling himself, right?

Amy: Right and that is a very important point because I think if you are a leader, whether of a team or a corporation, you have three real ways to influence people and one is just you are a role model, like it or not, you are a role model. What you do and say and how you act people will consciously and unconsciously emulate that because of your position. And so, you have an influence just in who you are and how you show up. And I think the second thing is what you say, what you say is our vision, our direction, our purpose, that matters, it really does. But the... and then the third thing, of course, is the direct feedback that you can give to people on your team, you coach them, you tell them what is really... you help them understand what is working and what is not working as well.

DJ: Amy, in the book *The Fearless Organization* you also speak about the calculus of silence, I love the way you frame it, you actually say that there's an asymmetry of voice and silence and you talk about Bridgewater Associates in that context where you say that Ray Dalio frames it as, frames silence as an unethical choice. Could you say more about how this plays out in different situations?

Amy: Sure, and so, the calculus that I describe is something that's very simple which is that if you are at work where there's an old saying better to be, better to risk being thought a fool than to open your mouth and prove it beyond a reasonable doubt or something like that, it's a bad saying, but it's wrong, right? It's wrong in today's world but the calculus is such that if you think about it this way, if I think your plan might be fatally flawed and I am your subordinate, you are my boss, in that moment I might be wrong, right? So, in that moment I can speak up and maybe save the day but maybe not, maybe you won't be mad at me but maybe you will and whether or not all of that will happen is going to be delayed for sure. I mean your anger might not be delayed but whether or not my intuition about the plan was right or wrong is going to be hard to sort of figure out objectively for a while, whereas if... and so I am taking a risk in other words, whereas if I stay silent, there's no risk in that. If I stay silent, I am just there, nobody knows, you don't know, nobody else knows that I had a thought in my mind, I had an objection and I didn't share it. So, I talk about that as this fundamental asymmetry between voice and silence. The voice calculus will always lead subordinates towards silence not voice. Therefore, as leaders, you have to override that natural instinct. Now, the Ray Dalio case Bridgewater is a very special case, I call it an extreme case, where he understands, he so deeply understands that voice calculus, that asymmetry, where silence is generally cost free and voice is expensive for people that he says, why don't we flip that on its head? He says, why don't I reframe silence as unethical. And think about it, it's a really strong statement and yet there's a way in which we have to agree with that statement, because if you had a concern about an important decision or issue in a work environment, a strategic decision or a patient care decision that doesn't matter and you decided to hold it to yourself because it's safer that way, that is unethical, isn't it? Because you have training, you have expertise and we hired you to share some of that training and that expertise with others. And so, I think, it's rather interesting and that's why I highlighted in the book that Ray Dalio labels it as such where he just comes right out instead of saying, hey, we would love to hear from you, he says, hey when we don't hear from you, you are really not doing your job. In fact, you are so much not doing your job that I believe it to be unethical, right? So, it's pretty extreme but it's provocative and I love that.

DJ: Hmm. It's a bit like, you know, whether you commit to the murder or whether you help somebody commit the murder, you just committed it, right, it's that type of framing.

Amy: Right, it's true, it's true. It's what we used to call, sort of errors of co-mission or errors you actually make, the errors of omission are the things you didn't prevent that you could have prevented.

DJ: Hmm. And just changing frames here Amy. I used to be a recruitment consultant at Egon Zehnder in my past life and as I was reading your book, I was wondering from a search perspective if we are solving for psychological safety in an organization, what should we be looking for in the leader that we are hiring to ensure that he or she will create a climate of safety? Are there... what are the few traits that come out in your research?

Amy: I am going to say three. Two of them I have already mentioned but then we might have to talk a little bit about how do you measure these because you probably know more about this than I do from a search perspective but the three I am going to say are humility, curiosity and empathy. Now notice, I didn't say brilliance, I didn't say extensive industry experience and all of the rest because I think first of all often there are certain kinds of experience that are just table stakes for you, you are

not going to be considered for a job if you have no background that's relevant. And so, I am assuming you have got those. But then humility is that Alan Mulally's sense of I don't have all the answers and I am confident that if we pull the best minds together with a good process around the table, we will come up with the answers we need, right? So, that's humility. It's a confidence in what we can do rather than what I know. Curiosity, I have already talked about and then empathy is that emotional intelligence to understand what others are up against. So, you are capable of framing the work and framing the challenge in ways that they really can rise to the occasion, it's the ability to respond productively when people bring you bad news.

DJ: Hmm. And how do you think about measuring them in the sense if you were hiring a CEO, what... how would you...?

Amy: It's tricky, I mean, I really don't have any super easy answer to that question. I can say I often say to my husband who is Dean of the Harvard Medical School and he has to do a lot of hiring and they often say anyone can ace an interview and I really believe it. I mean, I think people can show up in a one-on-one and act the part. If they can't, you definitely should run the other direction fast. But so that's sort of necessary but not sufficient that someone is, you find them appealing in an interview and so often times the useful thing to do is bring people together with, let's say if you are serious about if they are really a serious candidate, bringing them together with the team and watching their reactions to others. Are they, are they genuinely curious, are they dismissive, do they inadvertently belittle or engage in eye-rolling of any kind, do they interrupt in a problematic way rather than an enthusiastic building way?

DJ: It's a great point actually, you know, just building on what you said sometimes I have noticed micro moments in behavior, sometimes shine the light on what the person is so...

Amy: Yes.

DJ: Moving on Amy, I also liked your description of Pixar's Brain Trust process where candor is at the core of sharing constructive feedback. So, I wanted to talk a little bit about feedback, right, and about the nuances involved in getting candor in the feedback context whether it's a team feedback session or a one-on-one feedback session. Could you talk a little bit about that?

Amy: Sure, one of the keys for effective feedback that we all understand but often fail to deliver on is that you are critiquing the behavior, you are critiquing the project, you are critiquing the work not the person. And that's a subtle but powerful point because I think, ultimately everyone wants to do good work and they want to be seen well by their colleagues and especially by their managers. And so, if you can discipline yourself to really be concrete and focus on what doesn't work about the work or about the behavior, most people will come to that and counter with a genuine appreciation that it's hard for you to say but useful for them and useful for the team to get that information. Pixar does a particularly good job of this. And of course, what they do is create these lovable, engaging, creative movies that children and adults alike really enjoy and they appreciate part of their ability to do that, so they appreciate no movie would ever like, no book, no anything would ever be perfect in its first draft. So, in a way they have already framed the work in a specific way to say, we know this is going to be bad but what we need from you is where is it bad, where do you get bored, where do you find it not credible, where do the characters not look real to you and so forth. So, you are asking people, you are asking people in a very explicit formal setting around a table to really speak honestly about what they like and what they don't like and it works because they put these guidelines in place like we are critiquing the project not the person, everybody's voice matters and all movies are bad at the beginning and they get good because of this process. So, the process becomes something that people buy into and that's important because I am not saying because it isn't that it's easy, that

it is not easy for human beings to give each other critical feedback but we are willing to do it when we care enough to do it and when we are doing it in a concrete and timely way.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. Interestingly enough, Pixar came up in one of my earlier conversations at the podcast with Prof Kartik Hosanagar (KH) of Wharton. He speaks about how some large companies manage to stay agile and nimble despite their size and he speaks about Pixar in that context.

KH: "I usually go to a very interesting setting to illustrate how that could be done. Pixar is the setting that I personally love. Pixar is in the movie industry, as all of us know, and this movie industry is a blockbuster-driven market. It's very hard to predict what will be a blockbuster. A typical movie studio releases 10 movies and one of them is a blockbuster. Pixar, on the other hand, has released about 13 or 14 movies so far, and every single movie is a blockbuster. So, how is it that a company in an industry with such low odds of success can consistently produce these great hits? It's because they have such a system in place. Every time they try and make a new movie, it's not the big guys in the company saying, OK, this is our next topic. It's a bottom-up process where every employee can contribute an idea. They have a process wherein all of them vote on each other's ideas, and a movie worth pursuing emerges through this kind of a democratic process. So, I think, they have created such an organization, such a culture. They have tried to make it not too hierarchical, despite their size. So, these are some of the lessons that are applicable for any organization trying to build an entrepreneurial culture."

DJ: Fascinating to see a company like Pixar churning out hits at this kind of a rate when the market failure rate is much much higher. Let's now get back to the conversation with Amy.

DJ: The other thing that struck me Amy was very often we think that the role of creating safety while giving feedback often rests with the feedback giver but I think there's a role that the feedback receiver can play in creating the climate of trust and safety to receive constructive feedback. Like you said, the way the prototype is framed to say, of course, we know this is just a first draft and there are mistakes and feel free to jump in. So, I think this I found that very...

With my PhD students they will often say give me an ugly draft but that's what I want, right? Because I don't want them to waste too much time trying to make it perfect because they might, you know, they would be perfecting sentences and punctuation on material that's not quite good enough yet, right? So, you give me your ugly draft, right, that's what I want. And then the ugly draft is this wonderful starting place from which they can get better, from which we can together get better so... but by deliberately using the word ugly it lowers that tendency that the stakes and the tendency toward perfectionism.

DJ: Hmm. The other piece I am curious about Amy is while we have spoken about psychological safety in a sort of a one-on-one or a team level. At an organizational level, what have you seen some companies do in terms of creating rituals that drive psychological safety in a gathering or in a meeting? Any headline themes there?

Amy: Surely, we talked about Pixar before and they use this ritual, which they label the Brain Trust, and it is a ritual. It's a ritual of coming together with some periodic schedule to evaluate the work together, to figure out what's working what isn't and the ritual itself you can just imagine that

people know it's coming, all rituals are things that we expect, we know, we participate in, doesn't make them always fun or always easy, certainly not but they are expected and they are part of who we are and how we do things. In medicine, there is rituals like the morbidity and mortality meetings, the sort of weekly meetings on a Friday usually where clinicians come together and they together dig into the details of a case that didn't work out well and they try to understand together in a very thoughtful way what happened and what went wrong and you can imagine that's not easy particularly given what's at stake, but it's a ritual. And I think the ritual aspect of it makes it more palatable; that's kind of an extreme case. But rituals in companies I have been intrigued to find that rituals like failure parties when a really smart thoughtful experiment didn't go well anyway, even though it was really smart, it was a worthwhile thing to try and it didn't work. Let's have, let's celebrate the effort and the hypothesis and the discovery that that failure allowed.

DJ: Correct, you talk about Eli Lilly where there are failure parties and you also talk about Google X...

Amy: Yes, exactly, that's a ritual.

DJ: ...Google X which actually has a, what I read, has a museum of failures if you will of someone's thoughts.

Amy: Yes.

DJ: So, could you sort of expand on some of these fascinating, some of these rituals on the extreme just to provoke ideas?

Amy: Yes, I mean, I think, Google X has the museum of failures, they also have celebrations of the failures because they are explicit in their desire and their goal to break new boundaries to be really innovative in going after very hard problems and making a big difference in hard problems. And they recognize wisely that if that's your ambition more often than not things will fail. And so, if you don't reward that failure, people will just stop taking risks and if people stop taking risks, you won't accomplish your dreams. So, to help people be willing to take those risks you have got the... the psychology of it is that these rituals like the failure parties, the failure awards are really powerful.

DJ: Hmm. The other story that jumped at me was the story of Fukushima Daiichi. You talk about the other plant in Japan?

Amy: Yes, the less well-known one.

DJ: Less well-known one but you talk about the leader there Naohiro Masuda leading a team of 400 people working in extreme uncertainty and fragility to achieve cold shutdown and saving thousands of lives. It was... I hadn't heard of that story before and it was just awe-inspiring, you know, people going without sleep for 48 hours when their life is under threat to do the right thing and saving thousands of lives. Could you talk a little bit about the story and what we can learn from that story here?

Amy: Yeah, I thank you for asking about it and I do think it's a very powerful story and clearly most of us have never been in that kind of situation, right, where our actions could literally save thousands of lives and we are going to go, we have to work at an almost heroic pace over a long period of time as you said. But what I love about that story is the leader wasn't profoundly charismatic or larger than life; he was very grounded. He was honest, he was trustworthy, he had their respect but he kept, he did where I think leaders in challenging times and times of upheaval and times of crisis should do more reliably but often don't which is you tell the truth, tell the truth about what we

know and about what we don't know and you ask, you ask for people. It's like you are not telling people, you must do this and he was... it was very clear in that story, he was asking them, please help, right? This is what I think we will try, I think it can work, I can't guarantee it but please help, please join this effort because I think if we give it everything, we have we can shut this thing down and indeed they did. But it's very is his style was straightforward and honest and transparent. Even his style of management much of it rested on the use of a whiteboard, right, just a whiteboard to kind of keep capturing the knowledge as it developed and he's also, he was able to be present and supportive of people and appreciative of the work they were doing along the way.

DJ: The other thing that struck me in that story was along the way they realized that they are sort of working in the wrong direction and they had to

Amy: Yes.

DJ: And after about let's say 24 hours including a sleepless night on a cold day with life under threat, they had to completely change direction and they did it; it's just mind-boggling.

Amy: Yeah, it is mind-boggling and yet that's the way progress is made in a VUCA world, a volatile uncertain complex ambiguous world. You can be... you can do all the best thinking at time zero and believe that path A is the right path, but as you go down it further you get more information and then you... it's not that you were wrong before, it's that you have now learned more and the world has changed maybe a little bit and then you realize, oops, we got to go down path B. And for most of us that pivot, that being wrong is devastating and say you almost want to just give up but the leadership in this case was about helping people not give up because of what was at stake and because they had... the learning they had done in the failing course of action was mission critical to figuring out what needed to be done next.

DJ: Hmm, I guess something that's probably not as emphasized here is sort of pointing to the broader purpose behind the work here, in this case, for example, was that explicit or was that understood by the team? Is there a piece there around rallying them around the big picture and why we are doing what we are doing?

Amy: Yeah, it's interesting because it would be tempting to think or to conclude that in extreme stress like that and similarly for example in the Chilean mine rescue that the goal, the purpose, the importance of the purpose is so obvious that the leader doesn't need to refer to it, right? We got to save many communities from radioactive catastrophe or we have got 33 lives hanging in the balance, stuck deep in a mine, it doesn't need to be said, right? Wrong, it does need to be said because time and time again, making the purpose explicit even though it's obvious is really a powerful thing to do as a leader. Just I like to say what you are doing is reminding people and think about the word remind its re mind, put it back in your mind because all of us, especially when you are tired or frustrated or things aren't going well that emotion and that distraction makes it hard to stay focused on the technical work that you are doing. So, a leadership function is to remind people of what really matters, make it explicit.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. Another similar situation where an individual had to act under extreme pressure when his life was under threat was Captain Sully Sullenberger who miraculously landed a plane with 155 people without any loss of life. One of our earlier guests, Rich Fernandez, CEO of Search Inside Yourself, a Leadership Development institute incubated at Google

spoke about it. He highlights in the context of the distinction between responding to a situation and reacting to a situation. That is the other piece to bring to your attention here. Before we get into a discussion about how we lead people, I think there is a piece about how we handle ourselves.

RF: *"for the listeners who aren't familiar with Captain Sully Sullenberger he is the man who landed the jet plan that was flying over New York City. It flew through a flock of birds so they lost all jet propulsion because the birds flew into the engines and burnt them out so in the space I think I have about 3 minutes to make a split second decision to land the airplane on the Hudson River it was the only available large open space over New York City but he thought about it very calmly. So, I'd ask you to Google it or YouTube it you will see interview with him he explains it. But how did he do that he says he trained his whole career for it. He said I have 30 years as pilot and so I just know the routines. I knew what needed to happen and he just calmly proceeded to do that he didn't react and become over blown or over-whelmed by the situation and this is why we talk about emotional resilience is being a key quality of a leader in a digital economy"*

DJ: In my work with leaders, I realize that this piece of emotional resilience doesn't come overnight. It takes years and years of inner work for leaders to be able to be agile and nimble when a tsunami of stress hits them. Thank you for listening. Lets get back to the conversation with Amy Edmondson.

DJ: Amy, you also talk about psychological safety in a variety of settings. One end of the spectrum we have high volume repetitive work, like in an assembly plant, a fast-food restaurant, kidney dialysis center and so on where we need to watch out for a lapse in quality or attention. And on the other end of the spectrum, we have creative pursuits, right, Google X, Pixar and the like. When I say creative, I mean, innovative more creative pursuits. What are the nuances in driving psychological safety in these different types of situations?

Amy: Such an important question and nuance is the right word because fundamentally psychological safety matters across the spectrum. Whether you are doing high volume or recurring work or whether you are doing one-off crazy innovative projects but it matters in different ways. And I guess the simplest way to put it is that in relatively routine work the reason it matters is for continuous improvement and for catching and correcting small deviations, small errors that slip in because we are tired or maybe someone isn't yet up to speed on their training and so if you want to make a perfect automobile, for example, everybody's got to be paying exquisite attention to the work and so if they, if someone sees something that's not quite right, or if someone needs help to execute their task, if there isn't psychological safety, neither one of those two things will happen, right? They are not going to speak up about a possible imperfection or error, they are not going to ask for help when they are in over their head and the quality will suffer. So, you need psychological safety for the routine tasks of continuous improvement and of beautiful execution to spec. Whereas on the other end of the spectrum, let's say Google X or a scientific laboratory, you need psychological safety to be willing to take big bets, to be willing to do things that might not work out as planned and in the middle and I will describe the middle as the reasonably well understood activities that you might do in a supply chain or in a hospital emergency room that are still subjected to some uncertainty and some customization so it's a sort of a nice combination of routine and judgment that's required. And there, psychological safety plays a crucial role in people's willingness to speak up when they think that's the wrong judgment or wait a minute, maybe we should try this and to sort of intervene in a way that prevents the work from falling into the routine when it's not really fully routine or in a way that allows people to discover a better process. So, I guess the main point here is that psychological safety always matters. But and the research has shown this, it matters more when there's higher uncertainty. So, when there's higher uncertainty the performance difference from having

psychological safety versus not having it is greater than when the work is more certain and more routine.

DJ: Hmm. And also, I am thinking in terms of the profile of the people let's say driving psychological safety on the shop floor in a Walmart or a Home Depot and let's say Google X, the profiles of the people are different if you know what I mean.

Amy: Oh, yes.

DJ: In your research is there a nuance in the way we drive it given the different clusters of people we might be working with?

Amy: You know, you would think that the differences would be bigger than they probably are. In the following way the people are very different, their skills are very different, their work environments are of course different, but the human being is quite similar. The psychology of being human we all share and part of the psychology of being human is that we don't like our imperfection, right? Whether you are a worker on an assembly line or a CEO, you have this very deep desire to be seen well by others and sometimes you mistake that desire with a need to feel like people think you are perfect and of course none of us are perfect. And it's that human reluctance to ever be wrong or to ever be less than that gets in the way of doing excellent work in a fast-changing complex world. So... I guess because my emphasis is on human psychology and interpersonal dynamics, I see more similarities than differences but I do appreciate that the differences matter.

DJ: Fascinating. In your book Amy you also talk about a cognitive bias called naïve realism.

Amy: Yeah.

DJ: I really loved the term where you say that the leaders forget to acknowledge what they are seeing is just their subjective version of reality and not reality itself and therefore they end up not listening enough to other voices to form the full picture. Can you say a little more about this and how it comes in the way of decision making?

Amy: Yeah, the term was coined by a professor at Stanford named Lee Ross and it just refers to a fundamental aspect of psychology which is that we all have the experience of seeing reality, that you have that experience, I have that experience. I just I can't I almost can't shake it, right? I look around and I think I am seeing the light switch in the door and you know the other people in the room or whatever it is and I think that's just reality itself. I don't think oh I am seeing a picture inside my head that neurons are coming together to create. Now that it's not that we want to be bogged down by the amazing neurology of perception but we do want to have a healthy skepticism about what we are seeing so that we are open to the fact that we might be missing something. We are open to the fact that you might see it differently but because of our naïve realism we tend to think that we are seeing reality and you must see it too and then we are surprised and disappointed when you see something differently and it's usually not a happy surprise. And so, we sort of think, we then make inferences about the other person that they are not as smart as they need to be or that they are disagreeable in some way. So, in other words we have this wiring, I like to say, to put it simply, I like to say, it's hard to learn if you already know and naïve realism means that we feel like we know, which means I am right and you are wrong which is...

DJ: And in a way I guess it's pronounced in the social media-driven world where we are sort of operating in a bubble and in our echo chambers I am guessing?

Amy: Yes, yes. I mean, I think social media has exacerbated this problem because we are... it's so easy to find people who agree with us that we then are at risk of just looking for... because of course we all prefer that and so we are at risk of just collecting agreement and not encountering enough disagreement and dissent and perspective enhancing views.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is Deepak here again. A similar insight came from Jennifer Garvey Berger (JGB) who was on this podcast earlier who speaks about how the Human Operating System that has evolved over hundreds of years is not quite wired to deal with all the complexity of the world we find ourselves in. She speaks about 5 traps we find ourselves in, one of them is the power of believing a simple story:

JGB: "Well, so we become, we kind of fall in love with our own conclusions and we fall in love with our own stories without even noticing they are stories. You could hear it in our language like your people said, well, it's obvious that or it's totally clear that, I hear it in my language all the time and almost never is it actually obvious the thing that I am talking about and so forcing ourselves to listen to when we have a simple story. Like it's obvious what the government should do here, completely not obvious what any government should do right now, completely not obvious. And so when we hear ourselves interacting with a complex set of ideas as though it were simple, then we know that we are in this trap. And so I think the solution there is to be able to construct a series of alternate stories not to confuse us but in a kind of almost a scenario planning way, not to try and get the right one but to try to help us understand that there are these multiple possibilities, none of them are likely to be a 100 percent right and to help us create a kind of a flexibility of our thinking that will hold us in good stead."

DJ: Let's now get back to Amy where she speaks about how Psychological Safety plays out in families and in the recent remote working context.

DJ: Hmm. And switching to the current situation we are in Amy, given that we have been working remote for a while and who knows how long this will last. What have you seen around creating safety in a remote context? Any specific nuances in the remote world that are worth calling out?

Amy: Yes, I think the first thing to recognize is that in the remote work environment, psychological safety is at risk. It's... in the face-to-face environment you will often notice when a team member might be leaning in a little bit or might be looking puzzled or looking... their eyes might be wide, looking like they might have something to say and you can just... you sort of get interested in that and you say hey Deepak, what's on your mind? Whereas in the Zoom-enabled world, we miss a lot of those cues and people are distracted and there's other things going on. So, there can be even greater reluctance to speak up with dissenting views or with questions or concerns. And so, knowing that that means that team leaders and others peers team members need to work just a little bit harder to engage dissenting views and to seek input and to seek feedback and give feedback. So, we have to work a little harder or maybe a better way to put that rather than harder is just be more explicit, be more explicit about you talked about rituals earlier, but be more explicit about the rituals through which we include different voices. So, maybe we explicitly go around the screen and ask people what they are seeing about this particular issue or that issue. Maybe we use the poles to enhance our collection of views about a topic, but whatever tool or technique you want to use you have to use some tool or technique to make sure that their voices are being heard.

DJ: Got it. And talking about families, Amy, especially parenting and children, you know, I am going back to what you said saying psychology of human being is not that different but any nuances for us to bear in mind when we think about some of your work in the way it plays out in our families or would do you think it's roughly similar dynamics?

Amy: No, I mean, I... families are... families have power dynamics and those dynamics differ, of course, across families. But a risk factor and I think most people appreciate this pretty well is, you know, certainly as parents and I am a parent and you are a parent, as parents you very much want to work hard to make sure that your children know that you are interested, your children know that your ears are open because the default is that they won't tell you what they are really thinking because they think you will disapprove. I think all children want their parents' approval and they figure out how you get it and if the way to get it is to look perfect and never have bad news and never do anything that a parent has explicitly said not to do you are at a risk of not having perfect children but having ignorance about what's really happening. And so, I think, you have to have a kind of genuine interest, high standards, but a genuine interest and an open door to discuss the challenges that they will invariably face.

DJ: Got it. Amy, this podcast is titled Play to Potential, as we wrap up what occurs to you when we say playing to potential?

Amy: It's a wonderful title. I think, I will start with individuals then I will say something about teams. I mean, all of us as individuals like to think we have a potential that we can reach and then there are many, many things in the way. There's distractions, there's tiredness, there's health challenges and the job of leaders in a work environment is to minimize the hurdles, right? It is to get rid of the things that are in the way because I think most people can and want to long to reach their potential. So, a leader's job is to remove barriers to that, to inspire of course but then to figure out ways to remove barriers. Team potential really fascinates me too because I think of diverse teams maybe diverse expertise in particular as having enormous potential to innovate, to make good decisions, to make a difference. And more often than not that potential doesn't get realized, that synergy doesn't get captured because people talk by each other. Some people don't speak up or they don't understand each other because of different jargon in different areas of expertise. And so, in order to achieve the potential that diverse teams have to offer you need both psychological safety and good process, a good process and rituals and techniques that make sure different voices are heard, options are generated, decisions are made and value is created.

DJ: Got it. Amy, a real delight and pleasure having you on the podcast. Thank you much for being generous with your time and insight.

Amy: It was a privilege to be with you.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Thank you for listening. I hope you found the conversation purposeful. A couple of messages before we wrap up.

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End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Ravi Venkatesan that is referenced: [Listening intently during Transition.](#)

Nugget from Kartik Hosanagar that is referenced: [Building an entrepreneurial culture.](#)

Nugget from Rich Fernandez that is referenced: [3 levels of resilience.](#)

Nugget from Jennifer Garvey Berger that is referenced: [Trap1 - Looking for simple stories.](#)

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Amy Edmondson - Nuggets

- 78.01 Amy Edmondson - Nuances of Psychological Safety
- 78.02 Amy Edmondson - Implication on Learn-what vs Learn-how

- 78.03 Amy Edmondson - Impact on leadership transitions
- 78.04 Amy Edmondson - Calculus of silence
- 78.05 Amy Edmondson - Traits that drive psychological safety
- 78.06 Amy Edmondson - Effective feedback processes
- 78.07 Amy Edmondson - Rituals that drive psychological safety
- 78.08 Amy Edmondson - Miracle at Fukushima Daini
- 78.09 Amy Edmondson - Nuances in application - Google-X vs Walmart
- 78.10 Amy Edmondson - The "naïve realism" trap
- 78.11 Amy Edmondson - In Summary - Playing to Potential

About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock the human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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