Make it Safe for Employees to Speak Up with Connie Noonan Hadley (Transcript)

Chris Congdon: You might think if you don't hear much from your employees – that everything's going pretty well. Today's guest says – not exactly. She says the time to worry is when people are not speaking up at work. And she has ideas on how to change that. Welcome to Season 5 of Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host Chris Congdon and I'm here today with producer Rebecca Charbauski.

Rebecca Charbauski: Hi Chris

CC: Rebecca, tell us what to expect this season?

RC: This season we have an incredible lineup of guests who are going to help us understand how to create workplaces that can help people thrive in the midst of change. .

We're living through some of the most significant changes in work that people have experienced in a generation. These changes are leading to new behaviors at work – people taking video calls from their desks, for example. This season we'll talk to experts on how to navigate change, why generative AI isn't so scary, how we can do more to support mental health at work, how to improve productivity and focus, and how creating community at work can actually help people and organizations thrive. . Remember to subscribe so you don't miss a single episode.

CC: So let's jump into episode 1.
According to our guest today, Connie Noonan Hadley, the foundation for good relationships at work is psychological safety. That's the concept of feeling safe to take risks and be yourself without fear of negative consequences. And positive relationships at work benefit an organization's innovation and creativity.

Connie studies people at work and her work shows how community enhances productivity, creativity and improves job satisfaction and engagement.

RC: Connie is an organizational psychologist and she recently founded the Institute for Life at work. She studies hybrid and remote teams, team effectiveness, psychological safety, loneliness, inclusive cultures, employee engagement and burnout. She also serves as an associate professor at the Boston University Questrom School of Business.

If you enjoy this conversation with Connie, we'd love for you to share it with a friend or a colleague and to like it so others can find it more easily.

CC: Thanks Rebecca. Welcome to Work Better Connie.
Connie Noonan Hadley: Thank you, thank you for having me.

CC: I'm really excited to talk to you because I think your work is very interesting and people are just going through a lot right now in terms of their overall, their well-being. They're feeling lonely in life and even in work. And because you study this, I'd like to start with an article that you wrote last year for the Harvard Business Review with Mark Mortensen and Amy Edmondson.

This article in HBR that you wrote was about making it safe for employees to speak up, especially in risky times. These feel like risky times that we're in right now. Can you talk about why you wrote that story?

CNH: We wrote that article because we were seeing changes in the economy post pandemic that were leading some people to get more um silent and and quiet up more. And that's a natural response when you feel under threat. And when you hear about layoffs or inflation or other types of changes, AI taking my job, it's natural to start to conserve your your ah your energy and your efforts to make sure you're doing the safest possible types of behaviors.

So psychological safety is feeling that you can take interpersonal risks. without fear of retribution or punishment. And those kinds of risks look like admitting a mistake, offering a new idea, challenging the status quo, or reaching out and making a connection with someone in a vulnerable way. And these types of behaviors are really beneficial to organizations because what they do is they bring things to light faster or they get out new ideas or they stop the train from going down the wrong path. But people don't offer them because they don't want to have personal career risk for themselves.

And so we wrote this article kind of reminding employers that it's their job to make sure their employees are speaking up. by creating the right environment for that. And we offer this winning formula that's based on, ah first of all, making sure that there's a clear rationale and a reason why each person benefits from doing this, not just the broader organization because you have to make it worthwhile for them.

And the second is making sure they're really clear invitations. So not just like an open door policy or some kind of vague town hall agenda, really being specific about asking what you want people's input on and when and how they should provide that to you.

And then the third is um making sure the consequences are heavily oriented towards positive ones and really diminishing the negative ones and so positive ones would be. basically things like saying thank you, but also promotions, bonuses, and other types of organizational rewards should go to those people who take those risks for the benefit of the organization. And um all too often, there's far more punishments perceived than there are of rewards. And that's where um you know people, again, do the right risk calculation and say, no, thanks.

CC: Yeah. Well, yeah that is so hard to do to give feedback during those ah those times of uncertainty. And um my son was even asking for coaching because his leader had asked for really direct, honest feedback about what's going on. And I said, um Go with caution. So maybe I'm Maybe I just negated everything that you were talking about, but I said, proceed with caution, like Be honest, but think about how the listener is going to receive your feedback. So I mean I don't know if you have any advice for people about how they can do that or how leaders can make it feel safe.

CNH: Well, yes, I have some research where I specifically ask people what their manager did to make them feel comfortable or not comfortable. And there is a long list of behaviors that do relate to feeling psychologically safe that leaders can do. And one of them is making that invitation. So that was a good first step that your son experienced. But I would say there also has to be a really clear, um again, channel to communicate that, like if if the leader followed up by saying, okay, and now I'd like to schedule a 30 minute one on one with you in a couple weeks, you know, why don't you, you know, put some thoughts together, then that that's good. That means they're really, they're really not just sort of saying it, they actually have committed time to hearing what you have to say.

And then listening really, really carefully. Again, a lot of managers will say, "Does anybody have any questions in a meeting as they're looking at their phone? So it's like really you know showing that you care, you're interested.

And then, of course, the follow up has to be, again, that thank you and the doing something with that feedback. you You don't have to accept every suggestion you receive, of course. But you should acknowledge that the person went out of their way to provide that to you.

CC: Yeah, no, that's really great coaching. You've also in your work connected this notion of psychological safety to better overall well being and helping people cope with maybe feeling lonely or isolated at work. Can you talk about what you found?

CNH: Sure, I've been studying workplace relationships for a while and more recently um have been focusing on loneliness, um people experiencing loneliness while they're working, which is not just for the record, not a new phenomenon that came out of the pandemic and is associated with remote work and hybrid work. This was a big problem before that.

um But I have seen the connection to psychological safety as I've talked to people about what their work experiences are like. So Sarah Wright from the University of Canterbury and I conducted this big study where we were trying to talk to people and get stories about feeling connected and feeling disconnected and then looking at a whole lot of variables to see what distinguished those experiences. And it's really clear that no matter who you are in the hierarchy, no matter what your background is, people have a natural reluctance to put themselves out there to someone else to make a connection. So even just inviting someone to coffee, whether it's a virtual coffee or real coffee, can feel risky. And again, going back to psychological safety, it's an interpersonal risk and what's associated with that positive or negative outcomes.

CC: Yeah, what are they going to think?

CNH: Is this person going to really want to have coffee with me? Or if we do have coffee, will it be super awkward and they'll never want to talk to me again. You know, we, we you know, if we're not that different than we were in high school, you know, in a lot of ways, it does.

CC: I was going to say, it feels like dating.

CNH: Well, dating or even just making friends when you joined, you know, a new school. And so it takes courage. It takes um effort to go out there and to connect with people. And then even if you create the forum, say you schedule a coffee, you'll then have to decide how much I'm going to reveal about myself. You know, am I going to talk more about why I'm doing this job, what my hopes and dreams are, maybe things that are happening at home.

And it's those kinds of revelations that build a sense of intimacy and trust with another person. And that's the foundation for a relationship. So you can see how psychological safety is just a theme that keeps coming back because it is the foundation for when people can step out of their comfort zone and do something that helps them and helps the organization.

And by the way, creating relationships in the organization is not just good for individual people. I mean, I know for my research, it helps with job satisfaction and engagement.

and all sorts of other big outcomes like that, but we it also benefits the organization. I mean, that's where you get productivity, you get greater creativity and you know a longer sense of um ah connection and community for people that will keep them in their seats and and not go to your competitor.So I think everybody has some reason to try to um encourage connection in the workplace, but it starts with psychological safety.

CC: Yeah. Can you just go back and touch on productivity? Everything else made sense to me that you just said, but I imagine for a number of leaders and organizations, you might not associate psychological safety with productivity. How does that work?

CNH: But when you think about productivity, it's obvious it's like getting the best output with the minimal amount of expenditures of time and resources. And we know from Amy's research and other research that you're going to have higher levels of innovation, which is a form that can drive productivity.

But when I talk about relationships, the productivity impact I'm saying is that you're able to communicate better and faster with your teammates and the other people that you have to work with to get the job done when you have that good relationship.

It will smooth over communications. It'll expedite their responses to you and so forth. And so that is a driver of productivity. And there have been um a couple of good analyses of the costs of the opposite, which is ah workplace loneliness.

And Cigna, for example, estimated that it costs like $400 billion dollars a year to US employers to have lonely employees.

And a large part of that is people quitting, which we know happens more often.

But other parts of it are that they're not as engaged in their job. They're not achieving those productivity targets as easily because they're holding back or because they don't have the connections to smooth the work through.

um So this, again, has a real financial impact as well as a social impact.

CC: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. ah I would imagine that there are a number of leaders who would say, well, in my organization, people can speak up. um They may not always be self-aware about whether people you know whether that's really true or not. And so if you gave me some tips, how do I know that actually people feel psychological safety versus I'm just i Assume they do because I'm such a great leader.

CNH: Well that that's ah …. that's a good question and I actually love it when leaders tell me that because I find it so fascinating to hear what they're basing that assessment on and often
I find this really ironic. Often they're basing it on silence. So they're saying, well, you know, I've told my people they should come to me whenever they have something on their mind, or I held a town hall last month and nobody spoke up.
And therefore, you know, I think everything is going great, but they know they can speak up if if they wanted to. And it's like, that's the opposite of a sign of psychological safety.
The less you hear from your employees, the more likely it is they're not feeling particularly psychologically safe. um So what can you look for? I mean, the first thing I promote is to use an actual validated scientific instrument.
So Amy was created one decades ago. I have adapted my own version of that. It's got five questions, like answering you know do members of this team feel they're able to bring up problems and tough issues down to, do you feel it's easy to ask other members of your team for help if you if you see could use an actual survey questionnaire, to calculate the levels of psychological safety and in the monitor overtime.
So that's a great step that gives you a good baseline.
But also, it's so important to talk to people in small, hopefully safe environments. And you may need to bring in an external facilitator. Maybe the boss isn't the right person to be hosting these focus groups if they're the problem.
But I, as a researcher, get the benefit of going in there with neutral status and sort of asking people these questions.
And I'll ask questions like, for example, tell me a story about a time when you spoke up in this place and you regret it. What happened?
Why do you think that happened? Or maybe tell me about a time when you didn't speak up and you regretted it. And that tells you about the opportunity because people recognize that they could have done something to save time or frustration or have a better outcome and they didn't speak up for various reasons. And then, of course, I'll also want to collect good stories like, you know, when was ah ah when did you speak up and you're really glad you did. And that is these are the kinds of questions that kind of get at the underlying norms about what's acceptable and what's not here and what happens when people step over the line.
And you have to get to that kind of qualitative level to really understand what's going on in a workplace. So I recommend the scales to be like quantitative assessments using a survey, but also doing some deeper dives with people to really understand what's going on.

CC: Yeah, I would imagine that there's sometimes that people observe that maybe the person who speaks up with all the positives and all the great things that the boss is doing that their career advancement maybe goes ahead a little bit further. And you notice that and go, oh, well, I better not give any feedback that is less than positive because they don't want to hear that.

CNH: Yes. Yes, absolutely. People are just incredibly sensitive to signals of a threat or punishment. And that doesn't necessarily mean that they watch the leader cut short someone who is speaking up or roll their eyes, which is also a terrible reaction. um It could be just the absence of anything that comes in a positive way from speaking up. And so but all you see are benefits accruing to people who say positive things and don't challenge the status quo, yeah and then nobody ever says anything else. Well, that again is telling you, okay, this is where we channel our energies. This is how we get ahead here. And, and I mean, one other point I'll make here is that unfortunately some leaders blame employees for not speaking up.
They'll, they'll say things like, well, they're just, you know, not confident enough, or they're not strong enough to speak up. But the reality is, people who don't speak up are usually really savvy and they're smart and they're looking around them and going, this doesn't make sense here.
And, and so it's, we, we talk about in that HBR article, You know, the benefits to the individual speaking up can be delayed, can be uncertain and maybe have a low probability.
I mean, you don't know that you'll actually be rewarded for admitting a mistake, right?
So, who benefits? It's the organization. And so, and so if you haven't aligned your system to make, again, it's safe for the people to speak up, it's not their fault. It's yours as a leader.

CC: Right, right, right. So as a leader, I know you can't make everybody be friends at work kind of thing, but it seems like there are some ways that as a leader, we could help build stronger relationships between our employees to help them feel safe with one another. um Is that right?

CNH: Yes, absolutely. In fact, I have a book chapter coming out later this fall with the Thinkers 50 editors putting together an anthology called Human Touch. So it's all about human connection. And then the framework that I put forward, it's called the Unite framework. And the U is to start with understanding and that means i think the first step here for leaders is to really understand again like i was saying that the benefits and the cost associated with relationships and the cost of loneliness so that's first one is really getting motivated to to tackle this issue the next one is um at the end for and unite is is normalizing conversations and and

it's fine so Again, sometimes leaders have a tendency to say things like, oh, employees, go bond. You know like It's like a parent saying to the kid, go make friends today at school. And they need to also be part of this process. They need to be showing their own vulnerability and willingness to sacrifice some comfort to make relationships. And so a lot of the leaders that are doing well with this area are talking about, hey, I felt lonely at times too, and here's what happened. We're here so I make sure I'm still getting the kind of connections that I need at work. um The eye is a big one, which is invest. And I don't think anybody should be asked to do things on their own time, on their own dime, when it comes to a benefit for the organizations.

And that means that if you want to have people, you know, you want to support social connection, well, then do it during the workday, pay for people's time and don't expect them to do things on the weekends or in their evenings, or to do things during the day that then require them to work all night or all weekend to make up for it.

carve out time, slow down the workflow, make sure that you're spending the money and the resources necessary to say this is and this is important. And then the T is for trial and error. um And I'll talk if I have time in a minute about some research that Sarah and I are doing about what types of interventions to try.

But the reality is people are complex, organizations are different, leaders are different styles and goals as well. So I can't give you the one prescription for how to make everybody bond, but it's a good idea to start off with some hypotheses, try things out, and then the Eve is evaluated, evaluate whether they're working or not. And so you can do a pre-test of the loneliness and connection levels before you start doing things and check them six months later and see if things are moving. as well as do some you know interviews and one-on-ones to try to understand that better.

CC: Yeah, that is a really helpful framework. I think we'll want to put that in our show notes so people can find that work later to follow up and read more about that.

I think that's going to be really helpful for a lot of leaders.

But one of the other phenomenon that we've seen, and I think it was also in Microsoft's Work Trends report, is the advent of so many meetings ah that people are going from meeting to meeting to meeting to meeting and even going on to what Microsoft called like the triple peak where people are working again late at night. So ah one of the things I wondered is if I'm on this um this crazy pace of just not even having time to step away from my computer for a minute. Is it that impacting, whether I'm in the office or not, is that impacting the time that I have available or that I feel I have available to build relationships?

CNH: Absolutely.

CC: Does that make sense to you?

CNH: Yeah, absolutely. I had an earlier article in Harvard Business Review with Leslie Perlow and Eunice Yoon called, I think it's called Stop the Meeting Madness. um And so I've been thinking about meetings for a long time. And yeah again, this was I think this was in 2017 or so. You know meetings can have benefits, but they also have costs. And one of the costs can be if they're either scheduled in a really choppy way in your schedule. So you know what it's like when you only have a half an hour or an hour in between meetings, you don't get much done then either. um Or there's just too many of them or they're poorly run.
I mean, there's so many things that can go wrong with meetings. But regardless of of which particular thing is going wrong, if the impact is people don't have long blocks of unstructured time that they can use at their discretion, their creativity and productivity will suffer, but also their relationships will, because there needs to be a certain amount of leisure experienced when people are getting to know each other. And if we're on this breathless treadmill and we can't get off it, you know it's very hard to take a moment to look someone in the eye and ask, how are you really doing? Or, hey, can I share with you some feedback about what happened in that meeting that may be helpful to you?
And so yes, meetings themselves are not um the enemy, but it's the way meetings are scheduled and run that I think requires some rethinking.

CC: Yeah. Yeah, no, I agree with you. One last thing I want to try and get to, Connie, because this has been really helpful, is thinking that we've been doing about you know like how do we make the physical workplace better for people to be able to support well-being and help combat loneliness and you know all of the benefits that you've talked about that come from psychological safety. So we've been thinking a lot about using a community. We've used that word a few times, like actually physical communities where people gather and build relationships. And um Eric Kleinenberg uses the phrase social infrastructure, which I love because it's places that bring people together. And I was just wondering if you've seen any of that in your work that we could draw from, like examples of organizations that are thinking like a vibrant community or trying to create that kind of relational community.

CNH: Yes, I will first of all say something about being out of the office and then in the office. And I also want to caution that I've been using the office a lot and talking about knowledge workers. That's this group that I study but most of these principles apply to people working in factories or in stores or in restaurants and other frontline sites. um So ah first of all, we did some really interesting research. This is another project with Sarah Wright and someone named Ben Marks, where we looked at third spaces that people were working. And third spaces is a category used for not the office, not the home. And so it could be a coffee shop or it could be a co-working site.

And we were really amazed how happy people were working in those third spaces from a relationship standpoint. In fact, in our data, these were with remote and hybrid workers. They found the most relational fulfillment working in a third space versus the office or home. Office was second. um And so I think when we think about designing the workplaces of the future, we should go beyond the walls of whatever the organization itself as least as their footprint and think about how we can also influence community spaces or support things like coworking sites.There might be other ways that people can locate their work closely close to their homes, so they reduce the commute, but in a way that gets them out and about with other people, because we know those kinds of indirect conversations or connections can also be really valuable and restorative to people.

And so I do think that when companies are thinking about their space, you should um you really should have a ah ah ah place in mind for all these activities that you want to host. So going back to a different study with Sarah Wright where we looked at different things people were doing to encourage social connection at work, We asked eight different kinds of all different kinds of people. And the number one was a free communal lunch. And so that it just came through like, yeah, everybody loves a free lunch. um So no matter what age you were, what gender you were, what type of your role you had and so forth, everybody was like, this was their number one thing. So if I were designing an office, I'd be saying, okay, where are we going to have a lunch room that can fit everybody? But maybe it doesn't have to be, again, in our you know unique office, it could be a shared space. with another group.

um And you might want to also think about, okay, where are my small teams meeting? You know, do we have lots of small teams meeting rooms where people can shut the door and really be loud and not disturb other people? So everything should have its, like, when you think about designing spaces, it should be with a clear understanding of what you might do in that space and what your needs are. And when you have that blueprint, then I think the execution of it becomes, you know, much clearer and more straightforward.

CC: Yeah. Well, and one of the things I'm taking away from this conversation is that you know even if you're not in a place where you can have that kind of communal um third place with other organizations, like even thinking about your own workplace, like how can you draw some lessons from you know those great third places and be able to try and infuse that. ah into your workplace as well, like creating places where people come together that can be a little bit more relaxed. And it's not just about work, work, work, but actually have a cup of coffee, talk, yeah be a human being at work, all those good things.

So Connie, this has been a great conversation. Thank you so much for joining us today on Work Better.

CNH: Thank you so much for having me.

CC: Rebecca, can you tell us about our guest next week?

RC: Next week we're talking about AI in education and preparing students for a future with AI. Jose Antonio Bowen – who has written six books including Teaching Naked and Teaching with AI – has an interesting take. He says that what we call cheating in the classroom – like AI writing a paper for a student – we call progress in the business world. We'll explore what he says we should do about that and why he still advocates for less technology actually in our classrooms..

CC: It's a really helpful and optimistic conversation for anyone who – like me – is a little bit afraid that AI might take my job.
If you enjoyed today's conversation, would you share the episode with a friend or colleague, like us and visit us as steelcase.com/research to sign up for weekly updates on workplace research, insights and design ideas delivered right to your inbox.
Thanks again for being here and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.