

## SAFE AND REAL

One of leadership's main jobs is to create a certain atmosphere or space that encourages sharing, learning, and informed action. Leadership creates this container, and people fill it with their creativity and results. We support leaders in doing whatever helps them to find this generative state of being within themselves - taking courses, trainings, and workshops; reading articles on leadership agility, emotional intelligence, and authenticity; being mentored, perhaps being coached, challenged, receiving feedback, and diving into a deeper, more robust conversation.

People in organizations are starved to experience themselves, and each other, within such containers that leadership can best create and sustain. They are hungry for simple, real, safe, and transformative conversations. They are eager for leadership that creates the conditions for such conversations. We see conversation as the art and science of life, indeed of living itself, and therefore, as central to the art of leadership, which is enhancing aliveness in organizations.

Unfortunately, too often we see leaders who are out-of-touch with their teams, their people, their organization, and ultimately, with their customers. This is not just our opinion. Company survey after company survey documents this fact. Perhaps leaders are trying to grow through training, but listen only to the words, and don't put them into practice. Perhaps they hear about the importance being authentic, but only "do" it, as if the doing was the *being*, of such. Meanwhile, they're not being helped by management consulting firms who fill their heads with phrases like "human capital," as if "humans" can ever be "capital." The human spirit cannot be monetized; it can, however, be inspired, guided, supported and energized by courageous leaders.

The human spirit *is* alive and well in some companies, and within them, people strive to have conversations that are safe and real.

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Humans convene these conversations, and of course, because we humans are inherently imperfect, our conversations will sometimes be imperfectly safe and real. We all make mistakes and have off days. When leaders must still take action on such days, and in those unconscious moments, they know they must just do their best, make amends when necessary, and keep moving forward. What matters is not their perfect execution but their perfect intention, and their ever-renewing focus, to improve their ways of relating, and to provide safe and real spaces for their peers and teams to engage. To engage with what?

With each other.

The toughest task facing a leadership coach is getting a team to talk *with* each other—and not *about* each other. It's challenging helping a team fully engage in creative exchange, through open, honest, courageous, and robust conversation about whatever dilemma, problem, or task is at hand; about a new idea or an area of opportunity; about a tension, hurt, misunderstanding in the team relationship. Everything we know about leadership in these settings can be summed up in one, three-word sentence. *It takes courage.*

And not from us coaches! We're not in the heat of the game like our clients are. Such heat tests a leader's courage, and sometimes, finds it wanting. When conversations get dynamic, robust, and challenging, we hear leaders use phrases that mask their inner courage, phrases like: "Oh, let's talk about that off-line." Too often, that phrase is code for, "You have disturbed me; I don't want to lose my cool, so let's just deal with this one-to-one, pleeeeeease!" It may also mean, "I don't agree with you, but let's just talk together after, certainly not in front of everyone on the team, or even worse, our boss."

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Imagine if sports teams ran that way, and every time something difficult or disturbing happened (say in a basketball game, when your teammate, the forward, moved too quickly left instead of right, or forgot to set a pick, or didn't see you were wide open under the basket), imagine if the players said, "You are disturbing me, I don't agree with your action! Can we stop the game, and just you and I talk in the locker room? Or maybe, can we ask the guard whom everyone trusts to come sit with us too, but just us three. Not the whole team! And certainly not with the Coach."

High performing teams banish such fear from the leadership game. They simply do not accept staying "polite," being "fake," or tolerating "danger," in ways that put winning at risk. In meeting rooms and on conference calls, the best leaders show up like professional athletes, at once both driven for results, yet reliant on their teammates to experience ultimate success. Their roles may be just as demanding and complex, if not more so. The best leaders and teams know how to disturb each other elegantly. They know how to have safe and real conversations together, as a team, during the heat of play - which is their workday. They flow. They discuss, debate, discern, decide and get on with things. They share, learn, and improve.

As a young consultant, Jay took steps that he felt would enable a team to address its most pressing challenges. After the retreat, though, one of the team members told him, on the way out the door, "We never talked about the real issues." Ouch! That searing comment led Jay to do some professional soul-searching, wondering, "What does it take to help a team have a real conversation?"

And once, Sean gave a keynote, a "conceptually astounding" one an audience member had said, but he overheard two leaders who had heard the same keynote say in the rest room, "I have no idea what that bald guy was talking about!" The man and his colleague then left,

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clearly frustrated. That comment left Sean to wonder, “How did my talk fail these two leaders, and what stopped them, two senior leaders, from approaching me directly with their feedback, and opening a door to a real conversation?”

Once, Jay was interviewing individuals who would be participants in a team retreat. One of the team members told him, “I’m okay telling you what I’m about to say, but I would never say it in our group. If I got real, our manager would stare through me, and after you left, I’d get punished, as retribution.” That comment sent Jay deeper, wondering, “What does it take to help a team have a safe conversation?”

In short, we know how hard this can sometimes be. It has tested the limits of our abilities as well.

And then, we see what courage looks like in our leaders, and in ourselves, and we are inspired. We work with a client in the consumer goods industry. She encourages dissent. She encourages robust dialogue and rewards it. This leader challenges people to speak up and step up. When things get tense, she says, “Hey, we’re only making chocolate here; we’re not saving lives,” and everyone laughs and lightens up. We appreciate her care to keep things safe and real. But, maybe, as a life science company, or as a consumer healthcare company, you *are* saving lives. Maybe the stakes *are* high, and lives *are* at stake!

We have worked in health care settings on the issue of patient safety both in the United States and internationally. Hospital administrators learn about medical errors when they are reported, or when they result in a patient condition that can’t be hidden. Sometimes such errors trigger malpractice lawsuits by patients against caregivers. These lawsuits get insurance companies involved, who then conduct a thorough study of what happened. These studies show that,

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about 8 times out of 10, a significant breakdown in communication contributed to the error. In other words, someone in the room either knew the error was *about* to happen, or knew it *was* happening, and didn't speak up.

Why do people not speak up, even when a patient's life is at risk? The research gives us a number of reasons, but all of them point to how incredibly uncomfortable it is to be *real* in certain settings when being so may not be welcomed. Rigid medical hierarchy inhibits speaking up. A macho culture in many hospitals silences dissent. A culture of blame and shame, rather than one of learning and vulnerability, makes speaking up feel very dangerous. The risk of exposing oneself to ridicule, judgment, or rebuke makes it extremely hard for many to risk speaking up, even when lives are at stake. How then do we find the courage we need within ourselves to share our perspective?

We enjoy taking teams on journeys that are part individual self-discovery, part team collective self-discovery, and part deep dive into what makes for business success. We insist on a few guidelines for the journey. One is HOW: being Honest, Open, and Willing. When people show up as HOW, conversations tend to be safe and real. In our roles as leaders of a team's learning journey, we set guidelines, model appropriate behavior, encourage boundaries when necessary through coaching, offer provocative challenges, and appreciate people who take risks. Once that container feels solid, team members begin, perhaps tentatively at first, but soon with enthusiasm, to swim in those waters.

Based on experiences like this, we've discovered that team interactions fall into two simple continuums of experiences:

- They are either real, or not real.
- They are either safe, or not safe.

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LEADERSHIP

	Not Safe	Safe
Real	<i>Dangerous</i>	<i>Courageous</i>
Not Real	<i>Fake</i>	<i>Polite</i>

From this perspective, all team interactions can be seen as either:

- Not real and not safe, which feels fake
- Not real and safe, which feels polite
- Not safe and real, which feels dangerous
- Both safe and real, which feels courageous

Don't be put off by the fact that this idea is simple, because it is also powerful. An idea that is simple but not powerful is not compelling. An idea that is powerful but not simple is too complicated. But an idea that is both simple and powerful is both brilliant and infectious. A simple yet powerful idea spreads quickly and is sticky. Sticky works!

A conversation that is both safe and real is a courageous conversation. It takes risk to be real, even when the environment is safe. It means speaking up, and we've seen how hard that can be. It takes courage. It takes effort to create a sense of safety. It means listening to varying perspectives, welcoming dissent, appreciating

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differences, setting boundaries, and being comfortable with discomfort. That takes courage.

Notice that we are not confusing safety with comfort. It can be very uncomfortable to speak our perspective, especially if it lands as a hard truth that a peer or the team is avoiding, even in a setting where doing so is welcomed. Making it safe for people to say uncomfortable things makes it easier them to be real with each other.

Notice too that we are not confusing safety with agreement. Being safe means people are free to disagree, and even fight with each other, but the rules of a “fair fight” will always apply. Everyone knows intuitively – from our early childhood days - what makes for a fair fight. Teams that welcome the creative tension that comes from hearing out differences in opinion—even heated, passionate ones—take time to create guidelines for fighting fair.

A culture that chooses to be safe and real values learning over blame. The organization is in effect, a next-step culture, a forward looking mindset prevails. It’s a culture that welcomes the courage in encouragement, and avoids the shaming in discouragement. A culture that chooses to be safe and real avoids force, but welcomes power. It knows force contracts a conversation, whereas power expands it. A culture that chooses to be safe and real promotes leaders who are both powerful and vulnerable. Whenever real power rises and moves, it is always accompanied by vulnerability. These leaders are real. Really real. They make it safe for others to be so. That takes courage. Creating safety, being real, finding our courage...this is what truly advances conversation, and gets us all where we want to go.

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