



THE PLAYBOOK

The Room

Whether people say the difficult thing. What the evidence supports, what it does not, and how a small team builds this without a workshop.

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It is built in moments, not sessions

The tool: the speaking-up audit

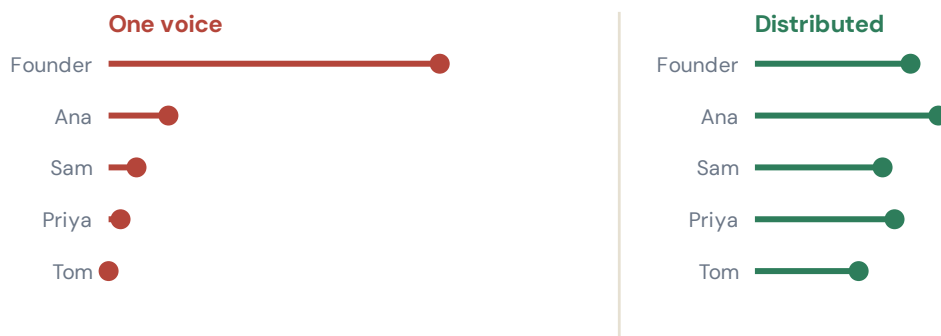
OPENING

The four people who did not speak

Think about your last team meeting. Who spoke, unprompted, about something that was not asked of them directly?

In most small teams the honest answer is one or two people, and it is the same one or two every time.

WHO SPOKE IN THE LAST TEAM MEETING



You do not need a survey to see this. Note who spoke, unprompted, in your last three meetings. The pattern is usually stable

Figure: silence is data. A team where four people never speak unprompted is telling you something specific.

That pattern is usually read as personality. Some people are quiet. Occasionally that is true, and more often it is a description of what the team has learned about what happens when you speak.

Silence is not the absence of information. It is information.

This playbook is about the conditions under which people say the difficult thing, and it is written to be usable by a small business with no budget and no appetite for a workshop about vulnerability.

What it is, and what it is not

The term for this in the research literature is psychological safety, and it has been badly diluted in popular use. It is worth being precise, because the diluted version is both wrong and unhelpful.

What it is: the shared belief that you will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with a question, a concern, a mistake or a disagreement.

What it is not: comfort. It is not everybody being nice, avoiding conflict, or agreeing. A team that never disagrees is usually the opposite of safe.

It is also not lowered standards. This is the misreading that makes managers suspicious of the whole idea, and reasonably so. High standards with no safety produces anxiety and hidden problems. Safety with no standards produces a pleasant team that achieves little. The useful combination is both, and they are independent rather than opposed.

Safe does not mean comfortable. It means you can say the uncomfortable thing without it costing you.

The evidence, stated carefully

This site does not quote statistics without saying where they came from, and this area needs that treatment more than most, because it is heavily used in consulting material.

What is well established. Amy Edmondson introduced the construct in the late 1990s and it has been studied extensively since. It is a genuine research area rather than a management fashion.

The most cited practical finding. Google's Project Aristotle examined 180 of its own teams between 2012 and 2016 and reported psychological safety as the strongest predictor of team effectiveness among the factors they measured.

The caveat that matters. That work is observational and correlational. It shows an association within one large technology company; it does not establish that installing safety causes effectiveness, and it may not transfer cleanly to an eight-person agency.

What I would not claim. Any specific percentage improvement in performance or retention. Those figures circulate widely and come mostly from organisations selling engagement surveys or training.

What remains after the caveats is still worth acting on: teams where people withhold problems find out about them later, and later is more expensive. That mechanism does not require a study to be plausible.

How a leader kills it in one sentence

This is built and destroyed in small moments rather than in initiatives, and the destructive ones are usually unintentional.

The reaction to the first piece of bad news sets the level. Somebody reports a mistake. If the response is a visible flash of irritation, the whole team has learned the rule, and no subsequent statement about openness will override what they saw.

Defending a decision when it is questioned. Explaining is fine. Defending signals that questions are attacks, and the next person will not ask.

Answering first, every time. If the most senior person states a view before anybody else speaks, they have not gathered opinions, they have gathered agreement. This is the most common and least noticed way it goes.

Asking for candour and then correcting the person who gives it. More damaging than never asking, because it establishes that the invitation was not real.

THE MOMENT TO WATCH FOR

The first time somebody disagrees with you in front of others. Everybody is watching how that lands, and the answer they get is the answer for the next year. Thank them specifically, engage with the substance, and if they were right, say so out loud.

The four things people withhold

Knowing what goes unsaid is more useful than a general concern about culture, because each has a different cost and a different remedy.

WHAT GOES UNSAID, AND WHAT IT COSTS LATER



None of these are dramatic. All of them are cheap to hear early and expensive to discover late.

Figure: the bottom row is the one businesses notice, and it is the last symptom rather than the first.

Questions they think are obvious. Cheap to answer, and their absence produces rework. Countered by senior people asking basic questions out loud, which gives everybody else permission.

Mistakes they caught and fixed. The most valuable withheld information in any business, because the same mistake will happen to somebody else. Countered by naming your own, routinely and without drama.

Concerns about a decision already made. Withheld because it feels like relitigating. This produces the failure everybody privately predicted. Countered by explicitly asking, once, what would make this go wrong.

That they are struggling. Withheld longest and discovered last, often at resignation. Countered by asking specifically rather than generally, and by what happens the first time somebody says it.

Building it without a workshop

Five habits, all free, none requiring anybody to discuss their feelings.

01 **Speak last in your own meetings**

Ask the question, hear everybody, then give your view. This single change does more than any intervention, and it is hard because you usually have a view already.

02 **Name your own mistakes routinely and briefly**

Not confessionally. One line, factually, when it happens. This is the only thing that makes it credible when you say mistakes are survivable here.

03 **Ask what would make this fail, before committing**

A structured invitation to disagree that does not require anybody to be brave. Ask it every time and it becomes a normal part of deciding.

04 **Respond to bad news with a question, not a reaction**

What do you need? What is the impact? Buys you the two seconds in which your face would otherwise have said something.

05 **Give credit publicly for the difficult contribution**

When somebody raises something awkward and they were right, say so where others can hear it. This is the reinforcement that makes the behaviour spread.

Measuring it honestly

You do not need a survey, and in a team of six a survey is not anonymous anyway, which makes it worse than nothing.

Count who speaks unprompted. Over three meetings, note who raised something nobody asked them for. That distribution is your measure and it is more honest than any questionnaire.

Count bad news arriving early. How often does a problem reach you while it is still small? A team that only reports problems once they are unavoidable is telling you the level clearly.

Notice who asks basic questions. If nobody ever asks the obvious question, they are being asked privately or not at all, and the second is more common.

And watch what happens after a mistake. Whether it gets discussed, and whether the discussion is about the cause or about the person, is the most direct observation available.

IF YOU DO ASK DIRECTLY

Ask one specific question rather than a scale: "is there anything you have not raised because it did not seem worth the trouble?" Asked one to one, calmly, it produces real answers more often than a survey does.

When it looks like safety and is not

Three states that resemble a healthy team from the outside and are not, and they are worth distinguishing because the fix differs.

Politeness. Everybody agrees, meetings are pleasant, nothing is contested. Frequently mistaken for a good culture. The test is whether anybody has disagreed with the most senior person in the last month. If not, this is deference rather than agreement.

Complaining without escalation. People speak freely to each other about problems and never to anybody who could act. This looks like candour and is its opposite: it is what a team does when it has concluded that raising things upward does not work.

Safety for some. One or two people speak freely, everybody else does not. Often invisible to the leader precisely because the people who speak are the ones they hear from. The lollipop exercise in chapter six catches this quickly.

All three respond to the same starting move: **ask a specific person a specific question, privately, and then act on the answer visibly.** One instance of that being safe does more than any statement about the culture.

It is built in moments, not sessions

The evidence here is real and it is correlational, so I would put it this way rather than claiming more: teams where people withhold problems find out about them later, and later costs more. That is enough to act on without any percentage attached.

Nothing in this requires a workshop, a survey or a conversation about values. It requires speaking last in your own meetings, naming your own mistakes briefly and often, asking what would make this fail before you commit, and responding to bad news with a question rather than a reaction.

And it requires knowing that the whole thing is decided in a handful of moments: the first time somebody disagrees with you in public, the first time somebody reports a mistake, the first time somebody says they are struggling.

The audit overleaf takes three meetings and no budget. It will tell you more than a survey would.

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Speaking-up audit

Three meetings, no survey · v1

Person	Meeting 1	Meeting 2	Meeting 3	Pattern
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Mark only unprompted contributions: something they raised that nobody asked them for. Answering a direct question does not count.

THEN CHECK THESE FOUR

- ☐ Has anyone disagreed with me in front of others in the last month?
- ☐ When did a problem last reach me while it was still small?
- ☐ Who asked a basic question out loud, and did anything happen to them?
- ☐ After the last mistake, was the discussion about the cause or about the person?

Speak last in your own meetings. It is the single highest-return change here and the hardest, because you usually have a view already.