

# Amy Edmondson: Teaming

Amy Edmondson is an Engineer turned Management and Leadership Professor, who has made a special study of how to create effective collaboration among small, disparate groups in informal circumstances. This, she believes, is the key to organisational success in a world where innovation is critical.



*Amy Edmondson*

## Very Short Biography

Amy Edmondson grew up in New York, and studied Visual and Environmental Studies and Engineering at Harvard University, graduating in 1981. For a short while, she was Chief Engineer at the Buckminster Fuller Institute. After she left, she published a book, *'A Fuller Explanation: The Synergetic Geometry of R. Buckminster Fuller'* about Fuller's ideas.

She then moved to the Pecos River Learning Centers, where she became Director of Research, until starting a PhD in Organisational Behaviour at Harvard in 1991. When she completed it, she joined the staff of Harvard Business School, where she is currently the Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management.

## Failure

For many people, Amy Edmondson came to notice with her 2011 Harvard Business Review article '[Strategies for Learning from Failure](#)'. In this, she argues the case for 'intelligent failures' setting out a neat model of how failure spans a spectrum from blameworthy to praiseworthy.

## Types of Failure

Amy C Edmondson  
(Harvard Business Review, April 2011)



*Reasons for Failure – Amy Edmondson*

The abilities to face up to failure, discuss it candidly, and be curious about it lead nicely into the work for which Edmondson is best known...

## Teaming

Edmondson distinguishes the concept of **'Teaming'** from the more familiar idea of teamwork. Teaming is about bringing together a diverse group and rapidly creating the conditions for close collaboration. It bears a close relationship with the idea of [Swift Trust](#), which we discussed in an earlier [Pocketblog](#).

However, whilst swift trust focuses on creating a solid basis for long-term collaboration quickly, Edmondson is more interested in short-term, informal collaboration. For this to happen, she identifies **'three pillars'**.

1. Curiosity – to learn from the people around you
2. Passion – so that you care enough to work your hardest
3. Empathy – so you can see things from other people's points of view

The role of leadership becomes one of role modelling these three behaviours. You must be driven to achieve the goal, enquire deeply into the situation, and tune into the needs and emotions of the people around you.

Edmondson's book, [Teaming: How Organizations Learn, Innovate, and Compete in the Knowledge Economy](#) is very highly regarded and features a foreword by [Edgar Schein](#).

An important concept that Edmondson introduces in her work on teaming is...

## Psychological Safety

Teaming works – and teams work – when participants collectively feel that members can take risks together safely. They can share feelings and disclose actions without fear of recrimination. This creates a climate of openness, which Edmondson calls **'Psychological Safety'**. Again, the leader needs to model appropriate behaviours, acknowledging your own fallibility, and being curious and empathic.

Crucially, when you achieve psychological safety for your team, work becomes a problem of learning, rather than of executing actions. In this, Edmondson's work complements Schein's exceptionally well.

## Edmondson in her own Words

There are a number of excellent videos available. In this 12 minute TEDx video, Edmondson is talking about Psychological Safety.

### Building a psychologically safe workplace: Amy Edmondson at TEDxHGSE



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### About Mike Clayton

Mike is an author and speaker, specialising in personal effectiveness, project management and the management of change. When we try to make change work for us, things don't always go as planned: Shift happens! Over the years, Mike has developed personal and professional strategies to anticipate and deal with shift. You can contact Mike at [mike@mikeclayton.co.uk](mailto:mike@mikeclayton.co.uk)