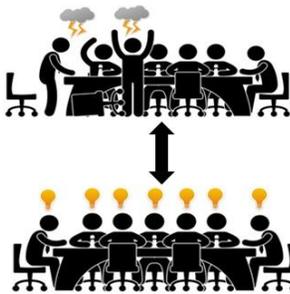


Normalize Human Messiness to Enhance Psychological Safety on Teams



Imagine someone has video-recorded you during every minute of your work the last week and you are now watching it. What are the odds that you will wince in some parts because of mistakes in the way you behaved or communicated?

If you guessed that the odds of seeing mistakes would be close to 100% then that puts you squarely within the range of normalcy for very successful leaders. I know I would cringe at parts of a video of me from last week. For example, I asked a coaching client a question and within seconds started answering it at length myself instead of carefully listening. I got caught up in my “great” ideas while my client went silent.

I really don't like such messiness in myself but there is no way around it--messiness is inevitable. Our brains are just hard-wired that way. Messy behaviors range from withdrawal into silence on one extreme to pushing our ideas on other people, judgment, or blame at the other extreme. While there are innumerable variations, all forms of messy behavior can diminish psychological safety on teams.

Even small degrees of messiness may impact psychological safety

The presence of psychological safety means that people are able to speak up about uncertainty, concerns, disagreement, new ideas, and mistakes without being thought of badly. Psychological safety enhances creativity and quality of decision making because teams are able to elicit and explore a wide range of ideas and concerns without defensiveness.

Even small degrees of messy communication can have a negative impact on psychological safety. This may be surprising especially for highly trained professionals. But, skills and experience do not eliminate our sensitivity to others. One example is that coaching client of mine, an experienced executive, who did not speak up when I started dominating the meeting.

Another example is from members of a senior leadership team I worked with who had fear of bringing up concerns about decisions being made. No one was ever overtly rebuked but alternative views were usually not invited and were not actively welcomed when someone did speak up.

Research has similarly indicated that even minor differences in degrees of encouragement can inhibit speaking up. For example, indirectly or directly giving the message to “just do your job” versus explicitly welcoming input may lead to problems with innovation efforts and, in healthcare, unsafe conditions for patients. (1, 2)

Five methods to normalize and stay vigilant about human messiness

All of this messy humanness holds teams back from reaching their full potential. Successful management of messiness involves normalizing it and staying vigilant for it. Here are five approaches.

1. Normalize human messiness with others by explicitly providing education about its inevitability and lack of correlation with bad intentions or poor skills.
2. Learn about your own human messiness by reflecting on your behavior each week. Regularly seeing and accepting it as normal will enhance empathy and compassion for yourself and others.
3. Create team norms to make sure all viewpoints are welcomed and heard and to assure concerns and alternative views are always set on the table with decision making.
4. Promote frequent feedback about how things are going relative to norms by shifting its purpose from “evaluation” or “correcting” to “helping everyone be at their best.”
5. Take leadership by being the first to be vulnerable. Identify with others when you have fallen into human messiness. In particular, leaders with positional authority have an important and powerful impact by acknowledging their own mistakes.

Enable everyone to be just human

With that coaching client I mentioned earlier, I was able to quickly recognize that I had been pushing my own ideas and apologized. We were able to backtrack and have him answer the question I had asked while I listened this time. This was far more helpful. While it does not happen very often with this client, when I do talk too much now we both can joke about it.

Also, my openness about my own messiness has helped my client to be more forthcoming about his own mistakes at work. This has made coaching more productive. We have made it normal for each of us to be just human.

References

1. Edmondson, Amy C. **Teaming** Jossey-Bass 2012
2. Salazar, Marco J Barzallo et al *Influence of surgeon behavior on trainee willingness to speak up: a randomized controlled trial* **J Am Coll Surg** 219: 1001 – 1009, 2014

Additional resources

- [Are you leading from reactivity or creativity?--four steps to see your blind spots](#)
 - Provides more detailed indicators of “reactivity”—another term for “messiness.”
- [A Key Barrier to Making Our Leadership Transformational](#)
 - Explains a method to reflect on personal behavior to identify our own messiness.
- [An Easily Missed Ingredient for High Team Performance](#)
 - Explains why team norms are so important and why it is so easy to not set them.

About Neil Baker M.D.

NEIL BAKER CONSULTING AND COACHING LLC

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Neil Baker M.D. works with healthcare organizations to enhance leadership and team impact through *In-the-Moment Leadership Strategies*. This means using any work situation, even the most complex and difficult, as an opportunity to achieve immediate impact on quality of work relationships and on progress toward results.

He has developed these approaches as a leader, speaker, consultant, and executive coach for 30 years. Past positions include serving as Director of Psychiatric Inpatient Services at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver, Colorado; Medical Director of Clinical Improvement at Group Health Cooperative in Seattle, Washington; and faculty and improvement advisor for more than twelve years for the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) in Cambridge, Massachusetts. You can learn more and see client testimonials on his website at neilbakerconsulting.com.