



Sankofa Learning Design

COMPLIANCE ESSENTIALS · MODULE 2 · PARTICIPANT GUIDE

Speaking Up Safely

A working reference for making it safe to raise a problem, a risk, or a mistake — before it gets expensive. Built on Amy Edmondson's research on psychological safety.

Corporate track



THE IDEA

What "psychological safety" actually means

Psychological safety is the shared belief that it's safe to speak up — to ask a question, flag a risk, disagree, or admit a mistake — without being punished or made to look foolish. It is not about being nice, lowering the bar, or avoiding hard feedback. High-performing teams have *more* candor, not less. The term comes from Harvard's Amy Edmondson.

The one sentence to remember

A team's willingness to speak up has a ceiling, and the leader sets it. The fix is never "people should be braver" — it's "make the room safe to be honest in."

Why people stay silent

Silence is almost never about not caring. It's about managing how you look. Edmondson names four fears:

The silence	The fear behind it
Won't ask a basic question	"I don't want to look like I don't know something everyone else does." (ignorant)
Won't admit a mistake	"I don't want to look like I can't do my job." (incompetent)
Won't raise a concern	"I don't want to be the person who's always shooting things down." (negative)
Won't challenge a decision	"I don't want to be seen as a troublemaker." (disruptive)

Name the fear and you can lower it. Every tool in this guide is built to make one of these four feel less risky.



Unit 1 · Reading the room

A hedge is data, not reassurance

"Probably fine," a pause, a change of subject — that's a person testing whether it's safe to say the real thing. Don't take it at face value (you teach them hedging works), and don't demand the full problem on the spot (you raise the cost of speaking). Name the hedge gently: *"Probably fine is doing a lot of work in that sentence — what's the part you're not sure about?"*

Unit 2 · Responding in the moment

Reward the flag before you know if it's right

The first flag is rarely certain. The behavior matters more than whether they're right — thank them and probe *before* you evaluate. Reassuring the worry away closes the door; demanding proof first turns speaking up into a burden of evidence.

Reflex shutdown → reframe that keeps the door open

What you catch yourself saying	Say this instead
"We don't have time for problems right now."	"If there's a problem, now is the cheapest time to hear it."
"Are you sure? That doesn't sound right."	"Walk me through what you're seeing."
"Let's stay positive."	"Naming a risk is being on the team, not off it."
"Just handle it."	"What do you need from me to handle it?"



Unit 3 · Fixing the meeting

When a meeting gets no straight answers, fix the room — not the people's courage.

Red flags that shut a meeting up

- It happens only at the end, once problems are already expensive.
- It opens with "what went wrong?" — which sounds like blame-hunting.
- The last person who spoke up got corrected in front of everyone.
- People share by seniority, so juniors just echo the boss's read.

TOOL · THE BLAMELESS CHECK-IN, IN ORDER

1. Open on the next stretch's **goal** — not last stretch's failures.
2. Ask "**what could go wrong from here?**" before "what already went wrong?"
3. Take the **most junior read first**, before anyone senior anchors it.
4. Name the first risk out loud with a **thank-you**, then give it an owner.

TOOL · THE PREMORTEM PROMPT

"Imagine it's six months out and this project has already failed — what's the story of what went wrong?"

It works because it's imaginary and blameless. People will name risks in a hypothetical failure that they'd never volunteer as a criticism of a colleague. Keep it "what went wrong," never "whose fault was it."



Unit 4 · Accountability isn't blame

Accountability

Looks **forward**, fixes the **system**.

"What did we learn, and what do we change so it doesn't repeat?"

"Own it, bring the fix, we move on."

Blame

Looks **backward**, finds a **person**.

"Who approved this? I need a name."

"This is why I can't trust the team."

When someone volunteers a mistake

Your response teaches everyone watching. Punish an honest disclosure and you buy silence; wave it off and you buy repeats. **Fix-forward**: thank them, learn from it, change the process.

Unit 5 · The leader sets the ceiling

Surface your own bad news first

The load-bearing move. When you surface bad news early and own your part — "my timeline was too optimistic; here's where we are and two ways forward" — you make it safe for everyone below you to do the same. You can't ask for a truth you won't model.

Manager self-check — this week

- ☐ Did I treat at least one hedge as a signal instead of reassurance?
- ☐ Did I thank someone for a flag before I knew whether they were right?
- ☐ Did I open a check-in on a goal, not on "what went wrong"?
- ☐ Did I run one premortem before a project locked?
- ☐ Did I surface a piece of my own bad news early — and own my part?