

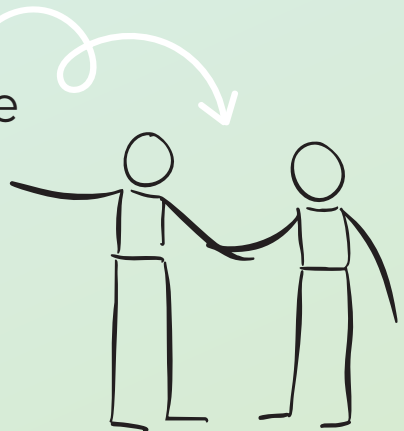
Sample
Pages

THE

Psychological Safety Playbook

FOR CHANGEMAKERS

Transform Your
Workplace Culture



Karolin Helbig
Minette Norman

Praise for *The Psychological Safety Playbook for Changemakers*

“*The Psychological Safety Playbook for Changemakers* is an invaluable resource. Helbig and Norman have compiled a set of actionable practices—grounded in solid research and brought to life with delightful drawings—that make the serious work of building a culture of learning feel accessible, human, and realistic.”

AMY C. EDMONDSON, Novartis professor of leadership at Harvard Business School, author of *Right Kind of Wrong* and *The Fearless Organization*

“Helbig and Norman make a powerful case that sustained, meaningful change comes not from loud pronouncements but from quiet consistency. This book offers a thoughtful, actionable guide to the small signals and daily behaviors that build trust, unify teams, and create resilient cultures.”

DANIEL H. PINK, #1 New York Times bestselling author of *Drive*, *When*, and *The Power of Regret*

“If you want more honest conversations at work, this book gives you language, rituals, and exercises to make speaking up safer.”

FRANCES FREI, Harvard Business School professor

“The more uncertain the outside world becomes, the more leaders must provide their teams with psychological safety. This book helps them learn to do just that.”

TIM HÖTTGES, CEO of Deutsche Telekom

“Our research with thousands of global leaders revealed a striking truth: Leaders are the worst judges of their own effectiveness; their colleagues are twice as accurate. The same holds for psychological safety. You can’t assess it alone; it lives in others’ perceptions. This book offers a practical road map for leaders ready to bridge that gap and genuinely transform their workplace culture. If you’re confident you’ve already mastered it, this book is especially for you.”

JOSEPH FOLKMAN, PhD, president of Zenger Folkman

“The Playbook aims to inspire the next generation of change-makers to create a safer culture in which leaders listen and communicate courageously, and teams transform failures into opportunities. Ideal reading for any leader ready to accept the challenge.”

BARBARA MAINI, head of HR Europe at Boeing

“Helbig and Norman understand the reality of driving change: Progress is uneven, resistance is real, and persistence matters. This book offers thoughtful, actionable support for change-makers who are determined to keep building psychological safety in complex, high-pressure environments.”

SABRINA OOI, CEO of Calm Collective Asia

“This Playbook bridges psychological safety and real-world execution, offering leaders practical guidance on how sustainable culture change can take root in everyday work.”

MARCUS HANSEN, CEO of ÖRAG
Rechtsschutzversicherungs-AG and
Deutsche Assistance Versicherung AG

“This is a great book for people who are already doing the work of psychological safety and discovering how hard it is to sustain. Building on their original Playbook, Helbig and Norman go deeper into the practical and relational work of cultural change. This is the essential field guide for changemakers doing real work in the real world.”

TOM GERAGHTY, co-founder of psychsafety.com

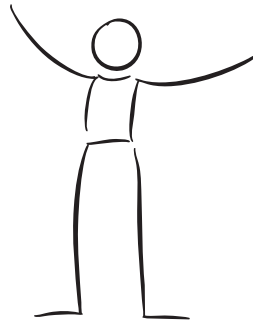
“This isn’t just another leadership book—it’s a field guide for the work of cultural transformation, offering both the inspiration and practical tools to navigate the inevitable challenges along the way. It’s a brilliant follow-up to their first book—I highly recommend it for all sizes of organizations.”

ROBERT DAVID, executive director of the Community for Strategic HR Partnership (CSHRP)

**Karolin Helbig
Minette Norman**

THE
**Psychological
Safety
Playbook**

FOR CHANGEMAKERS



CRAZY IDEA PRESS

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Why This Book?

Why Now?

The idea for this book emerged after the last event of our European book tour for our first book, *The Psychological Safety Playbook*. We had spent the previous week talking with leaders at organizations in Germany and Denmark about the ideas we shared in the book.

The people we met in those countries worked at large consumer goods companies, pharmaceutical companies, insurance companies, telecommunications firms, and not-for-profit organizations. Their roles included human resources, learning and development, organizational change, research and development, and innovation. One thing all these people had in common: They were changemakers.

They were committed to making their organizational cultures more collaborative, motivating, innovative, and inclusive. They also believed that a foundation of psychological safety was critical to the changes they were leading.

In our conversations, we heard about the challenges these leaders faced even as they made progress in increasing psychological safety within teams. One of the common themes was how to get senior leaders to be role models and “walk the talk” instead of paying lip service to a psychologically safe culture. The people we met also wanted to know how to keep the positive momentum going and bring everyone along with them so they could unlock the full potential of their workforce.

In short, they wanted more. They wanted to dive more deeply into conversations and learn how to make psychological safety a lived reality in their organizations by turning beliefs into sustained action. They also wanted specific guidance for navigating the resistance that inevitably arises when driving meaningful change.

While on our book tour, we finished running our certification program based on our first Playbook. The participants were highly experienced consultants, leaders, and facilitators who wanted to move beyond understanding a theoretical concept of psychological safety to enabling and sustaining real change through action.

So, there we found ourselves on our last day together, at Café Vivaldi in Copenhagen, realizing that we needed to write a follow-up to *The Psychological Safety Playbook*—one that goes deeper

and explores the real-world challenges of bringing psychological safety to life in the workplace. As we sipped our tea in that café, we outlined the book that you now hold in your hands.



In Café Vivaldi in Copenhagen

The impetus for writing our first book came from a gap we identified in the marketplace: We could not find the practical psychological safety “how-to” guide we were looking for, so we decided to write the guide ourselves. What we originally envisioned as a resource for our clients soon resonated far beyond our networks, revealing a global need for actionable ways to build psychological safety in the workplace.

What's different about this second book is that it's inspired by the changemakers we've met—real people like you, facing real-world challenges. These changemakers are passionate individuals who sometimes struggle to sustain momentum when driving positive change.

You are the people who are bringing psychological safety to life in your organizations, and it's crucial to stay the course when facing obstacles. You are the ones who, through persistence and dedication, will enable your organizations to tackle the huge challenges we all face in today's complex and volatile world.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”

MARGARET MEAD

We want this book to be a resource that supports you and other changemakers, building on the foundational principles in our first book and offering

practical strategies for responding to resistance, sparking change, embodying the change we want to see, and moving forward deliberately.

We've experienced the motivation, innovation, breakthrough performance, and well-being that result from a high level of psychological safety in the workplace. We have also experienced the suffering, mediocre performance, stagnation, and poor morale that occur when there is a low level of psychological safety in an organization.

Psychological safety in the workplace matters now more than ever. In uncertain times—be they economic, political, or social—we need our colleagues and staff members to feel they can share their ideas, ask for help, or offer a divergent perspective without fear of negative ramifications.

There is no quick “flip of a switch” to drive change in an organization. There are no simple solutions. What we have seen, however, is that by doing this work consistently, we can make a huge difference in how people experience working together.

The world of work needs positive changemakers like you, and we hope this book offers the support you've been looking for.

Introduction

**“Safety is not the absence of threat;
it is the presence of connection.”**

GABOR MATÉ

While psychological safety is increasingly recognized as essential for high-performing teams, it is still far from a reality in most organizations. In our first book, *The Psychological Safety Playbook*, we created a practical guide to fostering psychological safety in the workplace. This sequel builds on that foundation, offering deeper insights, nuanced approaches, and specific ideas for navigating complexity in any organization.



The Five Plays from *The Psychological Safety Playbook*

Beyond the Basics: Navigating Complexity

The five Plays from *The Psychological Safety Playbook* remain powerful and form the foundation of this book as well. However, as many changemakers have discovered, applying them in real-world settings is far from straightforward. Anyone who tries to change workplace culture frequently encounters obstacles such as organizational inertia, senior management skepticism, and deeply ingrained cultural norms.

This book offers insights on how to move beyond simplistic solutions, navigate complexity, and address resistance in the workplace. It is not, however, an exhaustive reference for addressing every complex situation you may encounter. Our goal is to equip you with tools and ideas that bolster your confidence and resilience when handling the challenges of the working world. Above all, we hope to encourage you to continue your work as a changemaker.

This book provides activities and ideas that accelerate change in behavior, mindset, and team culture. For new readers, we offer a brief recap of the

core principles from *The Psychological Safety Playbook* and highlight how cultivating psychological safety requires curiosity, empathy, and humility. For returning readers, this book builds on those principles, offering new ideas for implementing and sustaining change in the workplace. Our focus is on the how—not the why—of psychological safety, as we explore real-world situations.

**“Let your curiosity be greater than
your fear.”**

PEMA CHÖDRÖN

How to Use This Playbook

This book is for anyone who wants to transform their workplace culture. You do not need a formal leadership or management position to be a psychological safety changemaker. Everyone plays a role, and psychological safety is not the sole responsibility of leaders.

Please do not feel that you need to read the book chronologically or to do all the activities we share. Some of the material in this book may not apply to your immediate priorities, so feel free to pick and choose what is most applicable to your current needs.

Like our first book, this Playbook includes the five critical levers—or “Plays”—for increasing psychological safety. Each chapter includes:

- **An overview and importance of the Play:** This will give you an introduction or a quick refresher on the key principles of each Play.
- **Stories from changemakers:** Here you will find real-world examples that illustrate how the Play was implemented and adapted to everyday complexities.

- **Prompts for team brainstorming:** Well-crafted questions inspire insightful thinking and honest conversations. In this section, we share our most powerful prompts and practical tips for effective brainstorming sessions that address the five “moves,” which are specific actions that reinforce each Play. The format and timing are flexible, but we recommend starting with silent reflection to allow individuals time to gather their own 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, using sticky notes or digital platforms to collect ideas.
- **Storytelling:** By sharing personal stories, we foster understanding, appreciation of differences, and self-awareness, which help everyone understand how they are functioning within the group. In our experience, investing time in storytelling is always time well spent. Storytelling nurtures

empathy, builds connection, and strengthens team cohesion. In each chapter, we offer a powerful storytelling prompt that uncovers the rich, diverse experiences within a team.

- **Group exploration:** Drawing on our years of facilitation experience, we've selected a powerful exercise for each Play—a true gem that deepens several aspects of emotional intelligence (EQ), which is a critical underpinning of psychological safety. To ensure their success, these exercises require thoughtful facilitation. This section will help you lead the exercises effectively, with tips for creating a safe and supportive environment. The timing indications are guidelines and can be extended for a richer experience.

This table provides an overview of the group explorations and how they contribute to the domains and competencies of EQ as identified by Daniel Goleman. All of these are essential skills for fostering psychological safety, and each exercise contributes to several domains and competencies.

EQ domain or competency	Play 1: Courage Ladder (p. 28)	Play 2: Heard, Seen, Respected (p. 47)
Emotional self-awareness	✓	✓
Emotional self-control (self-regulation)	✓	
Positive outlook (motivation)	✓	
Empathy		✓
Teamwork		✓
Conflict management		

Play 3: What Pushes My Hot Buttons? (p. 70)	Play 4: Failure 1-2-4-All Brainstorming (p. 89)	Play 5: Create Your Team's Meeting Charter (p. 112)
✓	✓	
✓	✓	
	✓	
		✓
	✓	✓
✓	✓	✓

- **Ways to address skepticism:** We share common questions and concerns we've heard from clients and offer our suggestions for addressing resistance, skepticism, and misunderstandings. In some cases, we offer specific language you can use to respond to challenges. Feel free to use this language as written, or adapt it to your specific circumstances and context. 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."



- **How to walk the talk:** Embodying the qualities that promote psychological safety is essential. This section emphasizes the importance of leading by example, offers inspiration on how to do so, and includes self-reflection questions to help you tune into your behavior. Note that we aren't suggesting this take hours out of your busy day and week. Instead, think about setting aside 5 minutes to reflect on the question that's most interesting to you and write down your thoughts. The act of writing down your reflections is more impactful than simply pondering the question. Each Play and its "Walk the Talk" section stand on their own, which is why many of the suggestions naturally overlap, reinforcing core themes such as curiosity, non-defensiveness, and presence. These are all essential elements for fostering a psychologically safe environment. Real change begins on the inside; when you shift your inner state, your outer world naturally follows.

You can explore the material in this Playbook in any order. Find what resonates when things get tough, when progress is stalled, or when you have a specific problem to address. For example, you may want to start with courageous storytelling if you have a team that is not communicating well, or explore how to address skepticism about listening. You could also start by trying a suggested exercise for designing inclusive rituals, or by discovering how to manage your reactions. Each Play and its subsections stand on their own and can be explored independently.

This book is intentionally designed for change-makers who want to understand how they can positively influence an organizational culture by increasing the level of psychological safety. We recognize that systemic changes in hiring practices, leadership development, promotion criteria, and more are also required. This book does not address these structural, systemic changes. Instead, it focuses on the changemaking power you have as an individual.

A Real-World Story: How Intentional Habits Shape Culture

One of the key principles of this book is that small actions done consistently over time can have a profoundly positive impact on workplace culture. The following story from a real-world changemaker illustrates this principle.

One of Minette's clients, Dr. Joe Morelock, is the superintendent of a large education service agency in the United States and was new to this position when he started working with her. He told Minette that his leadership team had been through a long period of turmoil, and he wanted to bring humanity back to the workplace. So in 2024, he started the year by publicly committing to doing something every week to foster psychological safety within his large leadership team. He put reminders on his calendar and had his assistant check in with him every week to ensure he had done what he'd committed to doing.

When Minette and Joe spoke at the end of 2024, Joe reported that it was the small, consistent behaviors that changed people's experiences at work. He keeps his door open (literally) and often plays obscure or silly music at a low volume. As a result, people have started stopping by for informal chats. He also makes time to visit different floors and talk to people. When he first started these

unprompted office walks, employees thought he was coming to ask for something from them. Now they realize it's just a friendly visit and appreciate that he's taking time out of his busy day to acknowledge them.

Joe recognized that he needs to prioritize and make time in his schedule for these unstructured activities, because it's easy to get busy and neglect them. The results of this consistent commitment have been worth it, as his team is more engaged and productive. Joe's team members see him as an inclusive leader who takes feedback, fixes things when he gets them wrong, and is willing to apologize. As a result, they are willing to experiment and realize that failure is not career-limiting; it's an opportunity to learn and get better together.



Safety signals: What's your equivalent of Dr. Joe's silly music?

Do not underestimate the signals you're sending as a changemaker and leader. Small actions, such as leaving your door open while playing inviting music or having informal hallway chats, can change the workplace atmosphere and culture. One of the leaders we know regularly cleans up the office kitchen, chatting with colleagues and staff members as he tidies up.

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

JAMES BALDWIN

Let's Make Psychological Safety a Reality

Psychological safety is an ongoing journey, not a destination. The goal of this book is not to provide prescriptive solutions but instead to help you and your team members develop the awareness, skills, and persistence needed to navigate the complexity of today's workplaces. By leading with curiosity, humility, and empathy, we can foster environments where people feel safe to speak up, take risks, and do their best work.

We've already seen how small, intentional actions create ripple effects, and each of us has the power to shift the culture around us—one choice, one conversation, one meeting at a time. From leaders who open their doors and improve the interactions and atmosphere of their teams, to facilitators around the world who join our certification program, a global community of changemakers is expanding and learning together, supporting one another, and seeing real benefits as psychological safety becomes part of everyday work. The momentum we're seeing is a reminder that no one is alone in this effort. As changemakers, we're part of a growing movement working toward a common goal, step by step.

Change doesn't come from a single initiative. It grows out of everyday habits—the small actions that create a significant impact over time. It comes from the willingness to try, to experiment, to reflect, and to keep going. In this book, you'll find many stories of changemakers who have embraced these small, consistent actions to strengthen psychological safety within their teams.

You can be one of them! Let's roll up our sleeves and get to work.

Recommended Reading

Daniel Goleman and Richard E. Boyatzis, "Emotional Intelligence Has 12 Elements. Which Do You Need to Work On?" (<https://hbr.org/2017/02/emotional-intelligence-has-12-elements-which-do-you-need-to-work-on>)

Amy C. Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*

PLAY 1

Communicate Courageously



“Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one’s courage.”

ANAÏS NIN

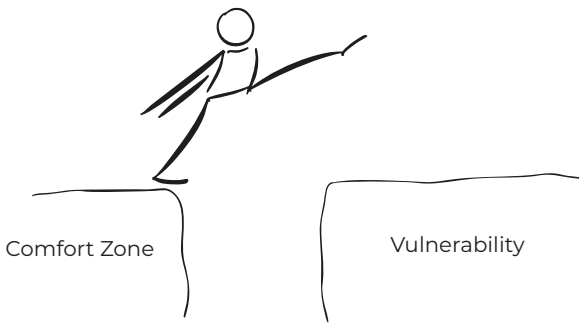
What does it mean to communicate courageously? We believe it starts with being willing to accept that we don’t know everything and to invite other people’s viewpoints and perspectives, which is why the first move in *The Psychological Safety Playbook* is asking the question, “What am I missing?”

The power of this question lies in its invitation: Changemakers give permission to themselves and others to not have all the answers. The question invites divergent viewpoints. It is also a way to challenge our confirmation bias, which keeps us from getting curious and exploring potentially divergent perspectives because we’re convinced we’re right. As a result, we can inadvertently prevent others from sharing their ideas or pointing out something important we haven’t considered.

Courageous communication also involves listening and managing our reactions, which we explore in Plays 2 and 3. It's not only about asking what we're missing; it's also about listening with curiosity and responding productively when our thinking is challenged.

Anyone leading teams or leading change is constantly balancing competence with vulnerability. No one wants to appear clueless or unqualified for their position, and openly expressing our emotions can be a deeply vulnerable behavior. However, if we don't acknowledge our blind spots and invite others to provide their own perspectives, we will not reach high levels of psychological safety and team performance. It's a balancing act that combines confidence with humility and strength with curiosity. When we navigate skillfully, we can still share our viewpoint *and* acknowledge there may be more we don't yet see.

Balancing competence with vulnerability can be challenging, and a sense of humor, especially at our own expense, can support this balance. Humor lightens the mood, fosters connection, and makes it easier to communicate courageously, even in high-stakes or uncomfortable conversations.



Psychological safety requires the courage to be vulnerable.

A Real-World Story: Inviting Other Perspectives

While running a full-day workshop with a leadership team, Minette shared several moves from the Playbook, including “What am I missing?” About a month after the initial workshop, Minette joined the leadership team for a virtual meeting and asked which moves from the Playbook people had experimented with and what had happened as a result.

One of the leaders stated, “I always assumed my staff members were speaking up and sharing their thoughts, but I was so wrong! When I regularly started asking, ‘What am I missing?’ I began to hear from people who had rarely spoken up before. They shared important ideas that influenced decisions and strategies. I was amazed by the impact of this seemingly simple question. It has now become something I ask regularly.”

This story is a reminder that leaders need to explicitly invite people to speak up, because it rarely happens automatically. Our brains are naturally risk-averse, and speaking up can often feel like an overly risky action.

Team Brainstorming: Courageous Communication

These are some suggestions for brainstorming prompts you can use with your team to foster courageous communication. The goal for these brainstorming sessions is to get people to be honest, explore non-obvious ideas, cultivate curiosity about other people's perspectives, challenge habits, and tackle the hard problems together. These questions can fuel powerful team brainstorming:

- 1** What would make it easier for people to speak up when they notice something important is being overlooked?
- 2** How can we encourage people to share their ideas, even when they differ from the majority of the group?
- 3** How do we make the shift in our team culture from believing we must have all the answers to being curious to learn more?
- 4** What keeps us from sharing our work-related emotions with others?
- 5** How could we laugh more and lighten the mood on our team while still tackling the hard problems?

A Real-World Story: The Courage to Ask for Help

A few years ago, Karolin helped design a “Leadership Expedition” on courageous leadership for Deutsche Telekom. It was a four-week peer-learning journey with daily bite-sized inspirations, reflections, discussions, and practical experiments. The goal was to help the participants develop courage in their day-to-day leadership by fostering vulnerability, curiosity, and connection.

During one discussion, Alex shared that he realized he had always tried to project certainty, believing that this was an important part of his role as a leader. But as he spoke with his peers, he saw how this attitude made his team overly reliant on him. He decided to try something different.

At his next team meeting, when faced with a challenge for which he didn’t have an answer, he simply said, “I’m not sure. What do you think?” To his surprise, his team immediately engaged—offering ideas, debating solutions, and taking ownership.

During the next session of the Leadership Expedition, Alex shared how positively surprised he was. He had expected his uncertainty to be seen as a weakness, but instead, it became an invitation for his team to step up. This positive response inspired Alex to commit to making it a regular practice to ask his team for help.

By asking for help, his leadership style became more authentic, while encouraging a culture of shared responsibility and contribution.

“It is a narrow mind which cannot look at a subject from various points of view.”

GEORGE ELIOT

Storytelling: Share Moments of Courage at Work

Storytelling is a powerful way to share and learn from personal examples of courage. 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.

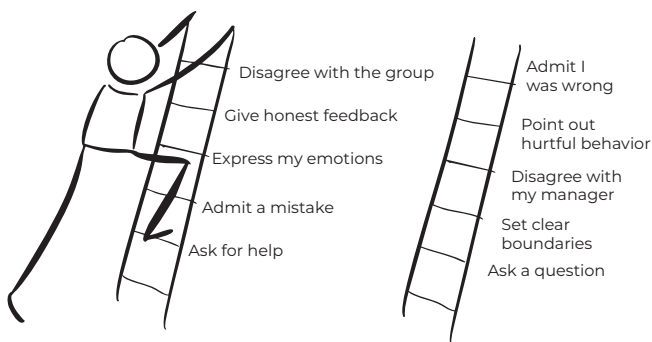
Instructions for storytelling

- **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.

Group Exploration: The Courage Ladder

Courage is very personal. Being courageous at work can mean different things to different people. The same act that requires a huge amount of courage from me may be easy for you, whereas what's easy for me may feel remarkably courageous to you. Jim Detert, leadership professor and author of *Choosing Courage*, developed a helpful concept called the “courage ladder,” where we rank acts of courage at work in the order of increasing difficulty.

- **Objective:** This exercise helps participants recognize their own thresholds for courage and understand how that compares with others. By reflecting on and sharing their personal courage ladders, the group gains insights into different experiences of courage, which fosters self-awareness, empathy, and more deliberately courageous actions.
- **Prompt:** What are small courageous acts at work, ordered by increasing difficulty?
- **Setup:** Start with silent reflection and note-taking, followed by sharing in small groups of three or four.



Everyone's courage ladder is different.

- **Process:** Invite participants to reflect on what they consider to be courageous acts in their daily work. Emphasize that courage in this context isn't about grand, heroic acts but rather the small everyday actions that feel challenging and make a difference. Examples include asking for help, admitting a mistake, expressing emotions, suggesting a new approach, advocating for a colleague, and challenging inappropriate behavior. Ask participants to identify four to six courageous acts and arrange them on their personal courage ladder, ranking them from easiest (at the bottom) to hardest (at the top).

In small groups, ask each person to take a turn sharing their courage ladder. Encourage them to notice what their courage ladders have in common and how they differ.

- **Group reflection:** In the larger group, have a debrief session to explore common themes, identify patterns, and discuss differences. Imagine how you could all deliberately act more courageously by committing to choosing just one courageous act from your ladder. Brainstorm ways to help each other act more courageously.
- **Time:** Allow 15–20 minutes for this exercise.
 - Introduce the exercise and give instructions. (3 minutes)
 - Each person identifies courageous acts at work and arranges them on their ladder from the least to the most challenging. (5 minutes)
 - Share your ladders in groups of three or four. (5 minutes)
 - Debrief in the larger group. (5–7 minutes)

**“Courage doesn’t mean you don’t
get afraid. Courage means you don’t
let fear stop you.”**

BETHANY HAMILTON

Address Skepticism about Courageous Communication

As we work with teams on the topic of courageous communication, some of the common concerns we hear revolve around the fear of losing authority and damaging professional reputation by being too open and vulnerable. Here are some specific questions and concerns we hear most often, with our thoughts on how to respond to them.

Asking “What am I missing?” will 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 ask for input will not benefit from the wisdom of their teams 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 this regularly.

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.

Expressing emotions in high-pressure, results-driven cultures is not helpful.

Acknowledging emotions that come up in a work setting can help defuse tensions and avoid unwanted outbursts that will have long-lasting negative ramifications on team culture. We do not advocate sharing something deeply private or overly personal. Instead, think about expressing emotions at work in a skillful way instead of an uncontrolled way.

For example, imagine you're frustrated because a staff member has not prepared a project summary on time, and you need their findings for an upcoming presentation. If you're not aware of the emotions you're experiencing, you could lose your cool and speak harshly to them, which would shame them and not get to the root of the problem. If you are aware of what you're feeling, you can avoid an outburst of frustration or anger while still letting the person know your expectations. This is also a chance to find out what's preventing them from getting it done and develop a plan to ensure you have what you need before your presentation.

See the chapter "Rebuilding Psychological Safety When It's Been Broken" to learn more about the long-lasting harm that can stem from an uncontrolled emotional outburst.

How can I admit I don't know something without creating doubt about my competence?

No one is omniscient. People respect leaders who reveal their humanity rather than try to maintain a mask of perfection. If you're asked a question you can't answer right away, don't make something up—that will be a surefire way to make people doubt your competence.

In situations where a question comes up and you don't have an immediate answer, you could follow these steps:

- 1** Pause and reflect on the question for a moment, assessing whether you have anything you can share as a response.
- 2** Tell the person who asked the question that you don't have a fully formed answer yet, but you'll commit to getting back to them when you have more information.
- 3** If you're in a group of people, ask the group if anyone has information that may address the question.

If I'm trying to be funny, I won't be able to maintain authority and respect.

While you may fear that injecting humor at work will undermine your authority, the inverse is often true: Humor can boost people's perception of your confidence. Showing your sense of humor at work can increase your colleagues' trust in you and help establish bonds within a team.

Don't *try* to be funny. Instead, laugh more about things that happen day to day, like that moment in the staff meeting when you were trying to share your important proposal and spilled coffee down your crisp white shirt. These moments are opportunities to show that you're human.

Walk the Talk of Courageous Communication

How do we “walk the talk” as leaders and change-makers who embody courageous communication? We can't expect our colleagues and staff members to communicate courageously unless we show up courageously ourselves with an open mind and an open heart. We need to demonstrate vulnerability to inspire others to do the same.

Here are some practices to help bring courageous communication to life:

- **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.”
- **Be gentle and compassionate toward yourself.** Embrace your own fallibility and blind spots—these are not only OK; they make you human. People want to work with leaders who are human and imperfect, just as we all are.
- **Allow silence.** Silence can be powerful. Allowing a pause gives others space to gather their thoughts and contribute their ideas. A moment of silence often leads to richer, more thoughtful discussions.
- **Be OK not knowing something.** It’s perfectly fine to not have all the answers. If you’re unsure, you can say, “I don’t have an informed answer yet, but I commit to getting back to

you.” Then, be sure to follow up when you have a response. This will foster trust and confidence that you will do what you say you’ll do.

- **Get curious, not defensive.** Notice when your ego gets triggered, take a deep breath, and let go. Shift to curiosity and ask a question. You could say, “Let’s explore this together. How can we approach this as a team?” Team members will appreciate the opportunity to be part of the solution.

Here are some self-reflection questions that may help you face the challenges of walking the talk of courageous communication:

- What compels me to have an immediate response, and how might slowing down lead to better outcomes?
- What if I reframed my imperfections as simply part of being human?
- What makes me uncomfortable about silence?



Be gentle and compassionate toward yourself:
"I don't have to be perfect."

- Imagine having a permission slip that reads: "I give myself permission to admit I don't know something." How would your interactions with others change?
- What patterns do I notice when I'm able to listen with curiosity instead of getting triggered?

Recommended Reading

Jim Detert, *Choosing Courage: The Everyday Guide to Being Brave at Work*

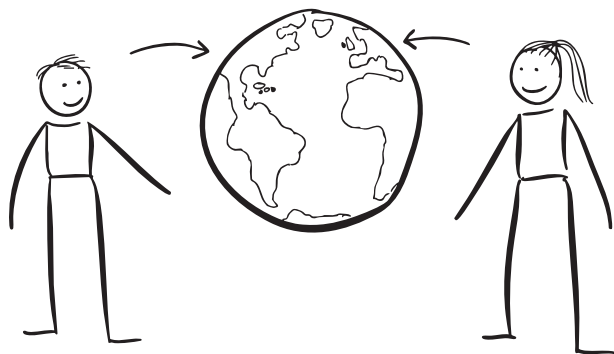
Jennifer Aaker and Naomi Bagdonas, *Humor, Seriously: Why Humor Is a Secret Weapon in Business and Life*

Personal Workplace Courage Ladder from Jim Detert (Personal Workplace Courage Ladder from Jim Detert, <https://jimdetert.com/sites/default/files/courage-ladder.pdf>)

Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*

About the Authors

As authors of this book, we live on opposite sides of the globe—Karolin in Germany and Minette in California—yet we have built a joyful and trusting collaboration fueled by shared values and a passion for meaningful work. We are living proof that creativity, friendship, and even multiple book projects can thrive without ever sharing an office (or a continent). What unites us is a deep belief in human potential and what’s possible when teams invest in psychological safety.



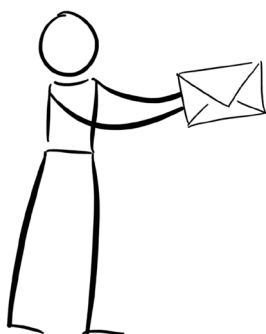
Collaborating across continents

Karolin Helbig is a leadership consultant focusing on mindset and emotional intelligence and holds a PhD in human genetics. She deeply believes in the transformative power of bringing one's whole self to work and making the workplace psychologically safe for everyone. She integrates neuroscience findings that revolutionize our understanding of the human brain and translates these findings into applicable and powerful leadership practices. Karolin spent many years as a top management consultant with McKinsey & Company, working as part of teams at all levels of psychological safety. She didn't know the term back then, but she could sense the level of safety by how much the team laughed together. Karolin loves supporting her messages with visuals and created all the illustrations for this book.

Minette Norman is a keynote speaker and leadership consultant focused on transformational leadership. She has extensive experience in leading internationally distributed teams and believes that when groups embrace diversity in all its forms, breakthroughs emerge and innovation accelerates. Her work focuses on helping leaders create high-performing, innovative, and thriving teams by fostering an inclusive culture built on a foundation of psychological safety. Before starting her own consultancy, Minette spent decades leading global technical teams in the software industry while nurturing a collaborative and inclusive culture. Minette is the author of the award-winning book *The Boldly Inclusive Leader*.

Beyond the Book

This book is only the beginning of what we hope will be an ongoing relationship with our readers.



We'd love to hear from you.

Connect with Us, Work with Us

We always love to hear from readers like you as you lead change in the real world. You can email us directly, connect with us on LinkedIn, or engage with us through our newsletter. Whether you want to spark new conversations, build leadership skills, or apply ideas from our Playbooks in your specific

context, you may benefit from our customized workshops, keynotes, and in-depth certification programs for facilitators that help teams turn insight into action. Reach out anytime. We'd love to explore how we can support your goals and bring psychological safety to life in your organization.

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Certification program

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Join the Community

We're building a global network of changemakers who are passionate about psychological safety. Whether you're just beginning or are already deep into this work, we welcome you to be part of a growing community that's committed to transforming workplace culture. Together, we can amplify our impact and support one another in creating lasting change.

To find out more and get involved, visit www.ThePsychologicalSafetyPlaybook.com.

Help Build the Movement

If you enjoyed this Playbook, please consider writing a review on your favorite book retailer's site. Reviews are important feedback for us—and a meaningful way to help psychological safety gain traction in workplaces everywhere. Thank you!

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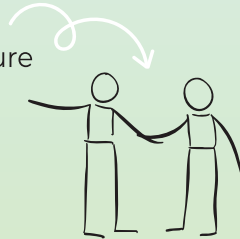
"An invaluable resource—grounded in solid research and brought to life in a way that makes building a culture of learning feel accessible, human, and realistic."

AMY C. EDMONDSON,
Novartis professor of leadership
at Harvard Business School

THE
**Psychological
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FOR CHANGEMAKERS

Transform Your
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Karolin Helbig
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