Federal Judicial Center
Executive Edge Episode 13
Interview with Amy Edmondson

Jim Chance: Coming up on *Executive Edge*.

Amy Edmondson: I've been in organizations across industries, across sectors, and most of them don't have a high enough level of psychological safety to really be excellent at what they do.

Jim Chance: Due to COVID-19 workplace disruption, this episode was recorded from varied remote locations. In light of recent events, today's episode about psychological safety in the workplace is especially relevant. We'll explore what psychological safety is, how to know if you have it, and what leaders can do to create it. Research shows that psychological safety in the workplace is one of the best predictors of organizational success and that leaders play a critical role in creating it.

Our guest today is Amy Edmondson, researcher and author of *The Fearless Organization*. Amy describes a fearless organization as one in which everyone at every level is encouraged to share ideas and question current workplace practices. Her research shows that even hierarchical and tradition bound institutions, like the judiciary, can promote and support psychological safety.

For the past two decades Amy has studied what makes an organization fearless and why being fearless matters. As the Novartis professor of leadership and management at Harvard Business School, she teaches and writes about leadership teams and organizational learning. She's written three books and her insights have been published in journals like the *Harvard Business Review, the California Management Review, Administrative Science Quarterly*, and the *Academy of Management Journal*. Today we'll talk about her most recent book *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation and Growth*.

Our host for today's episode is Lori Murphy, assistant division director for Executive Education at the Federal Judicial Center. Lori, take it away.

Lori Murphy: Amy, thanks so much for joining us today.

Amy Edmondson: Lori, thanks for having me.

Lori Murphy: Amy, I'd like to start with the basic definition of psychological safety and if you could give us a sense of what that looks like in a work context.

Amy Edmondson: Sure. I mean I define psychological safety as the belief that I can bring my whole self to work. Maybe that's overly simplistic because what I'm really talking about is the confidence that I can be direct and candid and people won't hold it against me. What that looks like in a workplace

is, while generally you'll see people just interacting with energy, you'll see humor. You'll see just a genuine leaning in on engagement and working. What I'm talking about is taking interpersonal risks, not undue organizational risks but interpersonal risks. An interpersonal risk is anything that might lead to others not thinking well of you.

For example: I'm not quite sure what to do here. Can I ask for help? Will I let her know. You might think I'm incompetent if I do so I won't, right? That's a lack of psychological safety. Whereas, if I'm willing to say I don't know what's going on, who can help, then that's the presence of psychological safety.

Lori Murphy: Talk through then why psychological safety is so important to an organization's success?

Amy Edmondson: Today, we live in what's called the knowledge era. I mean we are so long past the world of Henry Ford where the tasks that employees were meant to do were explicitly defined, broken down into chunks, largely individually accomplished and completely objectively measurable. Everything I just said is not true today. Most employees in your organization, in my organization, have to work together on challenging tasks and problems that have some knowledge base but also have some need for ingenuity and problem solving.

So we live in a world where problem solving and teamwork are more important than ever. You simply can't engage in high quality problem solving and effective teamwork without a sense of psychological safety. So the short answer to the reason why this is more important now than ever is that the work demands it. In order to do high quality work in the knowledge era, we need to feel psychologically safe.

Lori Murphy: So if we had that need, all of us it sounds like have that need at work, what role do leaders play in helping foster this type of environment?

Amy Edmondson: So what if I define leadership as an activity, right? As a function rather than a role and that function is doing and saying things that positively influence others; then that's leadership. So the answer to your question of what can leaders do, which is a really good question, should not be limited to those informal leadership roles. With that said, those informal leadership roles have an outsized impact on how the rest of us think and feel and show up. So I want people to listen to some of these ideas with the sense that I could do that too because I think it's true.

So what can leaders do? Well, I think the most important leadership action is to get everybody on the same page. If we all jointly recognize that the work requires problem solving and uncertainty and failures will happen; mistakes will happen, that

creates a very real rationale for why my voice might be needed. I might need to back up for a second because I was talking about how important psychological safety is. But I want to say something unfortunate which is, it's not the norm. I've been in organizations across industries, across sectors. Most of them don't have a high enough level of psychological safety to really be excellent at what they do. Part of the reason that's true is because the default is for us not to take interpersonal risks, right?

I mean there's a saying nobody ever got fired for silence. If I don't speak up in a particular instant, I am not at risk as an employee. By the way, it'd be nice to change that. So why should I, right? The reason I should is that I care. I care about my colleagues. I care about the work. I care about the mission. But that's not enough. I also need to know that you know that mistakes, and problems, and uncertainty are part of the game which means that any one of us literally might see something or have an idea that makes a difference. So I think the most important thing leaders can do is just make sure we're all on the same page in terms of having a rationale for why voice is needed because otherwise we're just going to hold back. I call that framing the work.

For example, in a hospital I studied, the chief operating officer would routinely say things like, health care by its

nature is a complex error-prone system. Now why did she do that? She did that because it let people know that if they see something, say it immediately because we can catch and correct and make sure patients don't get harmed. Whereas, the default before she got there was when something goes wrong, someone's going to get blamed. So you don't want to be anywhere near it. You have to shift that frame.

And the second thing is ask questions. Ask people what are you seeing, what are you thinking, what ideas do you have because most of us would feel very awkward not responding to a legitimate question, a genuine question.

The third thing that leaders can do is to respond productively when people do speak up. Productively doesn't mean I have to love everything you said or applaud everything you said. It does mean I have to acknowledge you, thank you for that clear line of sight. That's an interesting idea. I'm glad you raised it. So the essence of a productive response is it's appreciative not in a throw you a party but in just a simple human sense it's appreciative. Secondarily, it's forward looking, meaning my first instinct. I have to train myself so that my first instinct isn't how the heck did that happen and instead it's how can I help or what ideas do you have, right? That it's forward looking. We're going to solve it first. Maybe later we should look back on how did that happen, but the

first instinct has to be one that in a very, very small sense rewards voice.

Lori Murphy: I want to circle back to something you said earlier, that the norm is not for most organizations to be psychologically safe places. So I'm wondering if you could speak a little bit more about why it's typically hard for most people in most organizations to speak up?

Amy Edmondson: Sure. And in many ways it's very simple. It's like our school system. In our families our social norms are still predicated on the industrial era. Certainly before middle school, the kids learn that the good students are the ones who have the right answers. So you're not rewarded for taking risks. You're not rewarded for making mistakes. You're not rewarded, I think, fundamentally for what Carol Dweck might call growth mindset where you take on harder challenges because that exercises the learning muscles.

So in many ways the syndrome I'm talking about now is even more problematic for high achievers because high achievers are the ones who did really well in high school. Then they got into good universities and then they did well there. Then they went to law school or wherever they went and now they work for you. These people, and I have to put myself in that category, can be risk averse. Interpersonally risk averse because they inappropriately think the consequences of their making mistakes

or getting the wrong answer at some point would be dire when in fact in a complex, interdependent, unfamiliar world we're all going to have breakdowns and mess ups and failures. If we don't, we're probably not doing our jobs.

So I mean I think there's this just societal set of beliefs and mental models that get in the way of accepting our imperfection. When I say it's the norm, in most organizations that there isn't psychological safety, I need to modify that a little bit because in every organization I've studied what I have found is variability. So it's never the case that let's just say the whole federal judiciary is going to be psychologically safe or not psychologically safe. It's always the case that there are pockets. There's a group over here that's on fire, right? They innovate. They talk to each other. They roll up their sleeves and dig into thorny problems and they make progress.

Then there's a group over here that's tiptoeing. A lot of the explanation for that difference is local leadership factors. It's the division manager, or the team leader, or what have you. Again, there are such powerful psychological forces to lead us to self-protect. It's like my colleague at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Bob Keegan, says: Everybody at work has two jobs. There's the job you got hired to do and that you get paid to do, and then there's the job of looking good. What I'm

talking about is when you can make the job of looking good, a really minor part of your day's activities, then you have more time, energy, and brainpower available for your real job.

Lori Murphy: Interesting. So for a leader who wants to do better on this or wants to get a sense of what the level of psychological safety is in their own organization, what do you recommend they do?

Amy Edmondson: There are several answers to that question. One, which is a bit mechanical, is do a survey. Then you can also just kind of look around and listen. Do you hear people talking about problems and questions and mistakes or do you only hear good news? Do you only hear accomplishments? If you're only hearing sort of reports of how well everything's going in my department or my group, that's probably a risk factor. So there's that kind of just get the sense of whether you see people saying and doing things that people who are worried about what others think of them don't say and do. It's another indication.

Then I would say the third thing I would reply is that assume there's room for improvement almost no matter what. Even if you've got a pretty engaged lively group that's learning oriented and very collaborative, assume there's always more. To me the most useful tool if you assume there's more that people can offer if they take off the brakes is the tool of inquiry.

That is just a fancy way of saying ask more questions. Ask good questions. Don't ask yes and no questions. Don't ask leading questions. But ask questions, you know, what are we missing about this project? What other options might there be? Help me understand why you see it that way. You know, the kind of question that invites others thinking in a very real way.

Lori Murphy: There's almost an element of curiosity involved.

Amy Edmondson: Yes, yes. In fact, where it starts is curiosity. I mean most of us don't ensure and bolster our curiosity sufficiently. So you've got to wake up in the morning and remind yourself to be curious because it's a strong sense.

Lori Murphy: It is. In the judiciary, we're a hierarchical tradition-bound institution. So when I was reading through your book I found several examples that I think are really relevant to our audience. One of them is the hospital setting that you spoke a little bit about earlier, what happens when there's high versus low psychological safety. I think there's some parallels, like I said to the judiciary. So can you expand on what you said earlier on the hospital setting and how psychological safety impacts that environment?

Amy Edmondson: Absolutely. And I think you're right to draw a parallel because what the two domains have in common is profession. A profession is a body of knowledge and expertise

that you go to school to become an expert in and then you go practice your craft. That's what you do in hospitals and that's what you do in the judiciary. That's both an enormous strength because you have all this great knowledge but also a risk factor because you might inadvertently believe I'm supposed to know. I'm not supposed to ask. I'm not supposed to be curious. Like the law isn't a thing to be curious about. The law is a thing to uphold and apply. But of course that's wrong, right?

It's the same with medicine. The reality is: (a) medicine and even the law is a moving target. There's always new knowledge, new rulings, new tests, new studies. And, (b), probably more importantly medicine is a profession that is, unlike 100 years ago, practiced in a collaborative way. I mean there are very few and essentially zero hospitalized patients that don't have a need for multiple experts weighing in on the case. The average hospitalized patient might be seen by 60 different care givers over the course of a stay.

So that means that, yes, I have expertise and, yes, someone else has expertise. Maybe someone's an expert in this part of medicine and that part of medicine or this part of the law and that part of the law and yet a particular case is going to be rich and complex enough that we need to understand each other and work together to make it happen. So I think what I see routinely in the health care delivery setting is this tension.

First of all, [it's] high stakes, right? People will say things like, "Yeah, but we can't. You know, we can't have failures here. So I don't care if you want to talk about failures, but we can't have them here. It's like, well, yeah, but here's the thing, you will have them. So if you want to be error free at the end, meaning at the bedside, you need to be error aware at every step of the process. That's just reality.

Reality is that small things will go wrong in routine areas, but also that you will encounter at various times during the day or week or month novel situations that neither you nor anyone else have ever been in before. So you've got to be not only curious but kind of humble in the face of the novelty or the complexity that you face. So you're practicing a craft, you should be proud of that craft, *and* you've got to be seriously curious and humble about the limits of that craft.

Lori Murphy: It sounds like up and down the hierarchy that's important as well?

Amy Edmondson: It is. In the hospital, the chief operating officer I referred to before – that as a study that I did at Children's Minnesota - the culture, a hierarchical, medicine is very hierarchical. The culture of the organization was hierarchical. The more senior and the more expert, the more you're right. Others should just toe the line. Yet time and time again someone at the frontlines, a nurse or respiratory

therapist, might see something that got missed. If they don't feel utterly free to speak up, that patient is at risk. So it's not a matter of them being smarter or more educated than the physician. It's a matter of data and facts being shared which might make a world of difference to the outcome of a case.

Lori Murphy: Another example from your book that struck me as having a lot of parallels is the aviation industry and especially the relationship among the co-pilot, pilots, air traffic control. Can you highlight that for us a bit as well?

Amy Edmondson: In a well-run cockpit in aviation, there's a remarkable combination of role clarity. You know what your expertise is. You know what your role is and role flexibility. Meaning when something happens, let's say the famous the Miracle on the Hudson when Captain Sullenberger lost both engines and yet managed to land that plane in the river with no lives lost. It's an extraordinary moment. Because he was the more senior pilot, but at that moment that they hit the geese and lost their engines he was the co-pilot and the more junior pilot was flying the plane. You do the normal things first. Again, this is all in a matter of seconds. Like, okay, let's restart the engines. Oops, they won't.

Within a very short time, maybe 30 seconds, probably less, Sullenberger says my airplane. Because he recognizes first of all he's on the right side of the plane where the view is going

to be better for what he kind of anticipates might be ahead, and second of all he just has many more flying hours and a great deal of experience in cockpit resource management which is their term for teamwork in the cockpit. So it's not hierarchy that dominates. It’s expertise. Ideas can come from anywhere. What really matters is just communication, clarity, and keeping that line going forward. It's very complex work where there's just an enormous awareness that they have to work together. They have to be dynamic, but they also have to be clear.

Lori Murphy: And there's an element of trust as well.

Amy Edmondson: Oh my gosh, yes.

Lori Murphy: Okay. As we record this, Amy, as you well know, we're in the midst of a global pandemic. It strikes me that psychological safety is even more important when people are worried, anxious, and dispersed. Not able to be face to face. So I'm curious what your research tells you about the situation we find ourselves in and what leaders can do during times like these.

Amy Edmondson: Though I think it's the situation we find ourselves in which is of course unprecedented, and that understates it, no one has ever been in a situation like this before in modern times. On the one hand, the very unprecedentedness of it makes it a little bit easier for people to kind of admit that they're in over their head because it's

permissible. Like everything that's going on is quite discussable and, at least with colleagues and co-workers, we're in it together. I mean we're all, for example, learning how to teach online or dealing with working in our teams only from a distance which is quite hard. So it's not as if you would ever think, oh, it's a weakness if I can't sort of say, ooh, I'm feeling a little uncertain about this. Everybody gets that.

But on the other hand, our dispersion calls for us to be even more explicit about inquiry or about reaching out. Let's just say your manager Zooms you or calls you and says I need that report by 4:00 but doesn't stop to say what are you grappling with right now because she might not know that you're dealing with a three-year-old who's having a meltdown or that you're in the midst of something that is really quite challenging. So I mean the communication has to be much more explicit. The problem solving orientation has to be really nurtured because I think there's a tendency or there's a risk that we will kind of freeze. I mean it's so scary in a way, what's happening at the small and the large, that we can easily just become sort of paralyzed by it. If we're going to be productive and oriented, we need to sort of keep pushing it.

Lori Murphy: So there's an opportunity regardless about how psychologically safe an environment you had previously

cultivated. During this time, we can even flex our muscles in this area it sounds like.

Amy Edmondson: Yeah. That's a great way to put it. It's like a practice field. I mean because this is strange. Gee, I've never -- it's almost like a training exercise. We're all thrown into the simulation and, because it's simulation, we can experiment with new behaviors. Well, it's the same way. It's like this is a simulation except its real, but we can experiment. I think we are free to experiment with new behaviors.

Lori Murphy: Speaking of new behaviors, so what are some specific things that a leader can do beyond what you've already shared if they want to increase the level of psychological safety? You talked about communication. You talked about inquiry and curiosity, asking questions, reaching out more. Is there anything else that leaders in the judiciary can do during this time or at any time to increase the level of psychological safety?

Amy Edmondson: One of the things we haven't talked about is broadly under the category of structures. By that I mean specific forums that are designed, that have the express purpose of problem solving or reviewing a project or planning or looking forward or brainstorming. For example, in the book you'll see the description of Pixar’s brain trust which is not a specific

group of people. It's a specific process that they use periodically when they sense that there is a need to really get in there and look at the movie that's being made with an immense critical eye to make sure it's interesting and good. And it's a process. I call it a structure because it's got structured rules and norms.

When you go in to the brain trust or if you as a manager want to set up a forum where we're going to do problem solving or brainstorming or post mortem of something, there's got to be some rules and processes that we'll use. Like one voice at a time. Yes, we have a hierarchy out there, but in here we're peers for example. That's something that they do at Pixar. There are various kinds of structures like that that just make it easier for people to bring themselves forward because it's the design. It's the design of the engagement. We can't all come in the same room right now, but similarly we can set up a Zoom call, a Zoom meeting which is explicitly for brainstorming about such and such and where we explicitly go around the screen to get different voices at different times. So I think the use of structured sessions to increase voice is very important.

Lori Murphy: This may sound odd, but could an organization or even part of an organization be too psychologically safe? Is there a risk that you swing the pendulum to the other side and become too psychologically safe?

Amy Edmondson: I love that question. My short answer is no, but I have to give the longer answer because that sounds very unresponsive. The reason my short answer is no is because psychological safety is basically the absence of interpersonal fear. So I think what underlies that question is not, well, how much is a good level of fear to have because no amount of fear really helps our problem solving or our cognition or our collaborative spirit, right?

But what's really underneath that question is, well, what happens if people just kind of relax and don't work hard? So it's such a good question because it makes me have to be more clear than I have been. Psychological safety is one dimension of an effective workplace. It is by no means the only dimension, right? It's just I kind of say it's necessary but not sufficient.

The other dimension that's really important is one you already know, which is a commitment to excellence which encompasses that simple phrase. [It] encompasses a lot of things like the availability of training, the clarity of performance standards, even norms about respect and so forth. So you've got already systems in place in most organizations that are there to motivate people to work hard. So absent those, in fact you'd be in big trouble. Because then, with high psychological safety but no commitment to excellence, you'd have

what I call the comfort zone where, and by the way, I can say anything I want and I don't really have to take accountability for it. That's not good, right?

But what I worry about even more is let's say high commitment to excellence and I look to my right and I look to my left and I know a lot is expected of me but no psychological safety. I call that the anxiety zone. The book is full of examples of really smart and well educated people in the anxiety zone and inadvertently contributing to colossal failures, whether that be at NASA or in the financial services industry a decade ago.

The sweet spot is of course very high commitment to excellence and supports and structures to help people perform at their very best, plus high psychological safety, that’s the high performance zone. That's where innovation happens. That's where good things happen.

But the other part of the worry with too much psychological safety is that people might talk too much. That again is accomplished not by making them more afraid but by giving people feedback because nobody wants to be the person who others are thinking has just sucked all the air out of the room. So it's our duty to give them feedback on their effectiveness because we all want to be effective. We want to be thought well of. I want people to be thought well of, loved by their colleagues not

because they're holding back on who they really are and what they really think but because they have shared who they are and what they really think. That's valued by their colleagues. And when they overshare, they get feedback so that they understand it better.

Lori Murphy: Amy, is there anything else you'd like to share with our audience today?

Amy Edmondson: Just appreciation, I'd like to share my appreciation and respect for the work you do. It just couldn't be more important in today's world that you do it. So take risks. Get in there, make it happen. And thanks for listening.

Lori Murphy: Well, thank you so much. It's been a real pleasure to have you. Your research is important and we're grateful to share it with our audience.

Jim Chance: Thanks, Lori. And thank you to our listening audience. If you'd like to hear more episodes of *Executive Edge*, go to Executive Education at fjc.dcn and click on *Executive Edge Podcast*.

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Executive Edge is produced by Shelly Easter, and directed and edited by Craig Bowden. Our program coordinator is Anna

Glouchkova. Special thanks to Michael Siegel and Chris Murray.

I'm Jim Chance. Thanks for listening and stay well.

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