When employees are afraid to speak, companies stop learning

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AT a meeting in a Kuala Lumpur corporate office, the CEO asks, "Any concerns?" Nobody speaks. The meeting ends.

In the cafeteria, however, there is a buzz of activity and discussion, with some employees voicing their views on the problems facing the organisation.

But this raises the question: why was there deafening silence when the CEO asked if there were any concerns? It is a baffling scenario that plays out in Malaysian workplaces.

Why is this scenario so common in Malaysian workplaces?

One reason is the absence of psychological safety — an environment where employees feel able to speak up, ask questions, admit mistakes, challenge ideas and offer suggestions without fear of humiliation or punishment.

This does not mean that an organisation has no accountability. It means people can speak honestly while remaining accountable for their work.

The absence of such an environment can have serious consequences.

Organisations that provide psychological safety are better placed to achieve their goals and improve productivity.

Organisations that do not provide such an environment may find that problems remain hidden and decision-makers lack a true sense of what is happening on the ground because bad news travels slowly upwards.

Managers may therefore assume that everything is under control when, in reality, important problems are being kept from them.

The culture encourages employees to tell managers what they want to hear, preventing managers from getting a true sense of the problems facing the organisation.

In organisations where mistakes are concealed and problems are not discussed, innovation suffers.

Such organisations can be bureaucratic, with employees reluctant to take the initiative or responsibility because they see little incentive to do so.

Decisions become concentrated at the top and are disconnected from the realities of the marketplace.

Innovation suffers, and employees become less agile in responding to changing market demands because they are given little incentive to make decisions.

An organisation that lacks a learning culture and fails to inspire confidence among its employees can soon find itself in a tailspin.

Amy Edmondson a Harvard scholar who developed the concept of psychological safety in organisations, says people perform better when they ask questions, raise concerns, admit mistakes, challenge ideas and ask for help.

Google later conducted Project Aristotle to understand why some teams performed better than others.

It found that psychological safety ranked first among five key dynamics associated with effective teams.

Google found that team effectiveness was not simply about putting the smartest or most technically talented people together. How team members interacted also mattered.

The Google researchers drew on Edmondson's earlier work, which showed that employees' ability to speak up, ask questions and acknowledge mistakes has a significant bearing on team effectiveness.

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There are many examples that Malaysian companies could follow. Pixar shows how a creative process can benefit when people are able to criticise ideas and challenge the work of senior colleagues.

Its Braintrust meetings encourage candid feedback on films in development, allowing creative teams to identify weaknesses before a film is completed and released.

Malaysian managers need to understand that the traditional hierarchical organisation may struggle to keep up with rapidly changing markets and customer expectations.

To keep up, employees need to be agile and able to make decisions swiftly.

Without psychological safety, employees may be reluctant to take risks or make decisions, leaving the organisation less able to respond quickly to change.

If Malaysian organisations are able to navigate a difficult environment, managers need to create a culture in which employees feel confident making decisions, taking calculated risks and learning from their mistakes without fear or unfair punishment.

When employees are afraid to speak, silence may give managers the comforting impression that everything is under control.

That silence may instead be the clearest warning that something is wrong. An organisation cannot become agile if its people are afraid to speak.

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