



# HOW PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY MAKES CULTURE CHANGE STICK

Karolin Helbig & Minette Norman

# What does it take to change a culture?

Many leaders already have an intellectual understanding of the importance of psychological safety as they lead an organization through culture change. They've seen research showing that teams with higher levels of psychological safety perform better, innovate more, and have higher employee engagement than those with lower levels. The real challenge is turning that understanding into the daily behavior required to enable genuine and sustainable culture change.

In our work with leadership teams, we have met individuals committed to making their organizational cultures more collaborative, motivating, innovative, and inclusive. These are leaders who believe that a strong foundation of psychological safety is critical to transforming their culture.

These same leaders have shared the challenges they face, even as they make progress in culture change. A common theme we hear is how to get senior leaders to be role models and "walk the talk" rather than pay lip service to a psychologically safe culture. They also want to understand how to sustain the positive momentum and bring everyone along so they can unlock the full potential of their workforce. They want guidance for navigating the resistance that inevitably arises when driving meaningful change.

One of the most common concerns we hear is, “This all sounds great, but we don’t have time for it.” And it’s true: some of the practices we suggest, such as team exercises or structured explorations, require a small upfront investment of time. However, most of this work is not about adding more to your plate. It’s about changing how you show up in the conversations and interactions you’re already having.

Culture change does not require large corporate initiatives, beautifully designed posters, or lofty values statements. We change a culture through small, consistent actions that create a bedrock of psychological safety: how we invite dissent, how we listen, how we respond, how we handle discomfort, and how we respond to resistance. The real question is not whether we have time for psychological safety; it’s whether we have time for the cost of silence: overlooked ideas, avoidable mistakes, and unresolved tensions. With that foundation in place and well-maintained over time, your aspirational culture becomes a reality.

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## CREATE CO-OWNERSHIP

Small, intentional actions create a ripple effect, and each of us has the power to shift the culture around us—one choice, one conversation, one meeting at a time. When team members understand that building and sustaining psychological safety is a shared responsibility, they become enthusiastic champions of culture change as a team effort. We recommend investing some time in brainstorming sessions with your team to explore what's challenging and what might help mitigate the challenges. While you may be reluctant to spend time on these brainstorming sessions, they tend to pay off by addressing issues and finding solutions up front, rather than facing resistance and a lack of alignment later.

Well-crafted questions inspire insightful thinking and honest conversations. Here are a few prompts we recommend for brainstorming sessions:

- What keeps us from speaking up in group settings?
- What makes listening challenging for us?
- How do we handle tension and conflict in our group?
- What would help us treat failure as a learning experience?
- How can we ensure that everyone has a chance to contribute in meetings?

The format and timing of your brainstorming sessions are flexible, but we recommend starting with a period of silent reflection to give individuals time to gather their thoughts and jot down ideas before the group discussion. Then, you can have structured, time-boxed turn-taking so each team member has the same amount of time to share their ideas. Depending on how long you have and how many people are in the group, you can give people anywhere from 30 seconds to several minutes to share their ideas. It's important that everyone has the same amount of airtime. Brainstorming works equally well in-person or virtually.

## **EXPLORE AS A TEAM**

Shared responsibility for culture change comes from exploring and experimenting together. That's why we include several team explorations in our new book. Here's one you might try with your team:

### **"WHAT PUSHES MY HOT BUTTONS?"**

We all have triggers—specific situations or behaviors that activate our defensive reactions, especially when the stakes are high and we're under time pressure. If left unexamined, these moments of defensiveness can have a negative impact on the psychological safety in our team. Identifying what pushes our hot buttons is the first step toward responding deliberately instead of reacting automatically.

**Objective:** This exercise increases self-awareness by helping participants recognize their emotional triggers. By identifying and sharing patterns, the group normalizes the fact that everyone has triggers and explores how to navigate them more effectively. Acknowledging these challenges openly fosters a culture of understanding and emotional intelligence (EQ).

**Prompt:** What situations or behaviors tend to trigger a strong emotional reaction in you at work? An alternative way to phrase the question is, “What tends to push my hot buttons?” This is about identifying those everyday moments that push our hot buttons—not necessarily extreme situations, but those that evoke an automatic emotional response that might lead to unproductive behavior, or behavior we might later regret.

**Process:** Give people five minutes to reflect silently, then add their ideas to a physical or virtual whiteboard. Read each idea aloud and cluster similar ideas.

**Group Reflection:** Have the group reflect on any patterns they notice. Comment on how these insights foster self-awareness, which is the crucial first step in changing our instinctual reactions.

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By taking the time for team explorations like this one, you help people connect with themselves and their colleagues. Deepening self-awareness and awareness of others are critical starting points for building a healthy, collaborative culture.

## **USE STORYTELLING AS A CHANGE TOOL**

When leading change, data alone rarely creates emotional buy-in. To drive real change, we need to engage both hearts and minds, which is why we are huge advocates for making storytelling a regular part of your group's rituals. Storytelling nurtures empathy, builds connection, and strengthens team cohesion. Storytelling makes abstract ideas feel real and is often what makes the difference in actually shifting team culture.

Here's an example of a storytelling activity you can run with your group in only 15 to 20 minutes.

### **"COURAGE AT WORK"**

When we hear other people's stories of courage, we start to understand our own patterns and realize that we don't all experience courage in the same way. What may feel courageous to one person feels easy and natural to another. This helps us recognize and appreciate the diversity in the group and learn from one another.

**Prompt:** Think of an occasion when you demonstrated courage or took an interpersonal risk at work. Some examples include speaking up when no one else was willing to, challenging a decision, or asking for help.

**Process:** Give everyone a few minutes to reflect and write down their moments of courage. In small groups, participants take turns sharing their stories. Encourage them to focus on what motivated them, how they felt, what made it easier or harder for them, and the outcome.

**Group reflection:** Discuss common themes and lessons learned from the stories. Highlight the different forms courage can take and the impact it can have on individuals and teams. Identify what enabled or hindered courageous communication, and how that impacted psychological safety.

An hour spent sharing stories fosters connection and deepens understanding of team dynamics much more effectively than another presentation on psychological safety.

## EXPECT RESISTANCE

If you are leading culture change, you will undoubtedly face resistance and skepticism. Most resistance falls into two core themes: *time* (“we don’t have time for this”) and *performance* (“this will lower our standards”). Here are a few of the common questions and concerns we’ve heard from our clients, with our suggestions for addressing them.

**INVITING DISSENTING VIEWPOINTS WILL MAKE EVERYTHING TAKE FOREVER. WE'RE UNDER TOO MUCH TIME PRESSURE IN OUR BUSINESS.**

Not every topic or decision requires hearing dissenting viewpoints, and hearing from everyone in a group does not have to take forever. Get creative about how to gather input in a time-efficient way. For example, after giving people a few minutes to reflect silently, have everyone share their ideas on a physical or virtual whiteboard. Then do time-boxed turn-taking so everyone has a set amount of time to share their ideas. Get specific about how much time each person has, how you will discuss the input, and how you will make decisions.

Clients often tell us that the time spent upfront gathering input from everyone saves more time later by preventing the need to revisit decisions.

**YOU SUGGEST ASKING THE QUESTION "WHAT AM I MISSING?" AS A WAY TO INVITE MY TEAM TO SPEAK UP. WON'T THAT MAKE ME LOOK INDECISIVE AND LESS AUTHORITATIVE AS A LEADER?**

Acknowledging that no one has all the answers demonstrates confidence and invites smarter solutions through collaboration. You can build trust by modeling humility, curiosity, and openness. Leaders who don't seek input will not benefit from their teams' wisdom because important ideas remain unspoken.

Clarify your reasoning by saying that you don't expect people to see things as you do and that you value everyone's divergent viewpoints. You can share the phrase "Great minds do not think alike" and remind people of it regularly.

## **YOU'RE TELLING ME TO LISTEN WITH CURIOSITY. IF THE OTHER PERSON IS TAKING TOO LONG TO MAKE THEIR POINT, WON'T I JUST BE WASTING VALUABLE TIME?**

You may think that you're wasting your time, but sometimes you'll be surprised by a new way of seeing things that will improve the outcome. However, if someone is speaking eagerly but not giving others a chance to participate in a discussion or meeting, you can politely interrupt and say you want to hear other perspectives or offer your own. Consider adopting the ELMO ("Enough, Let's Move On") practice. It's a lighthearted shorthand for teams to bring an end to needlessly long discussions. Some teams take this practice literally, equipping their team rooms with an Elmo puppet that they playfully toss onto the table when it's time to wrap up a discussion.

How do you gracefully stop someone from talking too much? First, give them your full attention and make sure you've understood the point they're making. If they're going on for too long, try making the "time-out" hand signal to encourage them to move on by saying, "I'm going to stop you here to make sure we have time to hear from others, too." It's fair to interrupt someone who is doing more than their fair share of the talking.

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## **I HEARD YOU SAY WE NEED TO EMBRACE FAILURE. OUR WORK IS MISSION-CRITICAL, AND FAILURE IS NOT AN OPTION.**

Teams often believe that their work is so critical that they cannot fail, and in many ways, they are correct. However, it's worth exploring what the "work" comprises. If you're a finance team responsible for producing the quarterly financial reports for a publicly traded company, you cannot *not* deliver the reports, and the consequences are significant if there's an accounting irregularity in them. Within that same finance team, however, there is other work besides those quarterly or annual deliverables. You could try experimenting with how you communicate with people in other departments or how you run your meetings.

### **WALK THE TALK**

While it's useful to have logical reasoning to counter the resistance you face, facts alone rarely convince a skeptic; we also need to lead by example, or "walk the talk." People believe what they experience. That is why changemakers must embody the change they want to create. At its core, this work is an inner shift from needing to be right to wanting to understand. Here are a few suggestions for walking the talk:

**SLOW DOWN.** You do not need to have a quick answer to every question. Sometimes, you may need some time to think before responding. Useful language to keep you from rushing to respond is, "I appreciate your question. Let me take a moment to think about it." Or "Great point. I need a moment to respond thoughtfully."

**STAY PRESENT.** It's tempting to start preparing your response while someone is speaking, especially when their question or comment is lengthy. Resist this urge to prepare your response and jump in right away. Instead, stay present and give them the space to fully express themselves. This fosters respect and trust and can save time in the long run.

**PRACTICE PAUSING.** As leaders, we practice pausing and normalize it as a role model for our teams. Taking a conscious breath is one way to pause. Another way to remind yourself to pause is to have a glass of water nearby and get in the habit of taking a sip before responding, which gives you time to calm your mind and reflect on how you want to respond. Your team will appreciate it if you slow down the hectic pace, allowing everyone to contribute more thoughtfully.

**SHARE YOUR FAILURES.** Be open about your own failures and share them with your team. Do this in a matter-of-fact way, perhaps with humor, to model that it's OK to be fallible. This vulnerability helps create an environment where failure is seen as a learning opportunity rather than something to be feared.

**MODEL OPEN-MINDEDNESS.** Lead by example by modeling open-mindedness. Practice not interrupting, listening with your full attention, and approaching conversations with curiosity. Notice your urge to interrupt, be right, or know better, and intentionally choose to listen and remain open to different perspectives.

To help you walk the talk, you can reflect on these questions:

- What compels me to have an immediate response, and how might slowing down lead to better outcomes?

- How can I listen patiently when someone asks a long-winded question or makes a long-winded statement?
- When would it be most helpful to give myself permission to pause, just long enough for a sip of water, before responding?
- What keeps me from openly sharing my own failures?
- What can I do to become more curious about others' experiences, even when I disagree with their views?

Changemakers don't have to be the most senior people in the room, but they are the people who stay the course.

### **LEAD CHANGE WITHOUT FORMAL AUTHORITY**

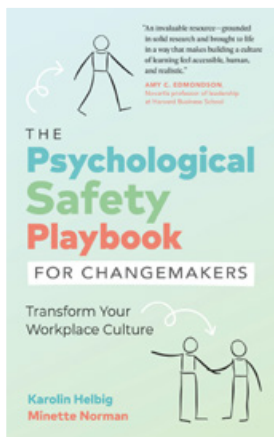
You do not need a title to foster psychological safety and transform your culture. We often have more influence than we think. Start with the people and groups you interact with regularly. You can change the work experience for the people you interact with every day, making them feel appreciated and safe to express themselves. Culture changes when we behave differently.

Changemakers don't have to be the most senior people in the room, but they are the people who stay the course. Driving change means continuously learning, trying things out, and refining your approach. Remember that small changes, practiced consistently, can have a far-reaching ripple effect, and positive change can be contagious. That is how we make culture change stick.

**This work doesn't require more time but rather more intention in the time we already spend together. What small shift will you make this week? 📌**



# Info



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This document was created on June 17, 2026 and is based on the best information available at that time.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The authors, Dr. Karolin Helbig and Minette Norman, met online when participating in a certification program for administering psychological safety assessments based on Amy C. Edmondson's work. They connected immediately around their shared beliefs about inclusive, empathetic, and mindful leadership and struck up a collaboration with the idea of writing a practical guide to psychological safety. They envisioned a book that they themselves would have loved to have as leaders: Concise and practical, though research-based and offering relevant resources for further exploration. They ended up writing *The Psychological Safety Playbook*, not having met face to face before its 2023 release. After hearing from enthusiastic readers and clients, they realized there was more to explore, which prompted them to write the second book in the series, *The Psychological Safety Playbook for Changemakers*. Learn more at [thepsychologicalsafetyplaybook.com](http://thepsychologicalsafetyplaybook.com)

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