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Power And Influence

How a CEO Can Create Psychological Safety in the Room

by Timothy R. Clark

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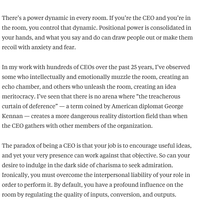

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Summary. As the CEO, your mere presence in a room dictates the power dynamic. The paradox of being a CEO is that your job is to encourage useful ideas, and yet your very presence can work against that objective. So can your desire to indulge in the dark side of charisma to seek... more

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There's a power dynamic in every room. If you're the CEO and you're in the room, you control that dynamic. Positional power is consolidated in your hands, and what you say and do can draw people out or make them recoil with anxiety and fear.

In my work with hundreds of CEOs over the past 25 years, I've observed some who intellectually and emotionally muzzle the room, creating an echo chamber, and others who unleash the room, creating an idea meritocracy. I've seen that there is no arena where "the treacherous curtain of deference" -- a term coined by American diplomat George Kennan -- creates a more dangerous reality distortion field than when the CEO gathers with other members of the organization.

The paradox of being a CEO is that your job is to encourage useful ideas, and yet your very presence can work against that objective. So can your desire to indulge in the dark side of charisma to seek admiration. Ironically, you must overcome the interpersonal liability of your role in order to perform it. By default, you have a profound influence on the room by regulating the quality of inputs, conversation, and outputs.

Consider the fact that for your people, their personal reputation, career opportunity, and job security are on the line. For you, the viability and success of the organization are on the line. You understand that silence is expensive, but your people understand that silence is safe. You understand that unvarnished feedback leads to good decision-making, but your people understand that varnished feedback is a form of self-preservation. You know that fear breaks the feedback loop, but your people know that fear surrounds the feedback loop.

How, then, can you create high levels of psychological safety to promote the unencumbered exchange of ideas and unedited evaluation of feedback? Here are 10 practical ways to make that happen:

1. Assign someone else to conduct the meeting.

Because you occupy the apex of power, you can change the power dynamic with small adjustments to the way you orchestrate a meeting. For example, when you assign someone else to conduct the meeting instead of taking the reins yourself, you're visibly redistributing power by leveling yourself down to be more of a player-coach. This has the added benefit of giving you a better vantage point to dual-monitor content and interaction.

2. Don't sit at the head of the table.

In many physical spaces, seating reflects the hierarchy. When you uphold rituals that reflect the power structure, it fosters guarded behavior and laundered language. Disrupt those rituals by not sitting at the head of the table. Mix it up -- don't allow people to get comfortable in designated spots. Show others that you're agnostic to title, position, authority, and the accouterments of power by continually reconfiguring the physical space, including your personal proximity to the same people.

3. Create warmth and informality.

It would be nice if you could personally greet and connect with every person in every meeting, but you can't. What you can do is create an atmosphere of psychological safety by using your emotional intelligence to convey warmth and encourage collaboration. Pay attention to the slightest signals you send, including your gestures, facial expressions, and vocal characteristics (intensity, tone, volume, rate, and pitch).

4. Model acts of vulnerability.

You have a first-mover obligation to model acts of vulnerability to give others permission to do the same. This is disarming, especially when the people in the room are doing risk/reward calculations about what to say or not say. The quality of the clash of ideas will hinge on the permission and respect others sense through your behavior. If you show no personal vulnerability, silence will substitute for productive tension. So, try the following:

- Openly challenge yourself
- Ask for help
- Admit what you don't know
- Point out a past mistake
- Express your uncertainty

5. Stimulate inquiry before advocacy.

You need lateral, divergent, and non-linear thinking in the room. If you move from asking questions to advocating your position too soon, it softly censors your ram and signals the end of the discussion.

There are two forms of inquiry: explanatory and exploratory. Explanatory inquiry uses data to understand current performance based on cause-and-effect relationships. Exploratory inquiry uses data to make assumptions and predictions about what could be possible. Explanatory inquiry helps improve execution, while exploratory inquiry drives innovation.

Whether your focus is execution or innovation, ask thoughtful questions surrounded by compassionate curiosity. This acts as an equalizer and dilutes the power differential. Make statements such as:

- Help me think this through...
- I'd like to know...
- I'm fascinated by...
- I wonder why...
- I can't wait until we figure out how to...
- Let's see if we can tackle this problem together.

6. Reward challenges to the status quo.

One CEO I've worked with likes to raise an issue and then ask everyone in the room to challenge her point of view. She'll say, "Tell me why I might be wrong. Help me see my blind spots." She then pauses and lets everyone sit in the silence until the first person is brave enough to challenge her. She immediately rewards the vulnerability by saying, "Thank you. I may have missed something. Let's explore your perspective." Keenly aware that smothering dissent increases the risk of poor judgment, she has done this so often that challenging the status quo has become normalized behavior.

7. Push back with humor and enthusiasm.

To increase the productive tension in the room, another CEO I've worked with makes smart use of humor and enthusiasm. For example, he'll ask, "May I arm wrestle you on that point?" which always elicits a smile and positive response. Humor and enthusiasm are not only disarming, but also inject excitement into the process and communicate a commitment to rigorous debate. This approach also takes the emotional edge off high-stakes discussions. If you can disagree without being autocratic, it leaves the discussion open for others to do the same.

8. Buffer strong personalities.

Chances are you have introverts, extroverts, and strong personalities in the room. Keep in mind that introverts may prefer to process quietly and nonverbally, whereas extroverts may relish verbal, public processing. Contain strong personalities, especially those who lack self-awareness. Don't allow assertions of dominance or overly dogmatic behavior. One CEO does this by saying, "As we discuss this issue, don't take more than your fair share of airtime. I want each of you to ensure equal participation." Remember, insecure people tend to elevate themselves by subordinating others. Your job is to create a shame- and embarrassment-free environment. The higher the arena of power, the deeper the potential humiliation if things go south. Finally, draw out the quiet ones. Ask a question up front and give time for reflection.

9. Listen and pause.

When you listen and pause, you're communicating respect in an unmistakable way. You're telling the person that they deserve to be seen, heard, and understood. There is perhaps no more powerful way to validate another human being. When you do this in the presence of other members of your organization, you send a clear message that the individual matters. I know a CEO who does this exceptionally well. He listens with intensity and will sometimes pause for a long time. People often try to break the awkward silence, but he raises his hand gently to signal a no-interruption rule. These moments of truth embolden others to think harder and contribute more fully.

10. Give highly targeted praise and recognition.

Inject precision into your praise and recognition. Instead of saying, "I appreciate that insight," make it highly targeted by explaining why. The "why" explains how the contribution is valuable, which both reinforces the behavior and coaches the individual to engage in deeper analysis. You might say instead, "I appreciate that insight because you're helping us identify other areas of risk that we weren't paying attention to." One CEO I've worked with avoids any hint of gratuitous or uncritical praise because he believes his job is to constantly stretch the critical-thinking capacity of his people. Don't withhold or be stingy with praise or recognition. Just give it in the moment with an explanation and genuine encouragement.

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As the CEO, you are first among equals, yet your mere presence dictates the power dynamic. Take the opportunity to deliberately design that dynamic. If you induce fear, add ambiguity, or allow hierarchy to outrank truth, you abdicate your role. But if you nurture psychological safety to unleash the room, you magnify your role and scale your influence and impact. Remember Dickens' description of Fezziwig's impact on the room: "He has the power to render us happy or unhappy; to make our service light or burdensome; a pleasure or a toil. Say that his power lies in words and looks; in things so slight and insignificant that it is impossible to add and count 'em up."

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