

Title: Amy Edmondson, Psychological Safety for Professors and Students
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Transcript

[Welcome to *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, featuring conversations with scholars and authors and ideas from diverse perspectives. Here's your host Chris Martin.]

Chris Martin: Amy Edmondson is my guest on this episode. She's an organizational psychologist at Harvard Business School and she's known for her highly influential studies of psychological safety, which is the sense that you can be honest and open and can take interpersonal risks at your workplace without fear of punishment. She has also published influential papers on team formation and organizational learning.

We'll be talking about her book *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation and Growth* which was published last year.

Chris Martin: Hi, Amy. Thanks for joining us on the show.

Amy Edmondson: Chris, thanks for having me.

Chris Martin: I like to start with a definition of psychological safety. People have defined it in various ways. And your succinct way of defining it currently seems to be it's the sense that you can take interpersonal risks in a team or in a group of some kind. So in a classroom environment, what would you define as some sort of interpersonal risks?

Amy Edmondson: In a classroom environment, I think the most important interpersonal risk is the risk of failure. It's the risk of raising your hand to say something that doesn't turn out to be brilliant, that doesn't turn out to be the right answer. And many students have learned through their K-12 education that it's much smarter to hold back, to not take risk, to wait until you're just darn sure you've got it right and then to raise your hand. And that's really an anathema to learning.

Chris Martin: So have you seen examples of professors doing things that are particularly good or not good in terms of establishing psychological safety?

Amy Edmondson: I think that when professors point out that the whole job of learning is to stretch, right? It is to try things and learn things you don't know on the way in. They are taking the first important step to clarifying that risk-taking is really part of a learning process. So they are just framing the activity that way. This isn't your Olympic medal winning final demonstration, right? This is the opportunity to try things that you haven't tried before, to take risk, to speak up, to keep an open mind, and all of that.

Chris Martin: So are there specific things you say when you are teaching at the outset to establish on that it's totally fine to take risks and you would not be graded harshly?

Amy Edmondson: Absolutely. In fact, I teach primarily by the case method. So I will often say first of all, the material that I'm teaching is not the kind of material like calculus where there's a right answer and a wrong answer. It's the kind of material where we are going to have to grapple together with difficult and challenging situations. I teach this course on general management so it's how human beings behave, how you wrestle with trade-offs, how you pull in other people and other areas of expertise to try to get a clearer sense of a complicated decision and so on.

So I say many of the things we teach first of all don't have a right answer. And second of all, your learning will be greater when you are willing to take risks. In fact, I tend to grade students based on the degree to which things they do in say, help their colleagues learn. And so if they are willing to take a risk, if they are willing to sort of put a wacky idea out there that challenges and stretches their colleagues so it helps everybody's learning. So those are some of the kinds of things I would say at the outset. And I call that framing the work or framing the activity. This is an – yeah.

Chris Martin: Great, yeah, and your list of things to do that's the first one.

Amy Edmondson: Yes, framing the work. And then of course in my teaching with case method teaching, it's all about asking questions. It's a continual process of asking probing questions, not yes/no questions, not right/wrong questions, but tell me how you think about that. Tell me what the concerns are. Tell me what the other side might be. So you are – I'm looking, I'm looking for diverse inputs.

Chris Martin: So one of the things you mentioned towards the end of your book in the Q&A section is sometimes you hear about leaders with big egos like Steve Jobs who seemed to be very fearsome. They create that atmosphere that does not appear to be psychologically safe in any way. And I think some professors may have that mindset too especially if they have a reputation of that sort and sometimes those professors can be popular.

Amy Edmondson: Sure.

Chris Martin: So what would you say to professors who do something like that to try to establish that atmosphere?

Amy Edmondson: I think where those kinds of professors are popular is where they are doing two things at the same time. They are conveying that they want to hold you to the very highest standards. And so they are not going to be satisfied with glib or comments or answers that show you haven't really tried very hard. So they are both holding you to the highest standards but they are at the same time conveying that they believe in you. They are not holding you to high standards so they can trip you up, that their intention is to sort of do a gotcha. They are holding you to high standards because they honestly believe you are able to reach them.

I don't professors who are sort of tyrants are popular. I think professors who stretch you and leave you feeling like, "Yeah, I really gave it all I had and I felt good about that." Those are the ones who are popular.

So I think in the context of Steve Jobs, he was obviously a genius and he left unanswered the question of how much more could have been done in the company had others' voices been heard as well. It's an unanswered question. We don't know. It could be that, no, he was always the smartest person in the room and there was no need to listen to anybody else. I'm willing to entertain that hypothesis. Or it could be that being "the smartest guy in the room," conveying that idea that no one else really has anything of value to offer destroyed value or failed to create value. We will never know in that sense. But I think the chances that other people, the other smart people that were hired in that company didn't have more to give are rather slim.

And the same is true in a classroom, right? The chances that your students don't have more to give if you let them know that you believe they have it are also slim.

Chris Martin: Right. I used to work in usability and I do know some of the people who worked on Apple interfaces originally were unhappy with some usability errors that started to creep into projects. They called it the hockey puck mouse, the mouse that was perfectly round. You can tell it where it was up just by holding it.

Amy Edmondson: Yeah.

Chris Martin: Yeah. Yeah. So maybe Apple is not great at catching some errors.

Amy Edmondson: Yeah. I mean they love to boast about their design and that everything is perfect and that Jobs was all over every corner and everything. But when I first got the little headphones in the triangle, you can't get them back in there. Once they are out, you can't get them back in. As long as you wind it as tight as you can or as loose as you can and that things don't go right back into nests. So to me, that's also a design error. Things should be elegant and usable and delight. They wanted you to be delighted. But they've given us a handful of things that don't delight.

Chris Martin: Right. Right. So you also talked about – well, the whole concept of psychological safety is about teams and about leaders. And so now, you have a lot of educational environments where students are placed in teams and are supposed to manage themselves. Sometimes there is no designated leader. In teams without a designated leader, what should professors monitor?

Amy Edmondson: The purpose of using teams in an educational setting is to help people learn how to do this because their future work is almost invariably going to involve some degree of teamwork. And so the first thing to recognize is that teamwork is hard, in part because of our hardwiring. We are sort of hardwired to have what Lee Ross at Stanford calls naïve realism, meaning we believe we see reality. And I believe you see reality too as long as you sort of see it my way. But as soon as you come in with a different point of view, I'm initially defensive about it. I will push back.

So if you have teams without leaders, which I think a lot of student teams do, you need to make sure your students have a fighting chance of learning how to do this well. In other words, you can't just let them sink or swim because an awful lot of them will sink. So you need to give them some skills, some tools. A team lunch is a really good thing to do. A team lunch where people in the teams are asked to come together and clarify their goal, talk about their norms. Even such small things as norms about coming to meetings on time can be absolutely critical in keeping the interpersonal goodwill alive that allows cooperation.

Chris Martin: And you manage teams in your courses?

Amy Edmondson: I do use a number of team exercises. I don't manage them. I encourage them to manage themselves. I do teach some concepts that help them do that.

Now, my students, most of my students are either MBA students or 26, 27 years old on average or executives who are 30s, 40s, 50s on average. So they all have some experience already. They all have work experience already. They've all worked in teams. But I still try to convey some concepts and some tools and skills that will help them do well. And then we get the wonderful data of the variance.

Let's say I give 6 teams or 10 teams or 20 teams identical sort of challenges, and some do better than others. Then we can debrief what happened and we can learn more about how the ones that performed well did that and not in a spirit of punishing those who didn't but in a spirit of in a way the ones who did the worse are well-positioned to learn the most.

Chris Martin: So when teams are discussing the issues that have a more social nature or something like discrimination and prejudice. Those discussions can go awry. How do you prepare students for those? Is there anything special you do to prepare student for those sort of topics?

Amy Edmondson: The most important thing I do is simply to remind them that this is difficult. It's supposed to be difficult. It's not – because I think if you get blindsided by the challenge and you expect let's say everyone to see some issue the same way you see it, you're going to get blindsided. Then it makes an already difficult activity even more difficult. So really, it's setting the stage. It's letting them know this is going to be hard.

And there are probably two crucial things that are two sides of the same coin that are necessary to doing this hard thing well. And one is inquiry. One is the art, and it really is an art, of asking good questions, so good questions are leading question. They aren't, "Well, we must see it this way, right?" In fact, you're asking good questions, right? Good questions are ones that focus me appropriately on a particular issue and give me space to respond. And then you look like you're listening intently, right? So you are trying to teach your students to do the same thing. One.

And then two is the art of perspective-taking, which is the genuine attempt to imagine, that's why imagination is so important, to imagine what the world looks like from your shoes. And that

isn't something that's just limited to people who have very different backgrounds or upbringings or expertise areas than yours. It also includes just anyone, right? You could be having an argument with your sister, your brother who has the same parents and blah, blah, blah and yet they still can be seeing a situation in a very different way. And it's like the job of a kind of detective. You want to find out what that looks like as best you can.

Chris Martin: So, have you had cases where teams got stuck when they were discussing prejudice and discrimination?

Amy Edmondson: I probably – I don't really have enough data to answer that question. I mean I work with the first year MBA students on a more general interpersonal-skills portion of the course. And that surely happens. The challenge I have there is I'll end up with about 15 teams at once and then I'll be debriefing. So this isn't a strength, right? I'll be debriefing the 90 students all in one room and I'm not always able to get down to the nitty-gritty of exactly what happened.

Chris Martin: Okay. And when you form teams, what – I'm in an engineering school and I know we don't actually do this in my department. But some engineering professors use some software to actually match team members so teams would never end up with people who are too similar to one another and so on. There's a computer program that can do this.

Is there any research showing that a certain sort of mix or configuration is good for psychological safety? Like say I had information about trades or gender, anything like that?

Amy Edmondson: I don't know. So I don't know the answer to that. And I would not want the answer to be although it's not impossible that higher homogeneity is going to create higher psychological safety but it's possible that that's true but I don't know.

But what I do know is there's great research that says team diversity is not a natural predictor of performance effectiveness. In fact, it's like a scatterplot. But if anything, the regression line is slightly tilted toward the homogeneity. In other words, the diverse teams that are put together on purpose to be diverse so that you can learn and accomplish complex tasks often don't reach their potential.

And what the research does show is that insert psychological safety as a moderating variable and in fact you then can leverage the benefits of diversity. So to put that simply, what you see is diverse teams' performances all over the map tending toward the negative. But when you have high psychological safety in the diverse teams then the performance is strongly positive.

Chris Martin: Right. I've seen terrific papers about that in the last few years. And it is interesting that you can't really leverage the dissent unless people dissent.

Amy Edmondson: Right. Right. Right. So if you are not hearing the dissent, you can't leverage it. And then if you are not able and willing to process the dissent, you can't use it. So if you are not sort of thinking, "Oh, that's interesting," rather than, "Oh, that's annoying," you're not going to get very far.

Chris Martin: So this question is a bit of a stretch. But I've heard some professors say that when students switch to using Zoom because of coronavirus and they could chat, they could type in the chat window, some students who are initially quiet were more open to sharing their opinions. Have you done any research or seen any research about getting people to use chat feature?

Amy Edmondson: No, although it's certainly possible that students who are more introverted or more likely to hold back in face-to-face or especially a large face-to-face setting, many of them will be more willing to express themselves in writing. I think that's likely true. But I haven't seen any research.

I do have some new research on global virtual teams where psychological safety is emerging as the most important factor in their effectiveness, which given that a fair amount of their work is going to be through writing, through Slack and email and chat and so forth. It might suggest that psychological safety still matters but in a slightly different way than in a face-to-face.

Chris Martin: What were the other factors that you measured there?

Amy Edmondson: Well, a whole bunch of things like technology availability, time zones, the sort of the usual coordination structural challenges were measured. And they matter. But psychological safety was the biggest driver.

And these were teams that are formed before COVID but they are continuing to work that way obviously through COVID.

Chris Martin: So one thing that can happen, I'm not an expert on this research, but there's some research showing that at very high levels of team cohesion and people are very similar to one another, they feel comfortable or they feel safe to such a degree that they spend a lot of their time socializing because they are almost too comfortable with each other.

Amy Edmondson: Right.

Chris Martin: And then there's a little bit of research showing that they also tried too hard to be agreeable. But just taking the socializing problem, how do you frame the work so that students who happen to be similar toward each other aren't so comfortable that they actually socialize more and focus on the work less?

Amy Edmondson: You bet. So I like to think of this as comfortable does come with psychological safety but it's not – to me, it's not about figuring out how comfortable to be and then not enough – and then lower the psychological safety. It's about the uncomfortableness that you want to introduce. It's the uncomfortableness of performance standards. In other words, you want people to be uncomfortable not achieving so that the socializing, limiting the socializing ought to come from ambition, not from fear.

And so, what you want is for teams to really get psyched about achieving as much as humanly possible. And great, I look to my right, I look to my left, here are some people I think I can get along with so let's do it. Like it's stretch ourselves. Let's challenge ourselves to do the very best job we can.

Chris Martin: And where is your research going now?

Amy Edmondson: That's a really good question. I've been so overwhelmed by queries and questions and requests through the COVID that I almost don't have time to think about it. But I think one of the most promising areas is some work in progress on joint problem-solving as an orientation in teams and it's an orientation toward two things, one, seeing the problem that we have as shared, and seeing solution-making as necessarily requiring co-production. And when those two aspects are present and measurable, it helps people who are working across boundaries especially expertise boundaries to come together and make progress despite the challenges of what they are facing.

And I think it's fair to say that they make progress by inviting input and offering what they can. So it's this dance of inviting and offering that's mutual. And this is shared work on – with Michaela Kerrissey who is a professor at the Harvard School of Public Health and we've been looking at healthcare delivery teams and focused initially on just chronic disease management but now more broadly at work in a big healthcare delivery system.

Chris Martin: So this is work in the field.

Amy Edmondson: Work in the field, yes, yes. And by the way, there is a potential here for lab research I think to test this orientation and its utility for again, complex tasks.

Chris Martin: So you are saying if people bring a mental model to work when they share.

Amy Edmondson: Exactly.

Chris Martin: I think some people show up with a mental model where they are – that they are less likely – do you think that their bad experiences people might have earlier in their career that make them less likely to want to engage in this dance?

Amy Edmondson: I think that's probably one good reason. The other might be they just haven't experienced it before. They've been doing let's in the school system by and large, they are doing knowable tasks that aren't ones that necessarily are uncertain or require collaboration or diverse perspectives to make progress. And so, they just don't have experience doing it.

If you'd grown up with right answer tests and right answer course work, you're not going to approach something as a joint problem-solving activity.

Chris Martin: So one of the reasons I asked that is some students early on can be intimidated. I'm thinking of my personal background when I took a Humanities course my freshman year and

some students have been in schools where they had already read Greek plays by Aeschylus and Euripides and were familiar with them already. And that was sort of intimidating to me. So it's not – maybe not the kind of situation you're implying in the corporation but ...

... in the classroom, what do you do with students who are in that situation where they feel intimidated by others?

Amy Edmondson: It's so important because people – students really do come to higher education with differential backgrounds. And many students have for example, really learned to write well and to analyze Greek plays for example. You have to analyze literature and identify themes. And others just haven't, right? They haven't done that sport yet.

And so I think it's really important to offer those students without that background some opportunity to get up to speed quickly with either some guidelines for how you do this well, some intensive feedback.

I haven't thought about this before but you could certainly imagine teams and peer-learning and especially when engineering students come into the Humanities courses, there's a real opportunity there for mutual learning.

I remember my brother who is 17 months older than I am went to MIT and I was at Harvard down the road and he was so great at helping me with my Physics problem sets and sort of explaining them and get objects and show me how things work in a way. And I tried to help him with writing. And it was – and I think you can do that in teams of freshmen as well.

I'm excited about the potential for higher education professors to make learning – I mean their job is learning, and to increasingly make learning on multiple dimensions, interpersonal learning, content learning to be even more engaging and exciting and safe.

Chris Martin: Are there any scholars working in this area or books in this area that you admire?

Amy Edmondson: Well, I'm a big fan of my colleague, Monica Higgins, at the Graduate School of Education, and she has been taking the organizational work, the organizational insights and management insights into the K-12 setting and doing really great research with her doctoral students as well.

Chris Martin: Well, thanks for joining us on the show.

Amy Edmondson: Thanks for having me, Chris.

Chris Martin: You can follow Amy on Twitter at AmyCEdmondson and also find her books wherever books are sold.

We'll have two more episodes and after that we'll be taking an indefinite break so unfortunately you won't get a new episode every two weeks, but we hope to come back at some point. I hope

you enjoyed listening to the show over the past three years. I've enjoyed seeing your reviews on iTunes and hearing from many of over email or in person.

If you want to get in touch, you can contact me at podcast@heterodoxacademy.org or tag me on Twitter @Chrismartin76.

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