



**WORK  
WITHOUT  
FEAR**

**PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY & TEAMING  
FOR SAFE HIGH-QUALITY CARE**

Amy C. Edmondson, PhD

**16<sup>th</sup> Annual Raphael Miara Patient Safety Symposium**

THE WORK ISSUE

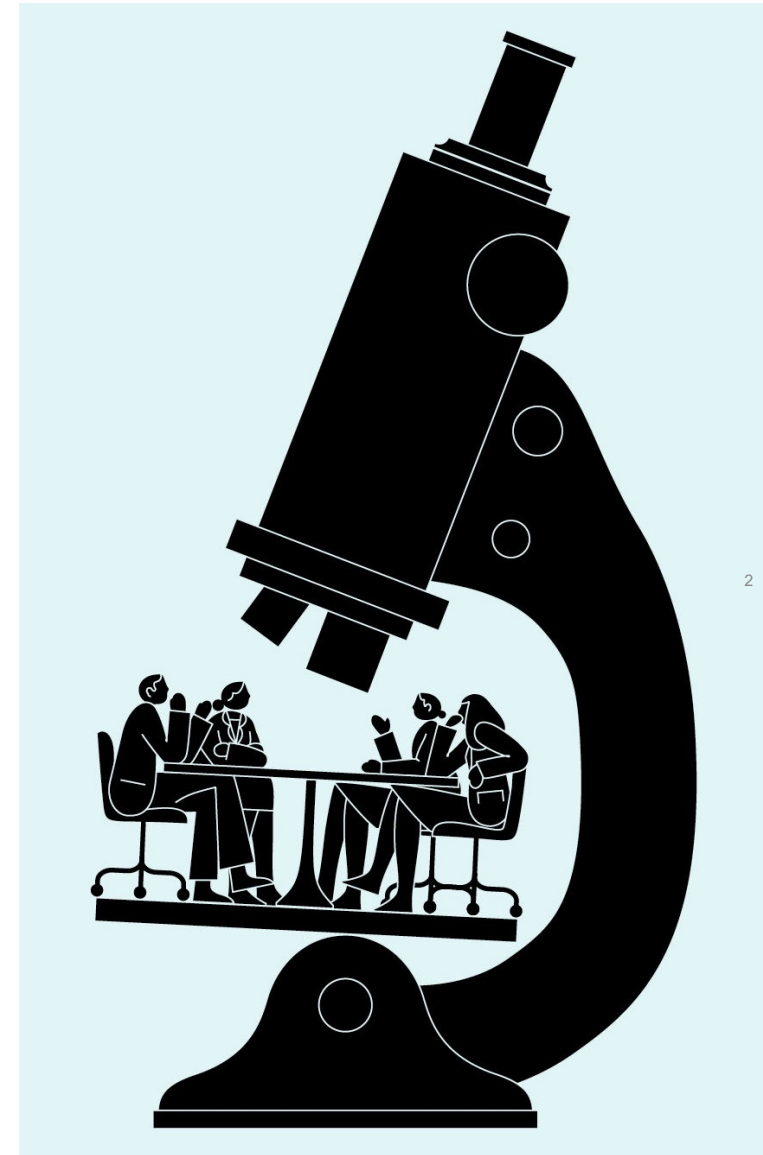
# What Google Learned From Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team

New research reveals surprising truths about why some work groups thrive and others falter.

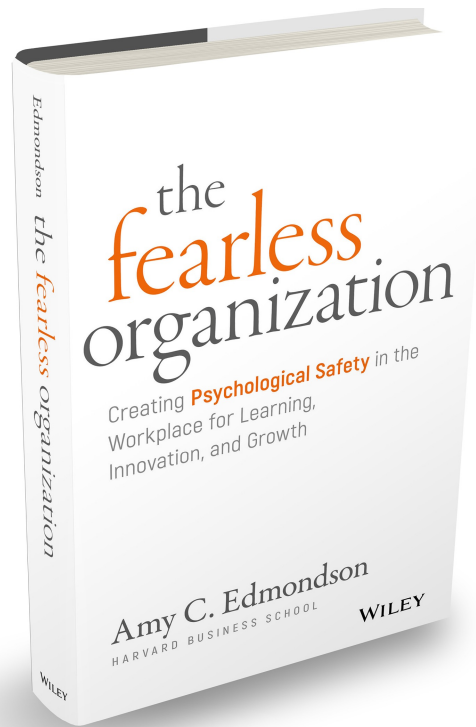


“When [Julia] Rozovsky and her Google colleagues encountered the concept of **psychological safety** in academic papers, it was as if **everything suddenly fell into place**”

*Source: NY Times*



## PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY



A belief that the context is safe for interpersonal risks – that speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes will be welcomed and valued.

**THINK OF IT AS FELT PERMISSION FOR CANDOR**

## HIGH-QUALITY BETS?



"All those in favor say 'Aye.'"  
"Aye."  
"Aye."

"Aye." "Aye." "Aye."

**Success in an uncertain world depends on high-quality bets**

***High-quality bets depend on high-quality conversations***

**These don't happen by accident.**



## NOT TAKING RISKS AT “GLOBAL CORP”

“And by taking risks, I mean something as simple as correcting your boss in a meeting if they say something wrong.”

“In an M&A meeting, the CEO of one of the business units mentioned a company that we bought, and how great it was that we bought it, and the business development team didn’t correct him that we never purchased the company.”

Recent HBS MBA

## UNDERSTANDING INTERPERSONAL RISK AT WORK

**NO ONE WANTS TO LOOK**

**IGNORANT**

**INCOMPETENT**

**INTRUSIVE**

**NEGATIVE**

**IT'S EASY TO MANAGE!**

**DON'T ASK QUESTIONS**

**DON'T ADMIT WEAKNESS OR MISTAKES**

**DON'T OFFER IDEAS**

**DON'T CRITIQUE THE STATUS QUO**

*Holding back is second nature.*

# PROBLEMATIC VERSUS PRODUCTIVE SILENCE

Problematic	Productive
Withholding voice related to a potentially serious business risk	Content that is off topic
<b>Withholding voice related to human safety risks</b>	<b>Content pertaining to an unimportant or tangential issue</b>
Withholding voice pointing to an opportunity for improvement or innovation	Content that you believe could produce serious harm by being shared at that moment
<b>An unanswered question restricts your ability to contribute or perform optimally</b>	<b>You are listening closely and processing what you're hearing to learn as much as you can.</b>
You deny colleagues the opportunity to help you solve a problem or address an issue by not mentioning it	You don't believe anyone currently present can address your issue and you recognize another way to get the help you need
Self-doubt drives your silence	Careful reflection drives your silence
<b>Your primary focus is concern with how you will look if you speak up</b>	<b>Your primary focus is on ensuring the quality of the work or furthering the organization's mission</b>



# NO TRADEOFF BETWEEN HIGH STANDARDS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY



## PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY IS NOT

Being nice

Being included in every decision

A guarantee that all your ideas will prevail

A license to whine

Freedom from conflict

Permission to slack off

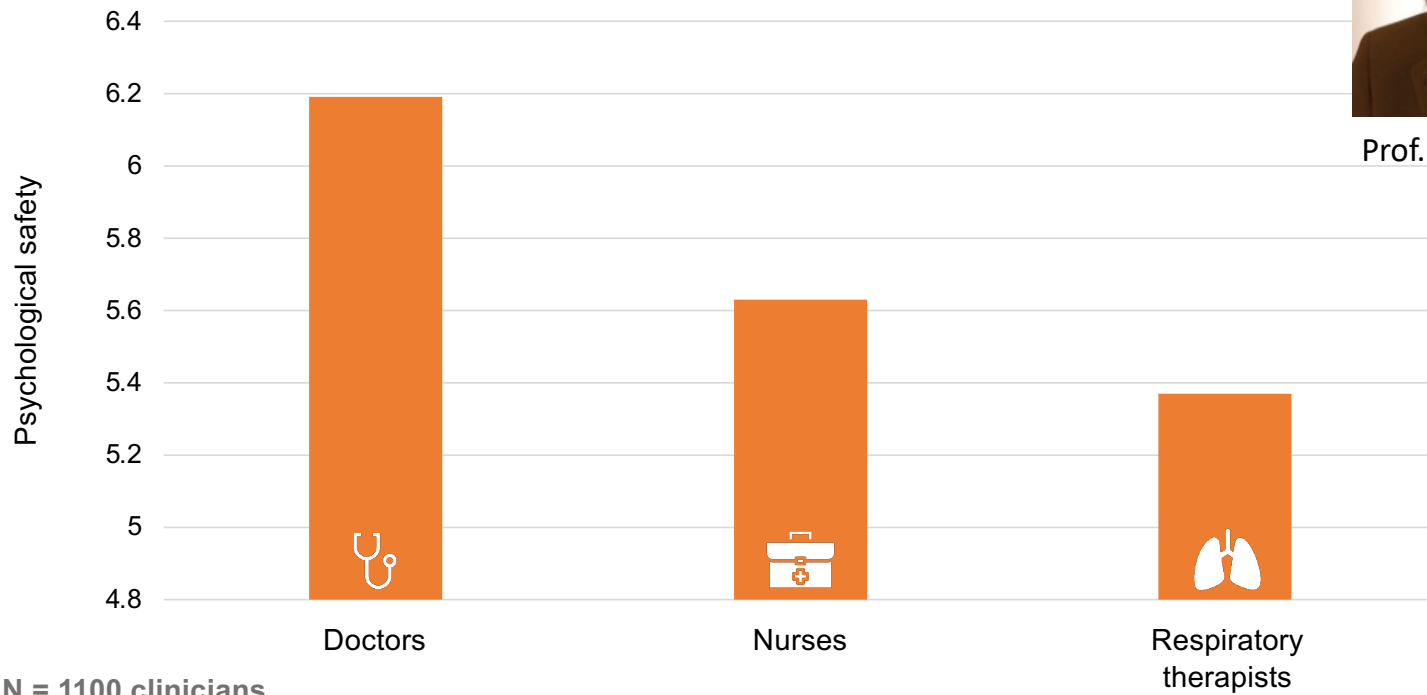
***The goal***



## QUALITY IMPROVEMENT IN HEALTHCARE DELIVERY



Prof. Ingrid Nembhard



Source: Nembhard, I. and Edmondson A.C. (2006). Making it safe: The effects of leader inclusiveness and professional status on psychological safety and improvement efforts in healthcare teams, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*.

# INNOVATION

Which teams do you expect to have greater innovation success?

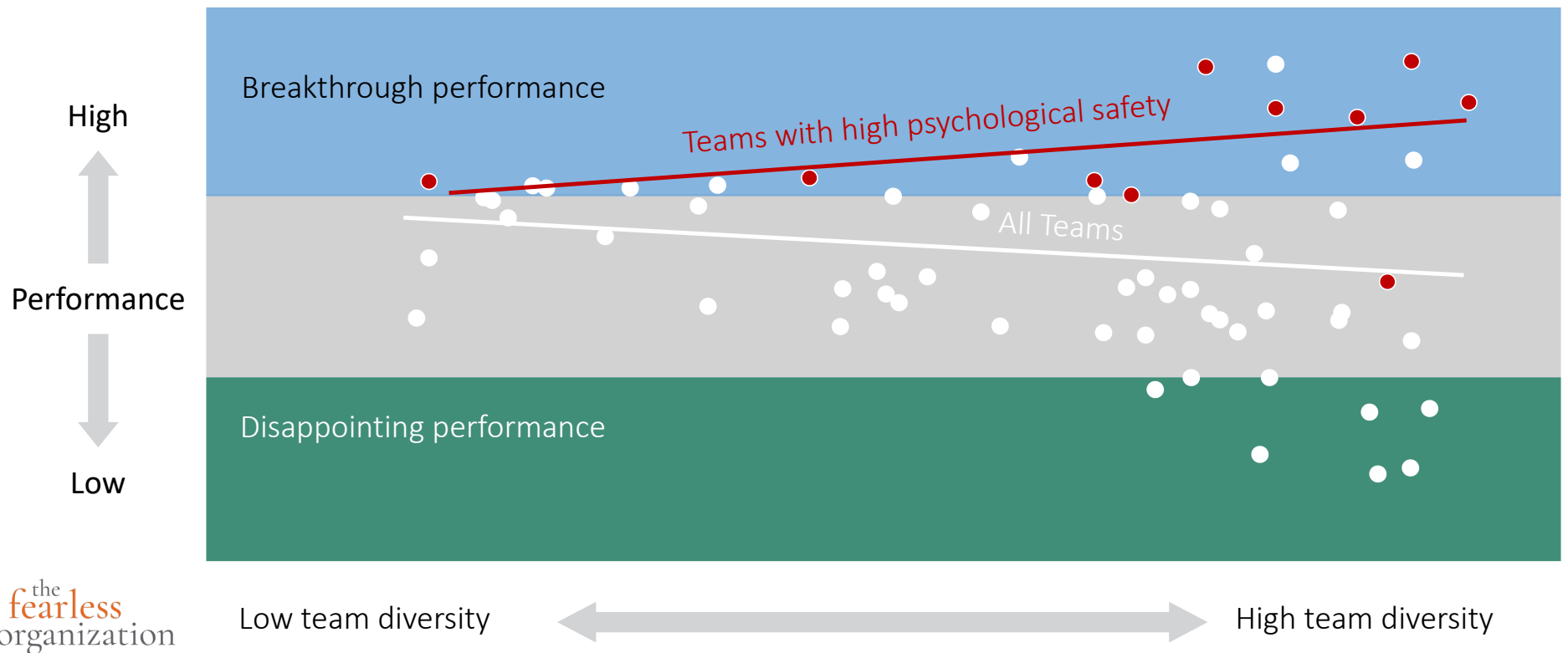
- a) Teams with more diverse-expertise?
- b) Teams with more homogeneous-expertise?



# TEAMING ACROSS DISCIPLINES? YOU NEED PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY!

All other factors being equal, on average diverse teams under-performed the homogenous teams

Teams with diverse talents have **greater potential** but face **greater challenges**...



Data: 62 pharmaceutical drug development teams  
Source: Bresman & Edmondson 2022

## META-ANALYSIS OF 136 RESEARCH STUDIES

Data from 5000 teams found that psychological safety was strongly related to:



Information sharing



Learning behavior



Task performance



Job satisfaction

*In short—everything teams need to do in dynamic challenging environments, thus also enabling performance.*

Psychological safety predicted team performance, controlling for personality, trust, work-design, and job engagement,

# TASK MATTERS

## When feeling safe isn't enough: Contextualizing models of safety and learning in teams

Bret Sanner, J. Stuart Bunderson

First Published January 23, 2015 | Research Article |



<https://doi.org/10.1177/2041386614565145>

[Article information](#) ▾



### Abstract

In working to understand the predictors of experiential learning in teams, researchers have focused on one variable more than any other—psychological safety. In virtually all of this work, psychological safety is viewed as a direct predictor of team learning and, through team

“We find that psychological safety is **more strongly associated with learning and performance in studies conducted in knowledge-intensive task settings**, that is, settings that involve complexity, creativity, and sensemaking.”

environment does not require learning.

**Success in an uncertain world depends on high-quality bets**

***High-quality bets depend on high-quality conversations***

**These don't happen by accident.**

**They take leadership.**



# LEADERSHIP THAT BUILDS PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

## 1. Framing the Work

- Call attention to **Attributes of the Work** that require mutual learning

## 2. Inviting Participation

- **Use Inquiry**; Set Up Structures & Processes

## 3. Responding Productively

- Express Appreciation, **Destigmatize Failure**, Sanction Clear Violations

## FRAMING

### **Cognitive frames**

Implicit beliefs that shape how people make sense of a situation and influence how they act and respond.

### **(Re)framing**

Saying and doing things to build shared understanding (of the work or the situation) to alter how people think and act



# Re-Framing The Work

Build shared expectations and meaning to help people navigate uncertainty

RE-FRAMING THE WORK:  
COMPLEX SYSTEMS BREAK DOWN –  
SPEAKING UP SAVES LIVES!

”

Healthcare by its nature is  
a complex, error prone  
system.

Julie Morath  
COO, Children's Hospital  
& Clinics

the  
fearless  
organization



RE-FRAMING THE WORK:  
THINGS *WILL* GO WRONG

”

I've never flown a perfect flight  
– and it won't happen today  
either. I need to hear from you.

Ben Berman  
Airline Captain and Accident Investigator



## WHAT YOU CAN DO – ASK YOURSELF:

What have I said today to reinforce the message

- ... that anyone's voice could make the difference – in solving a problem or preventing a failure?
- ... that things *will* go wrong! – that fast recovery and learning are what matter most?

# CONTEXT MATTERS:



A) WELL-UNDERSTOOD



B) VARIABLE, UNCERTAIN, COMPLEX



C) NOVEL, UNKNOWN

UNCERTAINTY

FAILURE

# THREE TYPES OF FAILURE



1

## Basic Failures

- Where we know how to do it right, but a single slip or other causal factor results in a failure (large or small)



2

## Complex Failures

- Multiple factors combine in a new way to produce a failure, usually in a reasonably familiar context



3

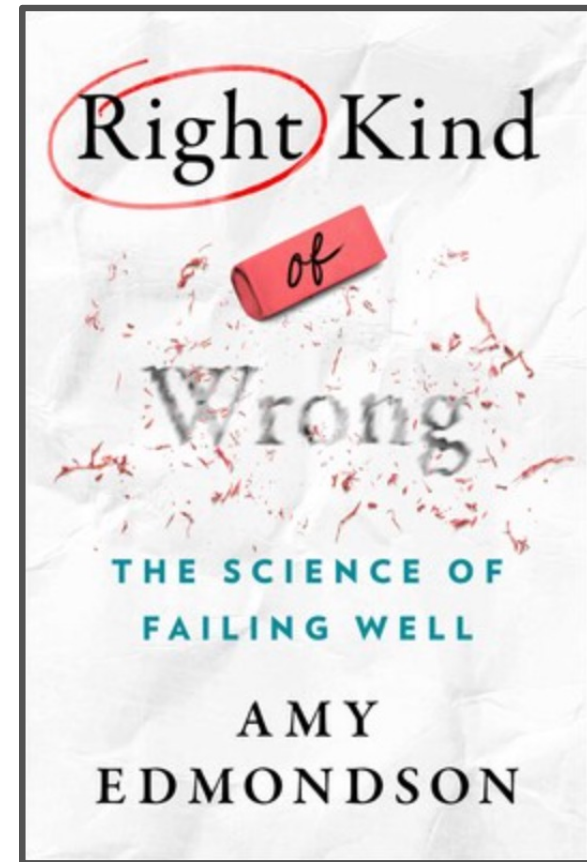
## Intelligent Failures

- Undesired results of thoughtful forays into novel territory



# INTELLIGENT FAILURE

1. Explores an opportunity
2. In novel territory
3. Driven by a hypothesis
4. Keeping the cost & scope as small as possible  
(just large enough to be informative)
5. You learn from it!



# Inviting Participation

Building confidence that voice is welcome; raising the “cost” of silence

## INVITE PARTICIPATION: ASK GOOD QUESTIONS

### To broaden the discussion

What do others think?

What are we missing?

What other options could we consider?

How would our competitor approach this?

Who has a different perspective?

### To deepen the discussion

What leads you to think so?

What's the concern that you have about that?

How would that work in action?

Can you explain that further?

What do you think might happen if we did X?

***Good questions focus on what matters, invite careful thought, and give people room to respond.***

# WHEN HIGH-QUALITY, CANDID CONVERSATIONS (REALLY) MATTER...



## WHAT YOU CAN DO – ASK YOURSELF:

- How many good questions have I asked today?
- Have I demonstrated a bias for action – while ensuring that concerns can be heard to avoid low-quality bets and the preventable failures they bring?
- Have I ensured dissent for **uncertain, important** decisions?

# Responding Productively

Orientation toward continuous learning

## RESPOND PRODUCTIVELY

*“We’re on track to lose \$17B this year. What isn’t going well?”*



APPRECIATIVE +  
FORWARD LOOKING



*You have to make honest feedback a positive experience. It has to be that the red is a gem. I had to demonstrate with my behavior that I welcomed it.*

Alan Mulally

## RESPOND PRODUCTIVELY

“Once an RN dropped a vein graft on the floor. She spoke up, and [the surgeon] didn’t say a word. He just made another incision. Maybe a millisecond was lost.

Maybe a millisecond was lost.

No yelling or screaming. He didn’t need to. She knew she’d made a mistake.”

Edmondson, A.C. (2003). Speaking up in the operating room: How team leaders promote learning in interdisciplinary action teams. *Journal of Management Studies*, 40 (6): 1419-1452




RESPOND PRODUCTIVELY =  
HUMANE +  
FORWARD-LOOKING



## HOW DOES IT FEEL WHEN SOMEONE POINTS OUT YOUR ERROR?

- Let's be honest!
- Is it possible to learn a new response?
- Dr. Jonathan Cohen says yes:

How does it feel when someone points out my error? 

Actually, pretty good – just to be clear it didn't always feel that way


After doing this a while, you realize what someone speaking up means:

- It means they're being vigilant & thinking critically
- It means they feel comfortable speaking up when something isn't right
- It means (hopefully) that I'm doing something right & fostering an environment that allows for speaking up

Bottom line...

**It means that patients will be getting safer care**

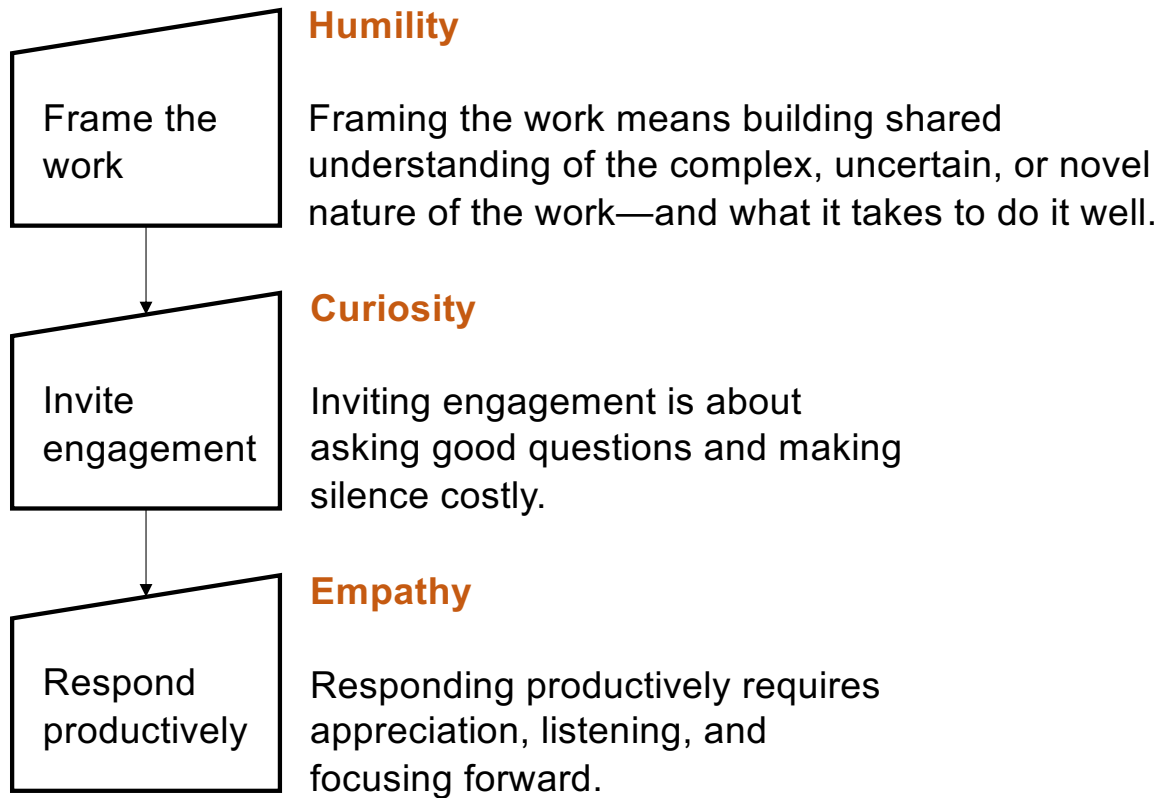
Because while I am fallible and will make errors, **WE** can stop the errors from causing harm *if when I don't see them, you point them out.*

Jonathan.Cohen@moffitt.org  
 @JonathanCohenMD

## WHAT YOU CAN DO – ASK YOURSELF:

- How do I usually respond to bad news?
- How do I feel when someone points out my error?
- What will I do to respond appreciatively and constructively to whatever happens, to foster speed and quality?
- How will I practice – and hold myself accountable for – productive responses?

## KEEP IT SIMPLE: 3 LEADERSHIP STANCES



## THE BASIC HUMAN CHALLENGE

*It's hard to **learn**,  
if you already **know***

I just have this feeling... If our two departments could just collaborate, we could come up with something that's truly amazing.



## **FRAME THE JOURNEY: *YOU CAN'T DO IT ALONE***

1. **Frame** the work as a collaborative, messy journey of constant learning
2. **Reinforce** shared ownership & problem-solving by asking good questions & testing your thinking aloud
3. **Anticipate** unexpected events
4. **Make learning explicit** by frequently reflecting on the “data” of your experience
5. **Embrace** bumps in the road as valuable inputs to learning

# A RECIPE FOR EXCELLENCE IN AN UNCERTAIN WORLD

**Aim High**  
**★ Team Up**  
**Fail Well**  
**Learn Fast**  
**Repeat**

