



NEIL PRETTY

Foreword by AMY EDMONDSON

LEADING BEYOND FEAR



The formula for **psychological
safety, adaptability, and growth**

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Foreword: Dr. Amy C. Edmondson

It gives me great pleasure to write a foreword for this wonderful, practical new book by Neil Pretty. I first met Neil in January 2020 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, during the first in-person meeting of members of a growing network of psychological safety practitioners helping translate theory into practice around the world. Since that inspiring winter gathering, Neil and his global community of colleagues have contributed immensely to the body of knowledge on psychological safety and teamwork that is spreading rapidly across industries and sectors. In the pages ahead, Neil shares his engaging, personal story in a way that beautifully sets the stage for the practical wisdom he has learned, developed, and practiced through his career.

As everyone has heard too often by now, in today's fast-changing, complex work environment, people at work face relentless pressure to learn, innovate, and grow. Navigating these challenges requires a mindset of continuous learning and an ability to collaborate fearlessly. Doing so calls for self-awareness, interest in others' views, and interpersonal skills—attributes that have never been more important to success. This is where psychological safety comes in. Without a climate of psychological safety, it is nearly impossible to have the kind of conversations, and the kind of teamwork, that are desperately needed for progress in the face of uncertainty and challenge.

Psychological safety is the foundation for learning in teams. My research (and that of many others) has found that psychological safety, defined as a

shared belief that one can take the interpersonal risks of speaking candidly, asking questions, or admitting mistakes without fear of embarrassment or retribution, predicts team learning and team performance across industry contexts. Yet, in many—perhaps most—workplaces, people hesitate to voice concerns and uncertainties, because they worry about being perceived as incompetent or disruptive. They struggle to ask for help. Holding back is simply easier and more natural than taking the risk of speaking up. In short, psychological safety is not the default state at work. So, when psychological safety is low, this does not mean a team is broken or bad. It means the team is normal and natural! Put another way, in most workplaces, the costs of speaking up simply feel greater than the costs of holding back. And that is the cognitive calculus that must be changed for teams and organizations to succeed today. That calculus stifles learning, creativity, and problem-solving, depriving individuals and their teams of opportunities for growth and success. Yes, changing cognitive and interpersonal habits takes work (the work described in the pages ahead!), but the rewards of doing so are immense.

Keep in mind that psychological safety is not about being nice. It's not about creating environments that are comfortable and free of risk. In contrast, psychological safety describes a learning environment and learning is uncomfortable. And necessary! The good news is that all of us, at the end of the day, feel happier and more fulfilled when we have learned. When we have taken interpersonal risks. When we have stretched and gone beyond what we might have thought was possible for us or our teammates. This field book helps make that possible.

I am confident that readers will gain much from Neil's hard work in capturing the nuances of psychological safety practices in the pages ahead—never an easy task, but in my view a truly important one. And if capturing practical skills in writing is not easy, reading about them in Neil's deft prose fortunately will be easy—or at least enjoyable and engaging. His stories, humility, humor, and practical insights will pull you in from the first pages.

—Amy C. Edmondson, Cambridge, MA
Prof. Harvard Business School and author of
The Fearless Organization and
Right Kind of Wrong: The Science of Failing Well

Foreword: Dr. Anita Polite-Wilson

When I taught a summer elective called *Diversity and Leadership* for Biola University's Crowell School of Business, I began the course by assigning students to read an article entitled "Three Types of Humility That Impact Your Leadership." The piece explores intellectual, moral, and personal humility—three interconnected dimensions that shape the core of a leader's character.

That same triad of humility is a throughline in this field book. This brings me to a truth that needs stating upfront: If you aren't humble, this guidebook isn't for you.

Why? Because without humility, you cannot fully appreciate all this book has to offer. You'll miss the personal relevance and skip past the self-reflection required to grow. Instead, you'll be tempted to use these insights as tools to "fix others" rather than as a mirror to transform yourself. That temptation is not only misleading—it's dangerous.

As leaders, we get results through others. That's the essence of leadership. But if we are unaware of our own opportunity for growth and development, we run the risk of placing unrealistic expectations on the very people we depend on. We start holding others accountable for a culture we've never truly modeled ourselves. And unless we're willing to lean into the three humilities—intellectual openness, moral grounding, and personal vulnerability—we cannot become the cultural architects our organizations so desperately need.

Cultural architects model the courage to be authentic, transparent, and fallible. They walk alongside other leaders at all levels—not ahead of them in hierarchy or behind them in silence, but with them in partnership. Neil’s writing makes it clear that this guidebook is not theoretical. It is born of lived experience and cultivated in the fire of trial and error. It’s raw. It’s real. And it’s exactly the kind of reflective, practical, and honest work that speaks to those of us committed to doing the inner work of leadership.

I have had the opportunity to witness Neil from the first day we met in the certification course offered by Aristotle and quickly embraced his philosophy. His work is built on the conviction that people deserve to feel safe, seen, and supported at work. This book is a testament—not only to how leaders lead—but to how people live and thrive in the systems we create.

This book is a gift. It is a map, a mirror, and a manual for anyone who wants to build better performing and more human-centered workplaces. But it will only work for those who are humble enough to use it the right way—starting with themselves.

—Dr. Anita Polite-Wilson
Elite team strategist, author, and founder
Dr. Anita Enterprises, Inc.

Introduction: Oh, the Places You'll Go. . .

*The Journey is rarely what you
imagined at the start*

*“Becoming a leader is synonymous with becoming yourself. It is precisely
that simple and also that difficult.”*

—Warren Bennis,
pioneer of the contemporary field of leadership studies

Careers often reflect a journey more than the pursuit of a destination. My career didn't follow a normal script; in part, because I didn't want whatever “normal” was.

From an early age I was encouraged to embrace struggle itself as a valuable teacher. Moments of fear were seen as an invitation to push harder. A willingness to be wrong was seen as a pathway to growth instead of a burden. It turns out that the willingness to embrace struggle in this way would build a desire to learn that would serve me year in and year

out, not in an academic sense but rather in the pursuit of meaning, curiosity, and fulfillment.

That journey has also brought me to the role of leadership time and again sometimes with joy and other times with great reluctance.

My journey—which eventually led to my work as a trusted advisor, leadership expert, executive coach, and consultant championing the movement to help build psychological safety and learning organizations—didn't begin where you might expect.

I have held some kind of leadership role since I was 13 in army cadets, which on its own provided more leadership lessons than I can clearly recall. One of my earliest was as a section leader, when we were asked to get our groups of six or seven cadets and set expectations. I asked everyone to grab chairs, and sat down with them. The very first words I uttered as a young leader were these: "How do we want to work together as a section?" One of my sergeants overheard, and I was promptly instructed to go outside. I stood at attention while my sergeant and two adult officers yelled in my face, instructing me on how things should be done. I was supposed to *tell* them how it was going to be instead of *asking*.

When I marched back in, I stood as ordered, and repeated—against orders—my original question: "How do we want to work together as a section?"

This kind of leadership—caring and collaborative—felt natural and it was a style that took a long time to come back to. The experience itself was also a preview of a lot of the leadership I would face through my career.

I worked as a ski racing coach and in the adventure sport industry. At the ripe old age of 19, I managed a service department that was ranked 54 of 56 shops nationwide in its store revenue to service revenue ratio. Within six months under my management, we broke the top 10 rankings nationally. When I eventually left, we were consistently in the top five. We were the smallest store to break the top 25. By age 21 when most of my friends were still in university, I was asked to consult with other stores and train managers to adopt some of the practices I had developed.

But it also gave me a desire to prove myself in other ways. What I had already accomplished felt easy and repeatable. I wanted to do something outside, dangerous, and exciting. I tried my hand as an ironworker and decided the hard living wasn't for me. So, I became a horticulturist

and eventually an arborist and tree-faller. Work that seems simple on the outside, but the process of removing large Pacific Northwest trees in an urban setting is complex, fast paced, and dangerous. It requires a practical understanding of physics and, perhaps more importantly, a capacity to manage fear. Following in the footsteps of my family history of logging I developed my own reputation. It was dangerous work—and I loved it.

In addition, without knowing it even had a name, I was an entrepreneur. I had started businesses and worked in parallel to my full-time work in several other industries. My version of a side hustle was usually a full-blown career on its own. It was great—there was always something to learn, some way to grow. I loved the hustle, I loved being productive, and I loved a challenge.

These were good years. I was able to meet and marry my wife and start a family. I was able to support her career journey, and we built a good life in the mountains of British Columbia Canada. I was always driven, highly active in adventure sports, and the mountains were where I found joy, and at times, refuge.

But journeys have a way of taking unexpected turns.

When One Door Closes, Another Opens

Soon, the very career that had given so much had nearly taken even more.

I needed change but I didn't have the direction, or the courage to do it. The belief that once existed had diminished. True self-belief had long since been stripped out of me by leaders who continued to undermine my self-worth. Finally, it came crashing down on a cold November morning when change was no longer a choice.

I didn't fall far—in fact, it was only about eighteen inches—just enough to damage my shoulder enough to end my career. After surgeries on my other shoulder, it was crushing to think that *this* is how it would all end. Months of physical rehab, time in the gym, and dedication to recovery wouldn't be enough to change what had become progressively more and more clear. My physical body was telling me “No more.” This was more than the final straw; it was more like the final nail.

What was I going to do?

I lost my health—not just from the fall but that started an avalanche of issues. I came to learn that I had several spinal fractures that had occurred years before and I simply worked on. I would learn what adrenal fatigue was. I was so sick that the medical professionals I spoke to were shocked I wasn't in the hospital.

I was lost. Not only had I lost my career, but I'd also lost my identity.

Through luck and hard work, the live production industry, leading teams as a stage manager, head rigger and collaborating to bring a variety of live performances to life provided a much-needed lifeline—it was a path I was fortunate enough to continue following. It saved me from what felt like ruin, but it would never enable me to build a life I wanted.

I still felt lost.

A Light in the Dark

It wasn't until I met Dr. Larry Cash that I felt there was a way forward. He is the creator of the SuccessFinder assessment, a tool that identifies natural behavioral preferences and aligns them with careers where individuals can thrive by being their most authentic selves. This process was a watershed moment for me.

As the conversation turned to explore my own self-limiting beliefs, he asked me more specifically about my internal dialogue—"how was I speaking to myself?"

My answers were, as you might guess, harsh and self-destructive . . .

He continued with another question: "would you say it to your daughter . . .?"

And there it was—the moment I realized what years of enduring toxic leaders and toxic environments had done. There was no way I could be that cruel to anyone else—least of all the child I was so dedicated to raising with kindness and love. So how could I allow this for myself? How could this be the reality I found myself in?

It was from there I began to rebuild. The only end I had in mind was to see how far I could go.

So, I started, first becoming certified as a coach, because I could do that on the road while I kept the lights on at home with my production career. It wasn't long after in a similarly revelatory conversation that Larry pointed out the leadership experience I had was a unique asset.

By that time I had of course worked in many domains—but I hadn't considered that leading more than 200 teams would be anything unique. I had seen some of the worst and some of the best leaders. I had made more mistakes than I could count. Yet, each mistake became a lesson that I used to learn and develop my skills. Not from a book, not theory from a school—but through practice. Most of those mistakes were small but they often cut deep.

I often took the mistakes home with me for one simple reason—I wanted the people I led to grow and feel empowered and I wasn't always good at it.

I wanted them to succeed, go home happy, feeling like they mattered and that their experience of the workplace was a good one. Even though there were many moments of failure—this remained the goal. I wanted to offer what I wanted for myself.

I learned, or more accurately, relearned, how to create this as a leader—but I wanted to understand how to empower others to do it as well, but it had to be practical. Most of the leadership training I was seeing was theoretical; most of the books talked about situations that were completely foreign to most people. Most people aren't pilots or astronauts, most people aren't high-powered executives or hostage negotiators. Most people are trying to get by, trying to manage the best they can, and for those who are brave enough to lead, are trying their best to make things better for themselves—and make things better for others as well. I found myself on a mission.

A Mountain of Small Steps

Things shifted again as I started working for organizations. I gained a reputation for helping high performers who you could say “left a trail of destruction in their wake.” Often working one on one I didn't see them as the toxic scary people—I saw them as humans too. Most had almost no leadership experience or training at all. Sometimes these were people managers in their first or second leadership role.

But what shocked me more were the leaders in positions of real power, in control of budgets of tens of millions of dollars or more and responsible for leading large business units who had only experienced leading maybe two or three teams. Completely underprepared, without the level of

training they needed to achieve high performance without reverting to leading from the fear they felt within themselves.

Through this time, I had many people compliment my authenticity, my confidence, and my drive. I still find this rather odd because I simply cared more about learning than projecting a well curated image. The same drive that I had lived with previously had returned. The work I pursued was invigorating, challenging, and meaningful.

Initially I was working from a place of pure experience with enough training to translate it into action. I was quickly filling the gap between experience and technical knowledge. For years I read or listened to several books a week, and countless hours of podcasts and conversations with anyone who would meet with me. Anything that would help me expand my knowledge or help me learn the language of the corporate world, leadership development, culture, learning design, proposal writing, marketing, sales, business strategy—you name it—I did my best to jump on it. It was through this journey that I came across *The Fearless Organization* (Edmondson, 2019)¹ and the work of Dr. Amy C. Edmondson.

Suddenly, I had a name for what I was aiming at. Not comfort, but psychological safety. Not just psychological safety, but creating learning organizations.

If this was one thing I could do—according to the numbers, the research, and my own lived experiences—it could have the single greatest impact on performance *and* the experience in the workplace.

By empowering leaders and culture architects I would be fulfilling this goal and my highest value of creating exponential impact.

As my career grew and expanded, I would find myself in boardrooms and tall towers the old me would have balked at. This led to Aristotle Performance being cofounded at the start of the pandemic, through which I've advised leaders in Fortune 100 and Fortune 500 companies around the globe. I've coached executives, trained thousands of leaders, and helped teams navigate their own psychological safety. We've also trained, certified, and advised hundreds of consultants and coaches in their own work. On several occasions, I've had the pleasure of waking up early and going to bed late to provide consulting with teams on six different continents throughout the day, satisfying both my love of culture and—as the pandemic subsided—travel.

We've built and scaled success programs and systemic interventions that are, now while writing this, still at work creating learning organizations. But, perhaps my favorite unexpected outcome has been standing on stage in front of audiences sharing stories and strategies with people whom only years before I would have felt very little connection with.

This is when I really started to acknowledge the value of my past.

Around the dinner table, in the family workshop, and throughout our early years, my brothers and I were encouraged to be savvy, initially described to me as “the ability to know enough about everything to have a conversation with anyone.” The invitation was to go beyond just an ability to turn our hands to any craft. Looking back, it was some of the best advice I've ever received. It was an invitation to stay curious, to build and create, and to understand the world through the eyes of others.

A long time ago I realized that being “savvy” wasn't just about being adaptable—it meant being perceptive, tactically aware, and able to navigate complexity with the kind of real-world clarity that rarely shows up in textbooks.

As a result, I felt compelled to build my understanding of leadership—not in a seminar, not in theory, but through practice, as a vocation of its own. It would become the foundation to see leadership as inherently human first.

It was the preparation I needed to help leaders and culture architects see their work as more than just a task, but an opportunity.

How to Use This Book

“Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”

—*Maya Angelou, American poet, author, and civil rights activist*

Nearly all the leadership books I have come across display leadership like some kind of pyramid. This is a tough way to go about leadership. Yes, you need a base of psychological safety. Yes, you need to use effective accountability to move into the team learning you will read about and, yes, you need that accountability to carry you into a realm of high performance and innovation.

You can display the journey to high performance in a pyramid if you'd like—with psychological safety on the bottom, team learning in the middle, consistent high performance on the top, and accountability as the ladder that carries you up the pyramid. However, the process of leadership is more like chemistry—perhaps more like alchemy at times, as you try to turn elements on hand into gold.

So, I want to invite you to think about the elements of leadership and the contents of this book more like the periodic table of the elements. Each day you will face challenges. Your job is to pick the elements, create experiments, observe the results, and learn from them.

Too often people seem to think learning happens in school—some learning does, most does not. If you don't like meetings, change them. If you don't like how decisions are made, you don't like the contributions of your team, or how you see teams interacting with each other, you have the power to do something about it.

You need to learn your way through these problems by trying new things, taking what works, and leaving behind what doesn't.

My goal is to provide you with the practices that I have seen work in teams and organizations and offer enough context to help you adapt those practices to your own situations.

Each section in this book could be, and often already is, a book of its own. This book provides what I feel is enough context in each section so you can understand where it will help you as a leader, a culture architect, and a leader of leaders.

I'll start by providing context on the nature of psychological safety that will help you adapt the sections and practices that follow to your own situation. With a meta perspective in hand, my hope is that as you read further you will also develop your own methods to test and learn from. There is no one answer so please learn as you go and take the small risks that are required to try something new.

From there, I move through this from the view of the leader, first exploring the inner journey you must attend to if you truly want to lead. Then I move from the inner game to the outer game, moving from “me to

we” and working to improve interactions with others, whether those be one-on-one or group interactions. I also explore how you can have an even broader influence from the perspective of a senior leader and a culture architect who has influence over systems and culture development to inspire broader growth and impact on those around you.

I’m also writing this for what I call *culture architects*. In addition to leaders and “leaders of leaders,” culture architects are also those in human resources, human resources business partners (HRBP), learning and development (L&D), and people and culture (P&C). You have a unique position that truly matters. What you train matters and what you communicate matters. Often these are positions where you have less power than you might like and more influence than you may realize. I want to help you change that.

In addition, and in my own way, I’m also writing this as a book back to a younger version of myself. I want this book to be the book I could have had on my desk as a young leader.

As a young leader I remember a boss saying to me, “Neil, sometimes the best place for a leader is in the back of the room.” I didn’t have a clue what he meant, or how to do anything about it. When I asked, the simple answer was “you’ll figure it out.” I didn’t, not for a long time. Now, I have a better answer and even if I don’t have all the answers, I’m comfortable knowing I just don’t need them. And there is real joy even in writing that. That is the nature of learning. But, knowing what I know now—what would I go back and tell myself?

As a leader and as a culture architect—what would I have wanted on my desk when I faced another new challenge?

Now, of course there are books that I find myself returning to. Books like *The Fifth Discipline* (Senge, 1990), *Dialogue* (Isaacs, 1999), *The Fearless Organization* (Edmondson, 2019), *Who Really Matters* (Kliener, 2003), *Radical Candor* (Scott, 2017), *Think Again* (Grant, 2021), the collective works of Brené Brown, and the wisdom of John Wooden, Dr. John DeMartini, Nancy Kline, and Maya Angelou. These leaders have become invaluable in shaping my thinking.

Their writing influenced my own leadership and provided a great basis for meaningful interventions and my initial work with organizations. But when it comes to the question of psychological safety and how to implement daily strategies the terrain still feels fresh.