

Psychological safety: You need people to speak up

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As a leader, you need people to speak up. You need people to feel safe enough to be willing to ask questions, raise their concerns, offer their crazy ideas. Without this, you're at risk. You're at risk of failing to innovate, and you're also at risk of preventable business failures. Consider the Boeing 737 MAX debacle. We found out way too late that employees throughout the organization had serious concerns about the project, but they didn't feel safe speaking up. In fact, some were quoted in the news as saying they thought they would lose their job if they spoke up about problems. I think that's probably very unlikely, but the point is, when people have that perception, real or not, it leads them to not speak up. And that puts you as a leader at great risk, at risk of preventable business failures, failures that could have been avoided had voices been heard early and often. It also puts you at risk for failing to innovate. When people don't share their ideas for improvement or don't share their wild ideas for new product opportunities, the company loses out. Here are three things you can do as a leader to make it safe for people to speak up. First, don't mistake silence for agreement. It's so natural to do that. When you don't hear people dissenting, you tend to think, "Ah, everybody's on board." That may not be the case. This is a very real trap in many organizations, and like the Boeing story, when the information finally comes to light, it's too late to avoid a very visible, very public, and very tragic failure, in this case. Second, recognize that any new initiative, any new project, necessarily has uncertainties and risks. So get interested in what those are. And third, constantly say things like, "What don't I know?" "What are you seeing out there?" Constantly ask those kinds of questions that simply make it easier for people to share what they know. See, the point is you're not, as a leader, supposed to tolerate voice and input. You need to welcome it.