

## Conversation #10: Helping Your Mentees Feel Safe

**Question Preview:** *Do you feel like you can be yourself in our mentoring conversations? Have I, as the mentor, demonstrated my own mistakes and imperfections?*

**Purpose:** This conversation aims to equip you with some background information that can help you understand why mentees need to feel safe, and how you can help facilitate that comfort.

**Background:** In his 2014 TED talk, *Why Good Leaders Make You Feel Safe*, Simon Sinek cites numerous anecdotal stories of how leaders build trust and accomplish missions by making their people feel safe. I re-watched Sinek's talk while thinking about how it parallels teaching, coaching, and mentoring, particularly when we shifted to online instruction during the initial COVID-19 crisis in 2020. Today, online instruction and mentoring continue, hence my inclusion of this module.

Pause for a moment and consider the people you're leading, coaching, teaching, or mentoring. Do they feel safe, right now in whatever living or work situation they find themselves? Really consider these folks: *How are they doing right now?*

Think back to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. From the bottom and moving upward, the needs are physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Do all our charges have their physiological needs met? Has their home situation changed post-COVID? Have they (or a parent or partner) recently lost a job? Are they worried about paying their cell phone bill?

If (and that's a big if) their physiological needs are mostly met, Maslow posits *safety* as the second-most foundational factor. Hence my question: Do our mentees feel safe in a conversation with us? Will they attempt a response to any question posed? Or are they cautious? Have you, as the mentor, demonstrated your own mistakes and reassured them this is how we learn and grow?

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs	
Self-actualization	Creativity, morality, problem solving, acceptance of facts, lack of prejudice
Self-esteem	Confidence, achievement, fulfillment
Love and belonging	Family, friendship, intimacy, connection
Safety and security	Physical (bodily) security, work, resources, morality, family, health
Physiological needs	Physical needs (air, water, food, sleep, reproduction, etc.)

Here is an example I almost always use when I am teaching courses on campus.

### My Vulnerable Opening Lecture

For years, I have opened my graduate level courses by asking students, *“Why are you in here? Have you not heard about my horrible reputation for marking up papers?”* I then share examples of my feedback on the screen: *“This paper needs help from someone who knows how to write.”* And, *“I see this paper as less significant given the paucity of data to inform the conclusions.”*

Then, I ask what they think. *“Is this a bit harsh?”* I tell them I think it might be. But finally, like Paul Harvey of yesteryear, I deliver the rest of the story. I share that this is not feedback I have given students, but it’s feedback **I have received** in the past. I get lots of surprised looks at this point! I can hear the questions in their heads. *“What? Dr. Raison can’t write?”* Then, I very clearly state: *“I’m going to be tough on your papers because I want you to learn in the safety of this class. I do not want you to EVER experience this. It’s a punch in the gut. It hurts. And I want you to avoid that.”*

I do then share that *I used these experiences* to improve my writing, and subsequently have been successful in publishing, grant writing, achieving tenure and promotion to the rank of full professor at a Tier 1 research university. *“So I’m not a total loser,”* I note. That breaks the tension, and they laugh. Most of the graduate students also see me differently. They tell me they feel comfortable approaching me and asking what they may previously have labeled a “stupid question.”

Safety, trust, and authenticity matter. As I have noted before, you must *reach before you teach*. This is the same in mentoring.

Continuing with Maslow, once physiological and safety needs are generally met, they no longer dominate and no longer drive behavior. Other higher-order needs grow. For example, upper-level needs, *love and belonging (social aspects of life) and esteem*, may become even more important in triggering mentorship participation. As noted, stresses from physical social isolation can be debilitating. Could adding a five-minute low risk opening question at the beginning of each mentoring session enhance connections and progress? I think so. Here’s an approach.

**The Discussion:** Ask your mentee these questions.

**Do you feel like you can be yourself in our mentoring conversations?**

**Have I, as the mentor, demonstrated my own mistakes and imperfections?**

Sharing shortfalls, being transparent and authentic, and demonstrating humility goes a long way in a mentoring relationship. And the road should run both directions. This is how we learn and grow.

**Reflection:** Take just a moment to think about why you became a mentor. Was it because you were inspired by someone who mentored you? Did someone tell you that you would make a good mentor? For most of us, we do this because we care deeply about people. We are energized by them. We find hope for the future in them.

**Summary:** This week, try to use one of these ideas to help your mentee feel safe. Give them some grace. Give yourself grace too. Some of these ideas can help your mentoring work result in great progress toward personal and professional goals. Above all, remember to encourage your mentees to keep a check on their mental health, and seek help when needed. Then, borrowing from Sinek, consider how you as the mentor can help your folks feel safe.

**For additional reference / reading:** Sinek, Simon (2014). Why good leaders make you feel safe. TED2014.