

What Is A No Fear Culture And Why Should You Have One?

Think about the best job you've ever had. Don't overthink it—just recall the one role you enjoyed the most. What about the worst experience you've ever had? What was it about these situations that you either liked or couldn't bear?

Many times, when people describe a positive workplace experience, they say it's down to working with people who support them and are trying to achieve the same thing they are. Where it's fair and people can learn and develop.

Conversely, when asked about the worst environment they've worked in, people often reference a climate of fear, where politics seem to be more important than performance. Too often this is known by many who work in the organization but there's a lack of belief that anything can change. And the fear makes it unlikely anyone will try.

Most of us would agree that a fear-based culture is probably not one that we would like to work in and probably not how the successful organizations of the future are likely to be led and managed. And yet so many times people, even at the most senior levels, shrug their shoulders and in essence decide to live with it. For now, at least.

It is very difficult to develop and successfully manage a culture that matches your goals. It is possible to change behavior but it takes a lot of hard work. Is it worth it?

Imagine a different world—one in which most people believe that they can really trust the people they work with. Where they feel able to speak up, take risks and even ask "stupid" questions. Perhaps it is no surprise then that psychological safety is linked to personal safety at work and patient safety in healthcare.

A culture of no fear doesn't mean no challenges. It doesn't mean no performance management. We need to be able to hold each other to account for the sake of the bigger goal. In this culture of kind candor, you still get to speak up—in fact you have to.

It's also not about creating somewhere where everyone says whatever comes into their heads. When people speak up, they need to do it effectively—rudeness and aggression is counter-productive and yet too often when we do speak up, we do so in a way almost guaranteed to give the impression that's what we're aiming for.

Managing culture is, in fact, the only real game in town for most leaders and yet it's what we spend the least amount of time working on. It's not necessarily because it's difficult in itself, but it is time consuming and detail-orientated. It's all-encompassing and leaders have day jobs to get on with too—this is why it often falls by the wayside.

Why is it so hard to build a culture where people speak up and listen up effectively?

We're not very good at managing our emotions

We revert to fear and rudeness and aggression. It's a reflex. We go fight or flight under pressure, meaning we either go speechless or we squash others, reverting to command and control. This often happens under stress and can be the right thing to do. For example, if you want someone to work harder at a process that's easily measured and done individually then simply pushing harder can work. But here's the thing: that's not what the jobs of the future will look like, as automation grows.

In the kind of jobs where people need to speak up effectively, fear can lead to nobody speaking about the bad news. If you care about the future, you want to hear bad news loudly, clearly and as soon as possible.

Often, the only consistent thing is our inconsistency

Managing culture means managing it 100% of the time. It means recognizing that everything you do sends a signal to others about what behavior is good and what is bad. It's remembering that the words you use, the emails you respond to, the jokes you laugh at, the behavior you ignore or reward, the decisions you make, and the processes you allow matter. Everything is a sign and an opportunity to shape a culture. And as hard as it is to build, it's as easy to undo.

For example, you may believe that gender balance is key to business success, but you're invited to speak on a panel that's made up only of men. People notice these signals. Inconsistency drives us crazy, but that doesn't mean you don't get to be human. Sometimes we will forget and behave in way that doesn't reflect what we want to achieve. Usually we'll be forgiven if our reputation is good enough, but this takes time and consistency.

We don't always understand that staying silent has consequences

Speaking up can come with consequences, and they may be dire, but in reality, the chances of us getting fired for speaking up are low. In fact, those who do it effectively often see it helping their careers, as they're seen as valuable and displaying leadership behaviors.

We often think of the worst-case scenario and this stops us speaking up—what we don't consider is the impact staying silent can have. Often a continuing situation can escalate into something much more serious, which could have been avoided if we'd chosen to speak up in the first place.

It's easier to stay inside our comfort zone

We get scared outside our comfort zone. And listening hard is outside our comfort zone. Because we are afraid of hearing things we don't want to. We're afraid of looking like we don't have the right answer, of not looking as clever as we could. Maybe we're afraid to waste our time. But if we can get over this fear and really listen it will change your life and that of the people around you. Genuine curiosity, sincerely expressed will go a long way to getting most people to open up so that they bring us to the edge of our comfort zone which is, of course, where most learning happens.

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