PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

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Recently I invited a guest speaker to my monthly Risk Leadership Group …

.. to share her experience in a toxic environment. Let's call her Kate. What Kate experienced was a culture of finger pointing, the blame game and "don't you dare come to me with anything that might make us look bad".

Kate's warfare story was about an 18-month period as a senior manager in a governance role in a large organisation. Her boss sat on the executive team and during that time, it became evident that her job was to take care of things so that her boss and the rest of the executive did not need to worry about such things.

It took two weeks for Kate to get her first one-on-one meeting. Over the following months her one-on-ones were cancelled or curtailed with great regularity. By the time her tenure came to an unexpected and abrupt end, she had managed just two hours of face-to-face time with her boss in 18 months.

During that time Kate had done her best to create value in the role that was decidedly not evident when she arrived. While doing so, she soon realised the toxic environment that staff were operating in. So she set about creating psychological safety for her team so they could be more effective in supporting the rest of the organisation. Encouraging them to speak up, to try new approaches and to feel safe in failing.

She then reflected that while she had done the right thing for her team, she had not done the right thing for herself. She did not create psychological safety for herself with her boss and the executive.

So when she spoke up, her boss and others on the executive felt threatened and reacted with an array of avoiding, delaying and blame-shifting strategies. Kate and I spoke about how she could have done things differently. In hindsight, she realised she needed to confront the situation much earlier and in a very tactful way. Kate was familiar with my book about creating persuasive conversations so we discussed how she might have constructed the conversation with her boss. We agreed that her boss was not aware of the damage that was being caused and how that impacted on her ability to shine. So we focused on a diagram to help explain the situation. Figure 1 is the diagram we came up with. It shows that staff react to the actions of management based on the emotions stirred in them. And that wrongful actions have impact that fracture the fabric of an organisation's culture. And in seeking safety, staff put up barriers. They don't speak up. They hold on to, even hide, bad news.
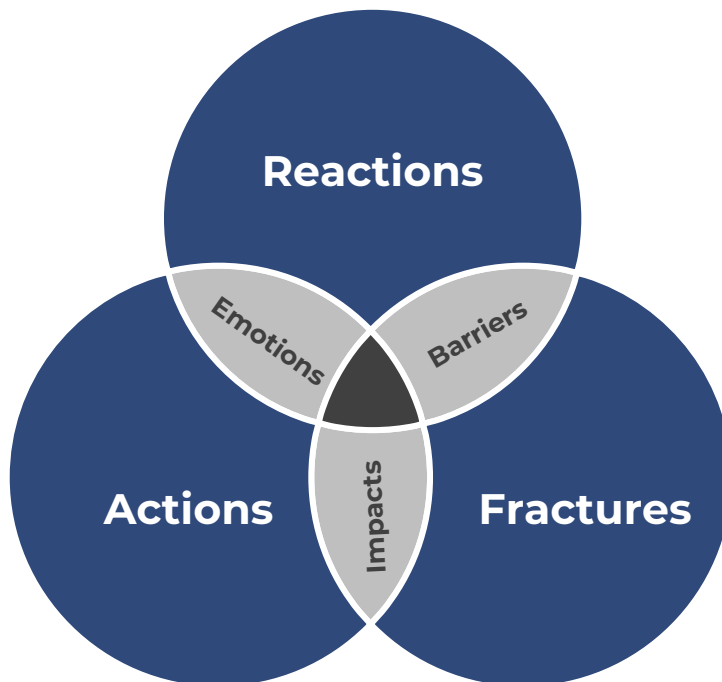

Figure 1

Diagrams like Figure 1 work very well as a conversation starter. Something to interest the other person, to demonstrate your deep thinking and to explain what is actually a complex situation.

We agreed that the other element of a persuasive conversation she needed was a story. Why? Because her message would have fallen on deaf ears if her boss was not emotionally ready to hear it. We make decisions on emotion first, logic second, if at all.

Kate had any number of stories of negative emotional impact, with staff literally quivering in their boots when interacting with the executive.

The key to telling this story would be to depersonalise it and talk about the organisation as a whole to get an agreement on the level of psychological safety. Clarifying for them the aim to ensure people can raise their voices, be heard and feel safe to do so.

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