TIMOTHY R. CLARK

THE 4 STAGES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

Defining the Path
to Inclusion and Innovation

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Defining the Path
to **Inclusion** and **Innovation**

Berrett–Koehler Publishers, Inc.

The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety

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To Tracey

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Preface

This book puts forward a theory of human interaction. Let me give you the context. Several years ago, my wife, Tracey, and I returned to the United States from England as I neared the completion of a PhD in social science at Oxford University. The ramen budget was gone. I would get a job, work for a year, finish my dissertation, teach at a university, and live happily ever after. That was the plan.

Here's what actually happened. I stepped out of the ivory tower into the gritty, sweaty megaton realm of a steel plant. Constructed by US Steel Corporation during World War II, Geneva Steel was the last fully integrated steel mill west of the Mississippi River, a hulking mass of machinery spread across 1,700 acres, the industrial equivalent of the Vatican, a self-contained enclave within a larger metropolis, with its own trains, fire station, hospital, and towering blast furnace cathedral. The plant manufactured steel plate, sheet, and pipe used to make everything from bridges to bulldozers. With my working-class sympathies, I thought I knew what I was getting into. I didn't have a clue.[1]

> **Key questions:** Have you ever been dropped into a completely foreign environment? Were you suspicious of the natives? What bias or prejudice did you bring?

This was another world. I found myself working with shift-work-hardened, layoff-endured welders, millwrights, pipefitters, and crane operators. These shadows under the hardhats became my friends, but there was nothing romantic about this heaving, grinding, snorting place. The shop floor was a high-stakes, no-margin-for-error arena where precision mattered and assumptions could kill. With thousands

of safe-job procedures to govern every task for every job in every operation, nothing was left to chance. They preached safety so incessantly, it was easy to stop believing.

Then came the fateful day. A maintenance worker was crushed under a sixteen-ton load of iron ore pellets. He died instantly. I remember wondering what agony would sweep through the man's family. Later that day, I was given the assignment to accompany the CEO to deliver the dreadful news. We learned later that this tragedy was the result of several employees breaking safety rules. In the days ahead, safety would become my obsession, but not in the way you might think. I would come to learn that psychological safety is the foundation of inclusion and team performance and the key to creating an innovative culture.

With my degree in hand, it was time to leave the mill and trade my hardhat and steel-toed boots for tweed, chalk, and the classroom. Then something unexpected happened. The CEO asked me to become the plant manager. Now I faced an unusual decision: Settle into the tranquil life of an academic or lead a team of 2,500 employees working in the bowels of an industrial beast. Tracey and I decided to accept the offer. Why? Because it represented a rare opportunity to study human behavior in a unique setting as a participant observer. The experience would thrust me into a real-world tutorial and challenge the elegant theory I had learned at Oxford.

On my first day as plant manager, I called to order the morning operating meeting and came face to face with the indigenous culture. A stoic silence fell over the room as I peered into the faces of twenty superintendents, many of whom were old enough to be my father. Now they reported to me.

They had been deeply socialized to self-censor, constrained by deference to positional power and a slavish adherence to the chain of command. Power mattered. And these men (and they were all men) understood where power lay. It lay with me. Despite my youth and

inexperience, they would render obedience to that source of power. Indeed, I was now the command center, the control tower, the alpha male. I had what the sociologist C. Wright Mills called "the most of what there is to have."[2] Experience had taught these managers that it was emotionally, politically, socially, and economically expensive to say what they really thought, so they smiled and nodded politely.

> **Key questions:** Have you ever been in a position of power? Have you ever been in a position of no power? Did having power or not having power change your behavior?

Inhabiting this fertile setting for field study was a social scientist's dream. What I was observing cried out for interpretation. But I had to be more than an observer; I had to be a reformer. To improve the company's performance, we needed a transformation. The tired old plant was struggling to compete with the mini-mills that had disrupted the industry and were dominating the market. To increase throughput and yield, we needed to vacate the rules of naked force and disabuse people of their worship of coercive authority and their inclination to induce fear through intimidation. The entire organization needed to be cleansed from its status-bound model of authoritarian rule. Defang the place or die in the next downturn.

Commercial organizations survive by maintaining competitive advantage, which ultimately means incubating innovation. If you watch closely, you will notice that innovation is almost always a collaborative process and almost never a lightbulb moment of lone genius. As the historian Robert Conquest once said, "What is easy to understand may have not been easy to think of."[3] Innovation is never easy to think of. It requires creative abrasion and constructive dissent—processes that rely on high *intellectual* friction and low *social* friction.[4]

Most leaders don't comprehend that managing these two categories of friction to create an ecosystem of brave collaboration is at the heart of leadership as an applied discipline. It is perhaps the supreme

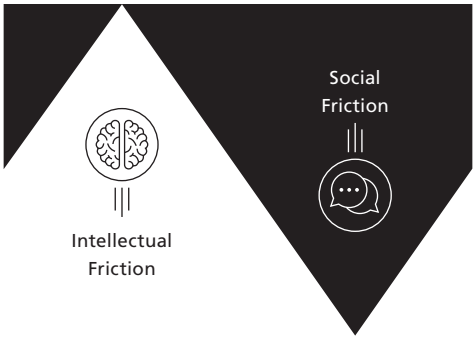

Figure 1. Increasing intellectual friction, decreasing social friction

test of a leader and a direct reflection of personal character. (figure 1) Without skill, integrity, and respect for people, it doesn't happen. Nor can perks such as foosball tables, free lunch, an open office environment, and the aesthetic of a hip organization bring it to life.

Key Concept: The leader's task is to simultaneously increase intellectual friction and decrease social friction.

I was witnessing the opposite pattern, reflected in the absence of what we call *psychological safety*. I soon realized that my stewardship meant protecting people not only physically but also psychologically. As I learned firsthand, the absence of physical safety can bring injury or death, but the absence of psychological safety can inflict devastating emotional wounds, neutralize performance, paralyze potential, and crater an individual's sense of self-worth. The implication is that organizations that lack psychological safety and compete in highly dynamic markets are galloping their way to extinction.

One of the first things you learn about leadership is that the social and cultural context has a profound influence on the way people behave and that you as the leader are, straight up, responsible for that context. The other thing you learn is that fear is the enemy. It freezes initiative, ties up creativity, yields compliance instead of commitment, and represses what would otherwise be an explosion of innovation.

Key principle: The presence of fear in an organization is the first sign of weak leadership.

If you can banish fear, install true performance-based accountability, and create a nurturing environment that allows people to be vulnerable as they learn and grow, they will perform beyond your expectations and theirs.

Key questions: Have you ever been a part of an organization that was dominated by fear? How did you respond? How did other people respond?

My informal ethnographic analysis as plant manager at Geneva Steel lasted five years. That defining experience set me on a path to understand why some organizations unleash the potential of individuals and other can't. For the past twenty-five years, I've been a working cultural anthropologist and a student of psychological safety, learning from leaders and teams across every sector of society.

I've discovered that psychological safety follows a progression based on the natural sequence of human needs. (figure 2) First, human beings want to be included. Second, they want to learn. Third, they

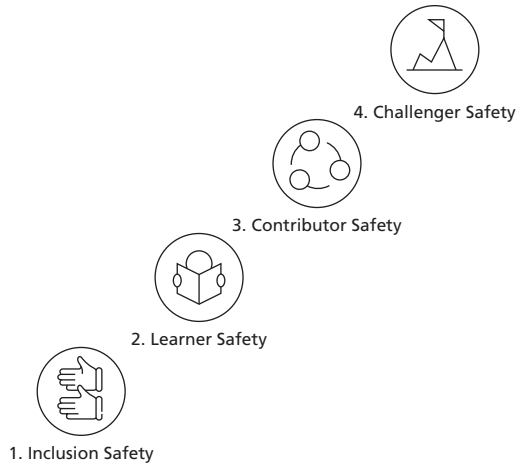

Figure 2. The 4 stages of psychological safety

want to contribute. And finally, they want to challenge the status quo when they believe things need to change. This pattern is consistent across all organizations and social units.

> **Key concept:** Psychological safety is a condition in which you feel (1) included, (2) safe to learn, (3) safe to contribute, and (4) safe to challenge the status quo—all without fear of being embarrassed, marginalized, or punished in some way.

All human beings have the same innate need: We long to belong. As a homeless man wrote on a tattered piece of cardboard, "Be kind if you're not my kind." Not long ago, my sardonic teenage daughter, Mary, went to a high school basketball game and held up a poster that revealed a penetrating truth: "I'm just here so I don't lose friends!" Though we long to belong, we see broken human interaction everywhere we look.

This book addresses broken human interaction. I'm writing primarily to business leaders, but my message applies to any social unit. I want to shine a light on how we get along, decode the science of silence, and explore what it takes to liberate our voices and connect more effectively. Specifically, I want to share with you what I've learned about the way psychological safety influences behavior, performance, and happiness. What's the mechanism? How do we activate or deactivate it?

I'm in the pattern-recognition business. When it comes to the way people interact, the patterns are unmistakable, and the challenge is universal. What I have to say is both empirical and normative. I make no apologies for combining cold, dispassionate observations with warm, passionate pleas because the use case, the job to be done, is to offer practical guidance. I'll share examples from work life, school, and home, drawing heavily on my own experience because what I have learned at home mirrors what I've learned in organizations.

> **Key question:** Have you ever had the realization that family life is almost always the most challenging place to model and apply correct principles of human interaction?

Sometimes we're noble and good to each other. Sometimes we're criminally irresponsible. Our track record as a species is, for the most part, a chilling history, a pageant of war, and a chronicle of conquest. Maya Angelou rendered the lamentable past as few literary voices can: "Throughout our nervous history, we have constructed pyramidic towers of evil, ofttimes in the name of good. Our greed, fear and lasciviousness have enabled us to murder our poets, who are ourselves, to castigate our priests, who are ourselves. The lists of our subversions of the good stretch from before recorded history to this moment."[5]

Why, after thousands of years, are we technologically advanced and still sociologically primitive?

As social creatures, we act like free electrons, demonstrating both connection and contention. It's true that we need each other to flourish. Yet despite knowing this, we suffer from compassion fatigue, are handicapped by our blind spots, and chronically regress to the mean. We go through cycles of embracing and exiling each other. Indeed, the study of humans in social settings is largely the study of exclusion and fear. For example, a mere third of US workers believe their opinions count.[6]

Key questions: Do you feel included and listened to at work? How about school? How about home?

Despite our unique life stories, we share common experiences. We have all felt the pain of rejection and reproach. At the same time, we've all done some excluding and segregating, some manipulating and controlling, some depriving and belittling, some friending and unfriending. We've all drawn racial, social, or other demographic or psychographic lines, and made unjust judgments on others and treated them poorly. We know something about marginality because we've all been marginalized. We can be benevolent, compassionate, and kind. We can also be, as the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes put it, "stinkin', low-down, mean."[7]

We have constructive and destructive tendencies. Sometimes we classify each other the way I classified butterflies in the fourth grade.

We invite and disinvite, include and exclude, listen and ignore, heal and abuse, sanctify and scar. We love and hate our diversity.

> **Key questions:** Are you excluding, manipulating, or treating anyone poorly? Is there any area of your life where you are being "stinkin', low-down, mean"?

I've never met an infallible human. Nor have I met a perfect parent, teacher, or coach. Each is a work in progress, an apprentice to greatness. We're all broken, damaged, wounded, and guilty, and yet possess amazing gifts.

It's an idealized notion to think we can undock from society and live deliberately in isolation. The monastic, cloistered alternative never works, and virtual reality is a bubble of indulgence. The truth is, we're embedded in, implicated with, bound to, and shaped by one another. Hannah Arendt wisely observed, "The world lies between people, and this in-between . . . is today the object of the greatest concern and the most obvious upheaval in almost all the countries of the globe."[8]

Crack Yourself Open

Please don't read this book for information. Read it for action. Read it for change. Crack yourself open and look inside. This is a time to summon the courage to conduct a searching, fearless personal inventory. And if you happen to lead a family, team, or organization, conduct an institutional examination of conscience while you're at it.

I have four questions to ask you:

- First, do you truly believe that all men and women are created equal, and do you accept others and welcome them into your society simply because they possess flesh and blood even if their values differ from your own?

- Second, without bias or discrimination, do you encourage others to learn and grow, and do you support them in that process even when they lack confidence or make mistakes?
- Third, do you grant others maximum autonomy to contribute in their own way as they demonstrate their ability to deliver results?
- Fourth, do you consistently invite others to challenge the status quo in order to make things better, and are you personally prepared to be wrong based on the humility and learning mindset you have developed?

These four questions align with the four stages of psychological safety. In large measure, the way you answer these questions will define the way you value human beings and your relationships with them. It will define the way you draw people out or shut them down, create confidence or induce fear, encourage or discourage. It will determine how you lead and influence others.

The philosopher Thomas Hobbes said that there is "a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death."[9] That lust for power, wealth, and aggrandizement runs counter to human flourishing because we're connected, not self-contained. "We are," as the former archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams said, "healed by relation, not isolation."[10]

Drawing lines of exclusion is not rooted in our biology. It's the adoration of power and distinction, insecurity, and ordinary selfishness that lead us to partition ourselves. As humans, we look for loyalties to attach to. Out of our attachments emerge our differences. Out of our differences emerge our divisions. Out of our divisions emerge our classes, ranks, and stations. And it is out of those spaces between us that the comparisons begin, the empathy flees, the fear and envy emerge, the conflicts arise, the antagonisms gestate, the destructive instincts and impulses for abuse and cruelty arise. In the spirit of our bigotry, we invent dogmas to justify the ways we torment each other.

Ironically, in our digital age, we connect and feel alone, compare and feel inadequate.[11] Indeed, if you have a sudden urge to feel "less than," spend an hour on your favorite social media platform.

> **Key concept:** When you compare and compete, you lose the ability to connect.

> **Key question:** Are there any areas in your life where you are losing the ability to connect by making unhelpful or destructive comparisons with others?

Though we can be foul friends to each other, we can also be cool rain on scorched earth—ministers, healers, and good neighbors. We are capable of breathtaking compassion, generosity, and selfless service. I'm not advocating heroism and grand expressions of self-sacrifice. No, my charge to you is, in the most basic sense, to treat human beings as they deserve to be treated—without arbitrary distinctions. Accept them, encourage them, respect them, and allow them. If you want to be happy, come to terms with your fellow creatures. Lose the mock superiority. Stop nursing wrongs and start reaching out. Too many of us live far beneath our privileges, locked in what W. B. Yeats called the "foul rag and bone shop of the heart."[12] If you can create a little more psychological safety for your fellow travelers, it will change your life and theirs. I'm inviting you to change. Change the way you view and treat humanity. The journey I take you on will create both joy and pain. We're never quite ready for that, so the real question is: Are you willing?

The real frontier of modernity is not artificial intelligence; it's emotional and social intelligence. Let me show you why.

Key Concepts

- The leader's task is to simultaneously increase intellectual friction and decrease social friction.

- The presence of fear in an organization is the first sign of weak leadership.
- Psychological safety is a condition in which you feel (1) included, (2) safe to learn, (3) safe to contribute, and (4) safe to challenge the status quo—all without fear of being embarrassed, marginalized, or punished in some way.
- When you compare and compete, you lose the ability to connect.

Key Questions

- Have you ever been dropped into a completely foreign environment? Were you suspicious of the natives? What bias or prejudice did you bring?
- Have you ever been in a position of power? Have you ever been in a position of no power? Did having power or not having power change your behavior?
- Have you ever been a part of an organization that was dominated by fear? How did you respond? How did other people respond?
- Have you ever had the realization that family life is almost always the most challenging place to model and apply correct principles of leadership?
- Do you feel included and listened to at work? How about school? How about home?
- Are you excluding, manipulating, or treating anyone poorly? Is there any area of your life where you are being "stinkin', lowdown, mean"? Are there any areas in your life where you are losing the ability to connect by making unhelpful or destructive comparisons with others?
- I'm asking you to change. Change the way you view and treat humanity. The journey I take you on will create both joy and pain. We're never quite ready for that, so the real question is: Are you willing?