Diagnose the Disconnect

Five Lies Leaders Tell Themselves About Psychological Safety

Build Trust Encourage Candor Strengthen Accountability

Psychological safety allows people to ask questions, challenge ideas, admit mistakes and raise concerns without fear of humiliation or retaliation. It does not promise comfort, agreement or freedom from accountability.

CONFERENCE APP POLL

Which 'lie' about psychological safety shows up most often in your workplace?

1. Safety means keeping everyone comfortable
2. Good teams agree and avoid conflict
3. Kind leaders soften difficult feedback
4. Accountability creates fear
5. An open door is enough

The psychological safety paradox

Trust makes speaking possible. Candor makes learning possible. Accountability makes improvement possible.

- Safety lowers the interpersonal cost of telling the truth. It does not remove tension.
- A team can be respectful and still disagree, deliver corrective feedback and hold clear standards.

Circle of Safety

Simon Sinek's Circle of Safety describes leaders creating conditions where people feel protected from internal threats and can focus on the work and challenges outside the team. Psychological safety strengthens that circle when leaders respond constructively to questions, disagreement, mistakes and concerns.

Related reading: Simon Sinek, Leaders Eat Last, Portfolio, 2014.

Notes

The Five Lies

Each lie begins with a positive intention. The risk appears when that intention produces avoidance, silence, ambiguity, fear or a burden on the employee to speak first.

#	The lie	What it can create	A better leadership move
1	Safety means keeping people comfortable	Avoided conversations and fragile relationships	Make honesty safe enough to practice. Protect dignity, clarity and a fair process.
2	Good teams agree	Artificial harmony and hallway resistance	Invite dissent before alignment. Ask, 'What concern have we not named yet?'
3	Kind leaders soften difficult feedback	Ambiguity and surprise when problems escalate	Name the behavior, its impact, the expectation and the support available.
4	Accountability creates fear	Either anxiety or tolerated underperformance	Make accountability predictable, fair and focused on the work rather than the person.
5	My open door is enough	The employee carries the first and greatest risk	Notice who has gone quiet. Invite input, respond well and close the loop.

The silence calculation

Employees often weigh whether a leader will listen, whether anything will change, whether they will be labeled difficult and whether speaking will follow them.

23% of U.S. employees had firsthand awareness of unethical behavior	**43%** of those employees reported what they knew
20% of non-reporters feared retaliation	**22%** believed no action would be taken

Source: Gallup, 'Most Unethical Behavior Goes Unreported and Unresolved,' September 3, 2024. Survey of 21,543 U.S. employees in May 2024.

Safety Comfort and Accountability

Discomfort can be part of honest work. The diagnostic question is whether people face a difficult moment with dignity and a fair process, or whether they face humiliation, retaliation or personal attack.

Safe and uncomfortable	Truly unsafe	May need more context
Specific corrective feedback delivered privately	Mocking someone after an admitted error	A concern is investigated but not substantiated
A team member challenges a plan respectfully	Retaliation after an employee raises a concern	A decision moves forward after leaders consider dissent
Clear expectations and proportionate consequences	A leader repeatedly labels reasonable dissent 'negative'	A conversation creates discomfort because expectations are now clear

CANDOR response model

The first response to bad news teaches the employee and everyone watching whether candor is welcome.

C Calm Regulate before responding	**A Ask** Seek examples and impact
N Name Acknowledge risk and tension	**D Discuss** Clarify standards and options
O Own State what you will do	**R Return** Close the loop

A useful opening response

> *'Thank you for telling me. I know that may not have been easy. Help me understand what happens when questions are raised. I will think through the next step and follow up with you by Friday.'*

My notes

Leadership Habits and Commitment

Psychological safety grows through repeated leadership moments. Choose one behavior you can make visible after this session.

Five habits that make candor possible

1. **Ask before telling:** What are we missing?
2. **Reward the message:** I'm glad you raised it.
3. **Separate the person from the issue:** Challenge ideas or performance without diminishing people.
4. **Make expectations visible:** Define standards before enforcing them.
5. **Close the loop:** Explain what happened next, even when the answer is no change.

My leadership move

STOP A reaction or habit that shuts candor down

START A specific behavior that invites truth earlier

CONTINUE A practice that already builds trust

The one action I will use first is

_____

I will use it when

_____

Resources

- *Amy C. Edmondson, The Fearless Organization, Wiley, 2018.*
- *Simon Sinek, Leaders Eat Last, Portfolio, 2014.*
- *Gallup, 'Most Unethical Behavior Goes Unreported and Unresolved,' September 3, 2024.*

Valarie A. Nash, SHRM-SCP, CLRP
President, 821 Consulting LLC | 330.470.4356