

SKIP LEVEL

strategic leadership for leaders ready to think two levels up

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Make Speaking Up the Default

You know the plan has a hole in it — and you say nothing. So does everyone else in the room. Pixar's Ed Catmull solved it not with braver people but with a room built for straight talk: the Braintrust. Amy Edmondson's research says the same thing — safety works through learning, and the response to the first hard truth decides whether there is a second one. This episode gives you four moves to build speaking up as a system, not a personality trait.

KEY STRATEGIES & IDEAS

1. Silence Is Not Agreement

Picture the meeting where you know the plan has a hole in it — and you say nothing. You know you are not the only one who sees it. You can feel the whole room deciding, quietly, to let it go. Silence gets mistaken for agreement. The plan moves forward, the hole travels with it, and by the time it surfaces, the fix costs far more than it would have in that room.

2. The Braintrust

Ed Catmull, the co-founder who led Pixar for decades, asked a better question than 'do we need braver people?' His premise was simple: every film starts out rough, so the leader's job is not to judge the idea but to design a room where the truth about it can be spoken while it is still cheap to fix. So he built the Braintrust — a regular meeting where Pixar's most experienced storytellers watched the latest cut of a film in trouble and gave candid notes for two or three hours. Catmull called it the studio's primary delivery system for straight talk. And here is the design choice that made it work: the Braintrust has no authority. The director does not have to follow a single suggestion. Catmull's reasoning was that the moment feedback carries the power to mandate a change, people stop telling the truth and start performing. So he removed the power — and the director could actually listen. Safety, for him, was built from routines: the Braintrust, daily reviews, postmortems that hunted for systemic causes instead of blame. And Catmull himself said the Braintrust is not foolproof. It was built for candour about the work — and it did not catch everything. The mechanism is what we are borrowing, not a claim that one studio got everything right.

3. What Safety Actually Is

Amy Edmondson, a researcher at Harvard Business School, defines team psychological safety as a shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for taking risks with each other. In plain terms: you will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with an idea, a question, a concern, or a mistake. In her study of fifty-one teams at an office furniture maker, safety did not lift performance directly. It worked through learning — teams that felt safe asked for help, shared information, and talked about errors, and that learning is what lifted performance. She had seen the same pattern earlier, in eight nursing units, where the strongest, most coaching leaders

recorded more detected medication errors, not fewer. Listen to the nurses' own words. On a safe team: 'Mistakes are serious, because of the toxicity of the drugs we use — so you're never afraid to tell the Nurse Manager.' On an unsafe one: 'You get put on trial! People get blamed for mistakes — you don't want to have made one.' The safe teams were not making more mistakes. They were surfacing the ones that were already happening: what gets detected is the errors that happen, times the willingness to report them. And here is the heart of it: safety is not about being nice, and it is not an anything-goes room where standards disappear. It enables candour in an environment of mutual respect. And it is not the same thing as trust. Trust is about another person's intentions toward you. Safety is about the team being a safe place to take a risk.

4. Two Dials
Picture two dials: psychological safety and accountability. Move both to full on — high safety with high standards — and that is the Learning Zone. That is the goal. High safety with low standards is the Comfort Zone, and comfort is not the goal. Low safety with high standards is the Anxiety Zone. Low on both dials results in Apathy.

5. Two Levels Up
Stop trying to make people braver, and start building the conditions where bad news arrives early. Courage is not what you judge. You are a designer of rooms.

The picture: The meeting where you know the plan has a hole in it — and you say nothing. You can feel the whole room deciding, quietly, to let it go.

ACTION & REFLECTION STEPS

- [ ] **Step one — set the stage.** Frame the work as a learning problem, not an execution problem. Say out loud that we have never been here before, name what is at stake, and name what you yourself might miss. Name your own fallibility first, and you give everyone else permission to do the same.

What I will say out loud about what I might miss:

- [ ] **Step two — invite participation.** Build the forums — a regular review where the notes carry no power to mandate, a standing question in every meeting. And ask a pointed question, not 'any thoughts?' 'Any thoughts?' gets silence. 'What is the biggest risk in this plan?' gets an answer.

The pointed question I will ask in our next meeting:



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- [ ] **Step three — respond productively.** This one decides everything. Start by thanking the person who brought the bad news, before you discuss the news itself. Treat the failure as data: what do we do next? The response to the first hard truth decides whether there is a second one.

The last hard truth I heard — and what I did in the first ten seconds:

- [ ] **Step four — hold the standard.** Safety without standards is the Comfort Zone — so keep accountability visible. Clear roles, clear goals, clear decision rights. And sanction clear violations, because safety was never the absence of consequences. It was candour alongside high standards.

One standard I will keep visible this week:

Think two levels up. — Maya & Marcus

Joe Dutkiewicz

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