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

Chris Congdon: If you don't hear much from your employees, you might think everything's going 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 for changing that.

Welcome to Season 5 of Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and how to improve it. 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 will help us understand how to create workplaces that can help people thrive amid 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 navigating 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 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. Psychological safety is the concept of feeling safe to take risks and be yourself without fear of negative consequences. Positive relationships at work benefit an organization's innovation and creativity.

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

RC: Connie is an organizational psychologist who recently founded the Institute for Life at Work. She studies hybrid and remote teams, team effectiveness, psychological safety, loneliness, inclusive cultures, team member engagement, and burnout. She is also 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.

CC: Hi Connie, welcome to Work Better.

Connie Noonan Hadley: Thank you, thank you for having me.

CC: I'm excited to talk to you because your work is exciting. People are just going through a lot right now regarding their overall well-being. They're feeling lonely in life and even at work. Because you studied this, I'd like to start with an article you wrote last year for the Harvard Business Review with Mark Mortensen and Amy Edmondson. You wrote this article in HBR 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 saw changes in the economy post-pandemic that were leading some people to get more silent and quieter. And that's a natural response when you feel under threat. And when you hear about layoffs, inflation, or other changes, AI is taking my job. It's natural to start conserving your energy and efforts to ensure you're doing the safest possible behaviors. So psychological safety is the feeling that you can take interpersonal risks without fear of retribution or punishment. Those risks include admitting a mistake, offering a new idea, challenging the status quo, or reaching out and connecting with someone in a vulnerable way. These behaviors benefit organizations by bringing things to light faster, getting out new ideas, or stopping the train from going down the wrong path. But people don't offer them because they don't want to have personal career risks for themselves. So, we wrote this article to remind employers that it's their job to ensure their employees speak up by creating the right environment. We offer this winning formula based on, first of all, making sure that there's a clear rationale and why each person benefits from doing this, not just the broader organization, and because you have to make it worthwhile for them. The second is making sure the invitations are really clear. So, it's not just an open-door policy or vague town hall agenda, but being specific about asking what you want people's input on and when and how they should provide that to you. The third step is making sure the consequences are heavily oriented towards positive ones and diminishing the negative ones so that positive ones would be. Things like saying thank you and promotions, bonuses, and other organizational rewards should go to those who take those risks for the organization's benefit.

CC: Yeah. It is so hard to give feedback during those uncertain times. And my son was even asking for coaching because his leader had asked for straightforward, honest feedback about what was happening. And I said go with caution. So maybe I just negated everything you were talking about, but I said proceed cautiously. Be honest, but think about how the listener will 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 related 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, again, channel to communicate that, like 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 of weeks, you know, why don't you put some thoughts together, then that's good. That means they're really not just saying it; they have committed time to hearing what you have to say—and then listening carefully. Again, many managers will say, does anybody have any questions in a meeting as they're looking at their phone? So it's showing that you care and that you're interested. And then, of course, the follow-up has to be, again, that thank you and doing something with that feedback. 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 excellent coaching. You've also connected this notion of psychological safety to better overall well-being and helping people cope with 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 have been focusing on loneliness, 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. However, I have seen the connection to psychological safety by talking to people about their work experiences. So Sarah Wright from the University of Canterbury and I conducted this significant study where we tried to talk to people and get stories about feeling connected and disconnected. Then, we looked at many variables to see what distinguished those experiences. And it's clear that no matter who you are in the hierarchy or your background, people are naturally reluctant 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 positive or negative outcomes.

CC: Yeah, what are they going to think?

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

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

CNH: Well, dating or even making friends when joining a new school. And so it takes courage. It takes effort to get out there and connect with people. And then, even if you create the forum and say you schedule a coffee, you'll have to decide how much I will reveal about myself. Will I talk more about why I'm doing this job, my hopes and dreams, and maybe things happening at home? And those kinds of revelations 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 the organization. And by the way, creating relationships in the organization is not just suitable for individuals. My research shows that it helps with job satisfaction, engagement, and other significant outcomes and benefits the organization. That's where you get productivity, greater creativity, and a more prolonged sense of connection and community for people that will keep them in their seats and not go to your competitor. So, I think everybody has some reason to try to encourage connections in the workplace, but it starts with psychological safety.

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

CNH: But when you think about productivity, it's obvious it's like getting the best output with minimal 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 can communicate better and faster with your teammates and the other people 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 a couple of good analyses of the costs of the opposite, which is workplace loneliness. Cigna, for example, estimated that it costs US employers 400 billion dollars a year to have lonely employees. And a large part of that is people quitting, which we know happens more often. But other parts are that they need to be more engaged in their job. They're not achieving those productivity targets as quickly because they're holding back or need the connections to smooth the work. So this, again, has a real financial impact as well as a social impact.

CC: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. I would imagine several leaders would say that people can speak up in my organization. They may only sometimes be self-aware about whether people know whether that's true. And so, if you gave me some tips, how do I know that people feel psychologically safe versus just assuming they do because I'm such a great leader?

CNH: Well, that's a good question, and I love it when leaders tell me that because I find it fascinating to hear what they're basing that assessment on. Often, I find this ironic. Usually, they're basing it on silence. So they're saying, well, 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 they want 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 they're not feeling exceptionally psychologically safe. So what can you look for? I mean, the first thing I promote is to use an actual validated scientific instrument. So, Amy created one decades ago. I have adapted my version of that. It's got five questions. Do members of this team feel they're able to bring up problems and challenging issues, or do you think it's easy to ask other members of your team for help? You could use an actual survey questionnaire to calculate the levels of psychological safety and monitor it over time.

CC: So that's a significant step that gives you a good baseline. But also, it's so important to talk to people in small, hopefully safe environments. You may need to bring in an external facilitator. Maybe the boss isn't the right person to host these focus groups if they're the problem. But I, as a researcher, get the benefit of going in there with a 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 regretted it. 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 when you spoke up and you're happy you did. These questions get at the underlying norms about what's acceptable and not here and what happens when people step over the line. You must get to that kind of qualitative level to understand what's happening in the workplace. So I recommend the scales be like quantitative assessments using a survey, but also do deeper dives with people to understand what's going on.

CC: Yeah, I would imagine that sometimes people observe that maybe the person who speaks up with all the positives and all the great things that the boss is doing, their career advancement goes a little bit further. And you notice that and go, oh, well, I better not give any feedback that is less than favorable 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. It could be the absence of anything that comes positively from speaking up. And so all you see are benefits accruing to people who say positive things and don't challenge the status quo, and then nobody ever says anything else. That tells you, okay, this is where we channel our energies. This is how we get ahead here. And I mean, one other point I'll make here is that some leaders blame employees for not speaking up. They'll say things like, well, they're just not confident enough or not strong enough to speak up. But the reality is, people who don't speak up are usually really savvy and bright, looking around them and going. This doesn't make sense here. And so, we talk about in that HBR article, you know, the benefits to the individual speaking up can be delayed, uncertain, and possibly have a low probability. You don't know that you'll actually be rewarded for admitting a mistake, right? So, who benefits? It's the organization. And so if you haven't aligned your system to make it safe for 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 friends at work, 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. 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. The U is to start with understanding, which means I think the first step here for leaders is to really understand, again, like I was saying, the benefits and the costs associated with relationships and the cost of loneliness. So the first one is really getting motivated to tackle this issue. The next one is normalizing conversations.
Sometimes leaders have a tendency to say things like, "Oh, employees, go bond." You know, like it's a parent saying to the kid, "Go make friends today at school." They need also to be part of this process. They must show their vulnerability and willingness to sacrifice some comfort to make relationships. Many leaders doing well in this area say, "Hey, I felt lonely at times too, and here's what happened. We're here, so I ensure I'm still getting the connections I need at work."
The I is a big one, which is invested. I don't think anybody should be asked to do things on their own time, on their dime, when it comes to a benefit for the organizations. That means that if you want to support social connection, 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 important.
The T is for trial and error. I'll talk if I have time about some research that Sarah and I are doing and what types of interventions to try. But the reality is people are complex, organizations are different, leaders have 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 evaluate whether they're working or not. You can do a pre-test of the loneliness and connection levels before you start doing things and check them six months later to see if things are moving, as well as do some 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 phenomena that we've seen, and I think it was also in Microsoft's Work Trends report, is the advent of so many meetings that people are going from meeting to meeting to meeting and even going on to what Microsoft called the triple peak where people are working again late at night. So one of the things I wondered is if I'm on this crazy pace of just not even having time to step away from my computer for a minute, is that impacting, whether I'm in the office or not, 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. So I've been thinking about meetings for a long time. This was in 2017 or so. Meetings can have benefits, but they also have costs. One of the costs can be if they're either scheduled in a really choppy way in your schedule. 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. Or there's just too many of them or they're poorly run.

There are so many things that can go wrong with meetings. But regardless 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. If we're on this breathless treadmill and we can't get off it, 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?"

So yes, meetings themselves are not 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 how do we make the physical workplace better for people to be able to support well-being and help combat loneliness and all of the benefits that you've talked about that come from psychological safety. 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. Eric Kleinenberg uses the phrase social infrastructure, which I love because it's places that bring people together. 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 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.

So, 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. 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. 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.

So I think when we think about designing the workplaces of the future, we should go beyond the walls of whatever the organization itself has 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 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 really have a place in mind for all these activities that you want to host. 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 all different kinds of people. The number one was a free communal lunch. It just came through like, yeah, everybody loves a free lunch. No matter what age you were, what gender you were, what type of 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 in our unique office, it could be a shared space with another group.

You might also want to think about, okay, where are my small teams meeting? Do we have lots of small team meeting rooms where people can shut the door and really be loud and not disturb other people? So everything should have its place. 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. When you have that blueprint, then I think the execution of it becomes much clearer and more straightforward.

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