

5 Behaviors That Foster Challenger Safety.

Challenger safety satisfies the basic human need to make things better. It's the support and confidence we need to ask questions such as, "Why do we do it this way?" "What if we tried this?" or "May I suggest a better way?" It allows us to feel safe to challenge the status quo without retaliation or the risk of damaging our personal standing or reputation.

As the fourth and final stage of psychological safety, challenger safety matches the increased vulnerability and personal risk associated with challenging the status quo. Here are five behaviors to help you create challenger safety on your team.

1. Model the art of disagreement. Having challenger safety means that the members of your team can debate issues on their merits and find the best one without creating fear and interpersonal conflict. It's your job to teach them how to have marvelous disagreement to create this idea of meritocracy. Master the emotional and interpersonal art of disagreeing in a warm and friendly way so others don't take offense. Maintain a respectful body posture while avoiding curt, abrupt, and abrasive language and overly aggressive or sarcastic body language. If you keep practicing this skill, your team will develop an incredibly high tolerance for candor.

2. Look for R.O.T. Everything we do eventually becomes obsolete. Every source of competitive advantage we have is temporary. It's like ice. The only question is the rate of the melt. Engage your team to look at the way you do things. Identify anything that is redundant, obsolete, or trivial (R.O.T.). Sources of R.O.T. represent the low-hanging fruit of the status quo that needs to be dismantled.

3. Weigh in Last. Speaking first when you hold positional power softly censors your team. Listen carefully, acknowledge the contributions of others, and then register your point of view.

4. Encourage others to think beyond their role. Inviting your people to venture out of their tactical and functional silos creates more opportunity for divergent thinking, allowing them to connect things that aren't normally connected. Of course, you must manage the process carefully and discern when constructive dissent is giving way to destructive derailment.

5. Take your finger off the fear button. Fear triggers the self-censoring instinct and causes people to retreat into silence and personal risk management. When a leader uses fear, it's normally a punitive response borne of frustration and insecurity. More importantly, it's an abdication of leadership.

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