



Fiona ROBERTSON

# What if new ideas aren't the most important thing to make innovation flourish?

When you joined your current organisation, do you remember asking yourself 'I wonder why they do it like that?' fairly frequently in the first few months? We see with fresh eyes in those precious early days. And I say precious, because it doesn't take us very long to 'go native' and stop seeing stuff we think is odd. After that, we just see the way 'we' do things around here as totally normal.

Here's the big question though, in those early days, did you ask anyone else why they did something a certain way? Did you mention that you thought a particular way of doing something seemed a bit odd to you? My guess is no. I suspect you were so busy figuring out how things worked and how to make sure you didn't look like an idiot that you kept your big mouth shut. Or if you did ask those kinds of questions, you fairly quickly figured out that you might not make too many new friends that way and started to clam up.

Turns out humans want to belong. Maslow was wrong about our most fundamental need, it's not food, water and shelter, it's belonging. But what has that got to do with innovation?

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Amy Edmondson is a Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School. She studies teams and leadership and is probably best known for her work on psychological safety. Whilst a lot has been written about this topic, Edmondson has a very specific definition of psychological safety that I believe isolates the key to unlocking innovation. Her definition is this: the belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns or mistakes.

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It's the word 'punished' that I think holds the key. Punishment can take many forms in organisations. It can be overt, in the form of a lower performance rating for being 'difficult' or 'negative', often with financial consequences. It can be covert, in the form of gaining a

reputation for being 'difficult' or 'negative' or 'a know-it-all' or 'exhausting' or 'painful' or any number of other labels we humans put on each other when someone doesn't have the good sense to know that they need to go along to get along. When covert, it may take quite a while for the target of these labels to notice that they're being invited to fewer brainstorming meetings than they used to, or not being asked out for lunch with the gang as often, or whatever signals are sent to suggest that the level of belonging they either once had or aspire to is at risk.

At this point, the vast majority of humans will cease and desist. They may not even know they're doing it. As far as their sub-conscious is concerned, belonging is literally a matter of life or death. After all, thousands of years ago, belonging was a pre-condition for food, water and shelter. Without belonging humans would die. It's still true, but in a different way. Many studies have shown that loneliness will kill us faster than smoking, alcohol, eating badly or doing no exercise. Our sub-conscious minds haven't evolved at anywhere near the pace of our external world. They're still fighting for our survival.

As a result, humans are first class experts at impression management. We know, at a primal level, that we don't want to look ignorant, incompetent, intrusive or negative. We know these things threaten our belonging. Turns out it's easy to avoid them all. If you don't want to look ignorant, just don't ask any questions. If you don't want to look incompetent, don't admit weakness or mistakes. If you don't want to look intrusive, don't offer new ideas. And if you don't want to look negative, make sure you never question the status quo.

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We all know, however, that innovation will only flourish in our organisations if people do the exact opposite of all this. We desperately need them to ask questions, admit when things aren't right (so they can be fixed), offer their ideas and constantly question the status quo.

It's not as simple as 'people want to look good'. Humans are hard-wired to do whatever they need to in order to belong, to keep themselves safe, whether they know they're doing it or not.

So what can we do about it? Do we just give everybody a big hug and say 'it'll all be ok, we don't care if you make mistakes, have no idea what you're doing and drive us all crazy'? Well no. Edmondson is often asked questions that boil down to: "how do I maintain accountability if I give my people psychological safety?" She is careful to point out that psychological safety is not the opposite of accountability. That there is no 'or' there. There's an 'and'. Both things must work together to create what she calls the 'learning zone'.

High accountability with low psychological safety is a recipe for disaster. Most of us have been there at some point in our careers and it feels awful. You're expected to deliver, deliver and deliver some more and if you make a mistake (usually because you've tried to do more with less, again, within a stupidly short deadline), you'll be publicly flogged, at

least metaphorically. There's pretty much no way to win in that sort of environment and the majority of people will eventually decide it's not worth it and exit stage left.

By contrast, high psychological safety with low accountability sounds lovely. Except its not. It might be nice to feel safe and to know that your mistakes won't be considered sins, but humans really want to achieve things, not just feel good about themselves. In that sort of environment, anyone with an ounce of initiative or drive will get bored very quickly and likewise jump ship.

Both need to be high. High expectations of accountability and high psychological safety. In those organisations, we feel safe to take personal risks, even those that might diminish our belonging, because we know that our colleagues will give us the benefit of the doubt. We are not just prepared to be vulnerable in front of each other, we also know we are expected to deliver. The main difference is that we're surrounded by people who understand a crucial fact - that the only people who don't make mistakes are the people who don't do anything.

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