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**Interpersonal Communication**

# When a Team Member Speaks Up — and It Doesn't Go Well

by Megan Reitz and Amy C. Edmondson

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**Summary.** Speaking up — and being heard — in organizations is critical, but failed attempts to speak up happen often at work and can lead people to silence themselves and others in the long run. Instead, leaders and team members should frame such situations as opportunities... [more](#)

Elena, a new member of a manufacturing operations team, has identified possible safety improvements. She's thought about what she wants to say to the team but is nervous about speaking up. Why? She's wary of her new boss, Raya; she doesn't want to get

off on the wrong foot with her colleagues; and she isn't absolutely sure her ideas will work across the multiple plants that the team oversees.

The team's weekly zoom meeting feels rushed with a tight agenda. But right at the end, Raya asks whether there is any other business and even asks Elena how she's experiencing things, so she goes for it.

Elena's words don't come out as planned; Raya looks angry and team members start leaving the meeting to go to another one. Raya says simply, "I'm not sure I agree, let's talk more about it." The meeting formally ends, and Elena is left staring at her blank screen, anxiously berating herself, swearing that she'll never do that again, and silently registering a belief that Raya is unapproachable. *Best stay quiet in future*, she thinks, thus strengthening a belief that may well affect the rest of her career.

Raya doesn't follow through with Elena because she's busy and forgets the interaction. Over time, Raya forms the opinion that Elena should be more assertive in meetings — she doesn't say much and seems tentative when she does. Raya's surprised; she could have sworn when she interviewed her that Elena was more forthright. Raya is utterly unaware that her reaction to Elena's ideas has entrenched Elena's assumption that speaking up in meetings is a mistake never to be repeated.

### **The importance of speaking up**

Speaking up — and being heard — in organizations is critical. What gets said, and what doesn't, directs ethical behavior, innovation, inclusion, and performance, as Megan's, Amy's and others' research has shown. Corporate initiatives to encourage speaking up and to build psychological safety are a good first step, but we've noticed many contain problematic assumptions that when employees *do* finally speak up, they'll do so skillfully from

the start, and that the person speaking up is predominantly responsible for the success of the interaction, rather than the listener. As a result, there is little in these programs that covers how both speaker and listener respond to a failed interaction and learn from it.

But failed attempts to speak up, such as the interaction between Elena and Raya, happen often at work. They can have lasting effects because they lead people to silence themselves and others, which means teams gradually lose the habits of feedback and risk-taking. For us as researchers and champions of speaking up, listening, and learning in organizations, it is one of the most frustrating things to observe, as a teams' potential slowly erodes, or new members are unable to make the difference they were recruited for.

Our research and experience have shown us that the antidote starts with all team members, including the leader, explicitly framing interactions such as this one between Elena and Raya, as *experiments from which everyone expects to learn* — especially when they don't go well. Doing so makes them *intelligent failures* in the language of Amy's recent research: when a positive, thoughtful intention to speak up or listen hasn't had the intended outcome but participants leverage the opportunity to learn from the experience.

We'll first take a look at why it's so hard to learn from these kinds of failures, and then suggest ways that team members — including both employees and leaders — can get better at it.

### **Why is it so difficult?**

There are three primary reasons why we don't learn well from failures in speaking up or listening:

**We are oblivious to the failure.**

To learn we must notice that there was something to learn from in the first place! But leaders, especially senior leaders, tend to believe that they are better listeners than they actually are and that they are more approachable than others experience them to be. This means leaders often miss situations where their behavior has silenced others. Elena's boss had no idea that she'd reacted in a way that affected Elena so deeply, so she missed the opportunity to help both of them learn and improve their ongoing relationship.

### **We experience counterproductive emotions.**

On the flip side, when we *do* notice, we often berate ourselves for even the smallest moments of failed speaking or listening. We may feel embarrassed or ashamed — unpleasant emotions that lead us to avoid careful thought. Elena expended a lot of energy wishing she hadn't spoken up, a corrosive response that stifled her future efforts, rather than improving them because the reflection triggered a sense of embarrassment.

Additionally, when aware of a communication breakdown, people often blame others for it — an equally unhelpful, if understandable, response. Elena, for instance, blames Raya for not listening. Raya, meanwhile, might be annoyed at Elena's timing — speaking up at the very end of a long meeting. Blaming distracts us from seeing the role we played, erodes our ability to learn, and has an ongoing corrosive impact on relationships.

### **We are too busy and focused on the short-term.**

In an ongoing survey conducted by Megan and John Higgins, with over 1,750 cross-sector global employees, two-thirds of respondents have reported that they want their manager to prioritize learning conversations more than they do currently. This compares with just 22% who want more prioritization on task.

Raya focuses on the instrumental, immediate, task-focused conversations necessary for short-term business results. Although understandable, her approach risks limiting the attention given to the less-tangible opportunities for improvement and change that are critical to ensure the long-term success of a company. Elena's team likely did not feel the sense of space or permission to pause to explore opportunities for change, or to learn from what had occurred.

### **How to get better at speaking up and listening up**

Given these challenges, to learn and keep learning from the inevitable intelligent failures in speaking and listening, we advise practicing the following four habits:

#### **Prepare to learn from conversations.**

Preparing to speak and listen is crucial, but it is even more critical to prepare to *learn* from interactions. Elena had put some thought into how she'd speak up but neither she nor her boss were on the lookout to learn.

To prepare to learn, explicitly call attention to the role of learning in your team's ongoing effectiveness. At the start of meetings, pause to allow participants to gather their attention and specifically allude to the intention to learn, giving permission for them to pause and reflect on anything that strikes them as unclear or problematic. When possible, build in a few minutes at the end to self-assess the quality of the discussion. This guards against our habit of getting caught up in busyness and distraction, which exacerbates our obliviousness to failures.

Managers in particular must also be aware of the blind spots that can lead them to miss how they may silence others; meanwhile, team members should be aware of how what they say can get misunderstood.

**Notice critical moments.**

Pay attention to feelings of shame or frustration during a discussion — and recognize them as cues to reflect and inquire. Elena and Raya experienced these emotions but were unable to recognize the moments of opportunity they signaled.

When we feel ashamed or frustrated, we tend to shut down reflection, but we can practice using these emotions to fuel curiosity instead. The wording of questions we ask ourselves has a huge impact on our capacity to learn. Instead of, “Why I was so stupid?” Elena could have asked herself, “What thoughts and emotions did I experience during that exchange?” and “What assumptions and judgments did I make, with what evidence?”

As Amy sets out in her new book, this requires going beyond *believing* intelligent failure is valuable, to genuinely *valuing* it when it happens.

**Implement process tools.**

Because it can be difficult to attend to critical moments, it's helpful to establish tools to help teams share responsibility for reflection and feedback, and ensure that no one is simply coasting. Elena and her boss weren't able to spot their failure or capture the learning; however, other team members could see what was happening and could have spoken up.

One team we've observed allocates someone (importantly, not always the same individual) in meetings to look for situations in which people have felt unable to speak or haven't been heard. Another has a short pause in the middle and at the end of meetings where they are asked to mention an interaction that needs more time or that can be learned from. This capacity to notice what is happening in the moment, rather than be swept away in judgments, assumptions, and auto-pilot reactions is

called meta-awareness, and individuals and teams can be successfully trained in this.

### **Attend to learning over the long term.**

A CEO we recently met lamented that her leadership team seemed overly focused on short-term operational targets, rather than on the development of the team. When we probed her further, she realized that her questions to the team had been mostly operationally focused. So, while saying she wanted them to step back and reflect on the larger picture, she sent signals that it was operational targets that really mattered. She began to ask about how they were leading and developing, and focused on recognizing and rewarding those who showed the courage to reflect openly. Soon, the CEO started to share her own speaking and listening failures, and her team began to prioritize learning from their own.

If you're in a world where conversations rarely feel uncomfortable, you might be in trouble. Conversations that matter, that go into new territory, and that develop learning are in their nature challenging.

Conversational failures, when recognized, are evidence of good team health. Recognizing breakdowns means people are saying things new and different, rather than simply going through the motions of discussing agenda items. A conversational failure is intelligent when it is noticed — not ignored or buried — and taken seriously as an opportunity to gain insight. This is where useful cultural change begins.

**Megan Reitz** is an associate fellow at Saïd Business School, University of Oxford, and

adjunct professor of leadership and dialogue at Hult International Business School. She is the author of *Dialogue in Organizations* (2015) and the coauthor of *Mind Time* (2018), *Speak Up* (2019), and the second edition of *Speak Out, Listen Up* (2024). Follow her on LinkedIn or [meganreitz.com](http://meganreitz.com).

**Amy C. Edmondson** is the Novartis Professor of Leadership and Management at Harvard Business School. Her latest book is *Right Kind of Wrong: The Science of Failing Well* (Atria Books, 2023).

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