

Max Paradox

PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

My Team Says “Everything’s Fine,” but I Know It Isn’t

**How to Build Psychological Safety in Your Team,
Ask Better Questions, and Get Honest Feedback
Before the Problem Creates Its Own Presentation**



**We've got a problem. But relax.
It can be solved—and we'll even have something to laugh about.**

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INTRO

At 4:47 on Thursday afternoon, Nina receives a message from someone on her team. The subject line reads, "Quick question about Monday." That sounds harmless enough. Monday is the launch date for a new customer service platform, and according to every progress update Nina has received, the project is ready. The message, however, contains a list of unresolved access permissions, missing training materials, and several employees who have never successfully logged into the system. Apparently, Monday's launch depends on an impressive collection of things that have not happened yet. Nina stares at the screen, wondering how a project can be simultaneously ready for launch and missing most of the ingredients required for launching. It's a remarkable achievement in corporate physics.

Her first instinct is to ask why nobody mentioned these problems earlier. After all, she has attended the planning meetings, requested updates, and repeatedly encouraged everyone to raise concerns. Nobody said the project was in trouble. Nobody challenged the timeline. Everyone seemed perfectly comfortable with the arrangements. Yet here she is, facing a collection of problems that apparently developed in complete silence while her team continued reporting satisfactory progress. The obvious explanation is that someone failed to communicate. The more uncomfortable possibility is that the team communicated exactly what it believed Nina wanted to hear. Those two explanations lead to very different management decisions, and confusing them is one reason workplace silence can survive even the most enthusiastic campaigns for openness.

When an employee says, "Everything's fine," the words may describe reality. They may also mean, "I don't know enough to answer," "I haven't found a good moment to explain," or "I would rather not become personally responsible for ruining everyone's afternoon." Sometimes people remain quiet because they fear criticism. Sometimes they have learned that identifying a problem earns them the exciting opportunity to solve it alone, on top of their existing responsibilities. And sometimes the workplace has created a peculiar reward system in which optimistic updates are celebrated while accurate warnings are treated as evidence of insufficient commitment. Under those conditions, silence isn't necessarily cowardice or dishonesty. It can be a thoroughly understandable response to the incentives surrounding a person.

This brings us to psychological safety, a term that sounds suspiciously like something printed on a conference banner beside a photograph of five people enthusiastically pointing at a laptop. In practical terms, it means people believe they can speak up, ask questions, acknowledge mistakes, express uncertainty, and challenge ideas without being subjected to humiliation or unfair retaliation for doing so. It doesn't mean everyone must agree, that criticism is forbidden, or that performance standards disappear. An employee can feel safe enough to report a mistake and still be expected to help correct it. A manager can welcome an opposing opinion and ultimately choose a different course. The point is to make honest participation possible, especially when the information is inconvenient.

Unfortunately, managers can unintentionally make honesty expensive while sincerely believing they encourage it. Consider the department head who announces that all

ideas are welcome, then responds to an unexpected suggestion with a twenty-minute explanation of why it couldn't possibly work. Or the supervisor who asks for constructive criticism, remembers exactly who provided it, and subsequently describes that person as "a little negative." Nobody needs to issue an official warning against speaking up. Employees are perfectly capable of noticing what happens to other people. They remember whose mistake became a public spectacle, whose uncomfortable question was dismissed, and whose career suddenly stopped progressing after an argument with the wrong person. The unwritten rules of a workplace are often taught with remarkable efficiency.

You may recognize a different version of the same difficulty. Perhaps you're approachable, generally fair, and genuinely interested in your team's opinions, yet you still struggle to obtain useful feedback. Your meetings produce agreement but little insight. Your employee surveys reveal pleasant averages and suspiciously vague comments. Your most experienced people dominate discussions while quieter colleagues contribute almost nothing. Or your team raises problems only when deadlines have already become impossible to meet. These patterns don't automatically prove that people are afraid of you. They may reflect unclear responsibilities, poor meeting design, workload pressure, conflicting incentives, or a lack of confidence that raising an issue will accomplish anything. Understanding the distinction matters because you cannot fix every communication problem by asking employees to be more courageous.

The way you respond to information is just as important as the way you request it. Imagine someone telling you that a recent decision has made their work unnecessarily

difficult. You might have excellent reasons for that decision. You might also feel unfairly criticized, especially if you spent weeks negotiating it with senior management. Both reactions are understandable. The trouble begins when explaining yourself becomes more urgent than understanding the difficulty. Your employee leaves knowing considerably more about your reasoning, while you remain unaware of the practical consequences. You technically held a feedback conversation. Unfortunately, the feedback was intercepted by an extremely well-prepared defense attorney who happened to be living inside your head.

There's another complication: people don't necessarily want the same things. One employee wants more independence, another needs clearer instructions, and a third believes the current priorities change too frequently. The sales department wants faster decisions; the operations team wants fewer interruptions. Everyone may have a legitimate point, even when their preferred solutions are incompatible. Building a more open team doesn't mean transforming yourself into a machine that grants every request. It means learning to distinguish observations from interpretations, understand competing needs, and make decisions whose reasoning people can follow. Sometimes you'll change the plan. Sometimes you'll explain why it must remain unchanged. In either case, employees should be able to raise a valid concern without feeling that their professional reputation has been placed on the negotiating table.

The practical work starts with smaller moments than most corporate programs acknowledge. It's the conversation where someone admits they don't understand an instruction. The disagreement that occurs before a costly decision

becomes irreversible. The early warning that arrives with incomplete information but enough substance to deserve attention. It's also what happens afterward: whether someone takes responsibility for examining the concern, whether a decision follows, and whether the person who spoke up ever learns what happened. A suggestion that disappears into an administrative black hole doesn't become valuable simply because the manager thanked its author with great enthusiasm. Feedback has to connect with reality. Otherwise, collecting it becomes an elaborate workplace hobby.

Throughout this book, we'll examine the habits that make these moments easier or harder. You'll learn to recognize misleading agreement, conduct conversations that reveal specific obstacles, handle criticism without immediately defending your entire management career, and separate honest mistakes from avoidable negligence. We'll explore how to surface risks before they become emergencies, navigate disagreements that cannot be solved by asking everyone to be nicer, and make difficult decisions when different people provide conflicting feedback. Just as importantly, we'll examine what happens when trust has already been damaged, when employees are exhausted by another initiative about communication, and when your own authority is limited by decisions made elsewhere. None of these situations can be repaired by enthusiasm alone.

There are boundaries to what a manager can reasonably accomplish. You cannot guarantee that every employee will speak openly, accurately interpret every situation, or feel comfortable sharing every concern. Nor should you expect access to people's private thoughts and emotions as a condition of professional cooperation. Serious allegations

involving harassment, discrimination, retaliation, or threats to safety may require protected reporting channels and appropriate formal procedures, rather than ordinary team discussions. Psychological safety is not a substitute for those safeguards. Your responsibility is to improve the conditions within your influence, clarify expectations, respond fairly, and recognize when a matter requires authority or expertise beyond your own.

And you don't need to become a permanently cheerful, endlessly patient management superhero to do any of this. You will occasionally be tired, irritated, mistaken, or uncertain. The aim is to build a team in which those ordinary human limitations don't automatically make honest communication dangerous. A healthy team isn't one where everyone speaks constantly or every meeting ends in harmonious agreement. It's one where important information has a reasonable chance of reaching the people who need it while there is still something useful they can do.

Back at her desk, Nina has a choice. She can demand to know who failed to protect Monday's launch, or she can establish what is missing, what can realistically be completed, and which decisions must be made before the weekend. She may still face an awkward conversation with senior management. The launch might even need to move. But the uncomfortable message has given her something the reassuring updates never did: a chance to respond to what is actually happening.

Because problems rarely wait for an invitation to the next management meeting. Given enough time, they'll arrange the meeting themselves, invite the executives, and arrive with a presentation nobody particularly wants to see.

Chapter 1 - When Silence Starts Pretending to Be Agreement

The meeting ends six minutes early, which everyone considers a minor administrative miracle. Oliver, the operations manager of a regional entertainment company, has just reviewed preparations for a major weekend event. Marketing confirms that the campaign is ready. The venue team reports that everything is on schedule. Customer services has no outstanding concerns, and the technical coordinator gives a confident thumbs-up. Oliver asks whether anyone sees a reason to reconsider the plan. Nobody responds. Excellent. He closes his laptop, congratulates everyone on their preparation, and spends the next hour enjoying the rare sensation of being a manager whose team apparently has no problems. By Friday afternoon, the promotional materials contain an outdated entrance location, the temporary staff have received conflicting instructions, and the equipment delivery is scheduled for two hours after the technical rehearsal. Every department had been ready. Unfortunately, they had apparently been preparing for slightly different versions of the same event.

What went wrong was more complicated than a team collectively deciding to conceal the truth. Each person had answered from the perspective of their immediate responsibilities. Marketing had finished the advertisements, although nobody had confirmed the final entrance arrangements. The venue team had reserved the required spaces, assuming the equipment would arrive on Thursday. The technical coordinator had confirmed that the equipment

was available, without realizing that availability and physical delivery were two separate matters. Their individual statements were reasonably accurate. The collective conclusion was not. Oliver had mistaken a series of local confirmations for evidence that the entire operation was coordinated. It's a surprisingly common management achievement: collecting several pieces of perfectly respectable information and assembling them into one confidently incorrect picture.

Silence creates a similar problem. Managers often treat the absence of objections as a positive signal because it appears to simplify decision-making. Nobody challenged the deadline, so the deadline must be realistic. Nobody questioned the new procedure, so everyone must understand it. Nobody raised concerns about the staffing arrangement, so the team must consider it fair. Unfortunately, silence doesn't come with a certificate explaining what it means. An employee may remain quiet because they agree, because they don't know enough to disagree, because they believe somebody else has already checked the details, or because they consider the discussion effectively over. Those possibilities look identical in a meeting room, yet each requires a different response. Before treating silence as evidence, you need to understand what people were actually being asked to confirm.

Consider the familiar question, "Is everyone happy with this?" It sounds friendly, democratic, and efficient. It is also extraordinarily ambitious. Happiness is difficult enough to establish in a household choosing where to eat dinner, let alone among eleven employees evaluating a new operational process. Some may consider the proposal reasonable but inconvenient. Others may accept it because alternatives are

worse. One person might understand only part of it, while another has concerns that aren't serious enough to justify delaying the decision. A collective nod cannot communicate these distinctions. When your decision depends on specific conditions, ask about those conditions rather than requesting a general emotional endorsement. You don't need to conduct a referendum on workplace happiness every time you change a procedure.

Another source of misleading agreement is the assumption that everyone understands the same words in the same way. Terms such as "ready," "approved," "completed," and "urgent" are particularly dangerous because they sound precise while often concealing different expectations. To one employee, a task is completed when their contribution is finished. To another, completion includes review, approval, and delivery to the next person. A manager may believe that "ready for launch" means every necessary activity has been verified, while a specialist understands it to mean that their particular component is technically functional. Neither interpretation is necessarily dishonest. The problem arises when the differences remain invisible until somebody needs a result that hasn't materialized. A shared vocabulary becomes genuinely useful only when the people using it also share an understanding of its practical consequences.

This is why examining the boundaries between responsibilities often reveals more than collecting additional progress updates. Suppose a team responsible for an online store reports that product descriptions, pricing, photography, and inventory records are complete. Everything sounds encouraging until customers begin ordering products whose displayed specifications don't

match the actual stock. The description team used information from an earlier product version. Inventory assumed the descriptions had been updated. Nobody considered checking the relationship between those two completed tasks part of their responsibility. A manager investigating such a problem should look at what each person needs from others, what they believe has already been verified, and which handovers lack a clear owner. The interesting question is no longer whether everyone worked hard. It's whether their individual efforts connected in the way the overall plan required.

Not every quiet meeting conceals a disaster, of course. Some teams genuinely understand their responsibilities, agree on the approach, and have little reason to discuss matters further. You don't improve psychological safety by becoming suspicious of every peaceful interaction. Imagine the exhausting experience of working for someone who interprets a relaxed expression as concealed resentment and a short answer as evidence of an elaborate internal conspiracy. Employees would soon need to submit explanatory notes about their facial expressions. The useful distinction is between an isolated observation and a recurring pattern. A person contributing little during one meeting may simply have nothing relevant to add. A person who previously raised thoughtful concerns but has stopped doing so across several important decisions presents a more meaningful reason to investigate.

Changes in participation deserve attention because communication habits tend to develop in relation to circumstances. An experienced technician who usually challenges unclear specifications may stop asking questions after several proposals are dismissed. A new employee may

participate confidently in informal discussions but become unusually cautious when senior managers attend. A remote colleague might contribute extensively through written messages yet struggle to interrupt fast-moving video meetings. These patterns suggest that the environment influences what people feel able to contribute. They don't reveal exactly what anyone is thinking. You should therefore begin with observable differences rather than dramatic interpretations: where participation has changed, under what conditions, and whether relevant information is still reaching the decision.

Timing also affects whether silence can reasonably be interpreted as agreement. Asking for opinions immediately after presenting an unfamiliar proposal doesn't necessarily give people enough opportunity to evaluate it. Some decisions involve technical consequences, operational dependencies, or financial implications that require checking outside the meeting. An employee may remain quiet because they have not yet examined the assumptions, not because they accept them. If the decision permits it, provide the relevant material beforehand or establish a brief period for additional observations. This isn't an invitation to postpone every decision indefinitely. It acknowledges that meaningful assessment sometimes requires more than the five seconds between "Any concerns?" and "Wonderful, moving on."

The composition of the room matters just as much. A relatively junior employee may possess detailed knowledge about how a change will affect daily operations, yet hesitate to contradict the senior executive who enthusiastically introduced it. Another participant might believe that questioning a proposal already supported by several

managers would waste everyone's time. Meanwhile, the leader observes widespread agreement and assumes the case has been settled. An apparently unanimous decision may therefore reflect unequal opportunities to influence the conversation. Before concluding that a group shares one position, consider whether the people with relevant knowledge had sufficient information, a genuine opportunity to contribute, and a reasonable expectation that their observations would be considered. Participation isn't meaningful merely because everyone received the same calendar invitation.

There is also a difference between understanding a decision and supporting it. Someone may fully understand a new scheduling policy while believing it creates unnecessary difficulties. Another employee may dislike the policy but accept that it meets a legitimate business requirement. A third might support the general objective while questioning the chosen implementation. If you collapse these positions into a single question about agreement, you lose useful distinctions. Managers don't necessarily need enthusiastic approval to proceed. They do need to know whether employees understand what must happen, whether important objections have been considered, and whether unresolved constraints could prevent execution. A decision can be unpopular and workable, or popular and fundamentally impractical. Applause is not an operational readiness assessment.

An especially revealing moment occurs after the meeting ends. Sometimes the formal discussion produces little disagreement, but private conversations immediately become animated. People gather near the elevators, exchange messages, or contact individual colleagues to

discuss concerns they didn't mention earlier. These conversations aren't automatically evidence of disloyalty. Employees naturally continue thinking and talking after meetings, and some ideas take time to develop. Nevertheless, when important objections repeatedly emerge only outside the decision-making process, there may be a gap between the official opportunity to contribute and the conditions people actually need. The solution isn't to monitor corridor conversations like a particularly underfunded intelligence agency. It's to investigate why useful information isn't reaching the place where it could influence a decision.

One practical way to examine that gap is to compare what was known before a decision with what emerged during implementation. Choose a recent project that required substantial corrections. Identify the difficulties that appeared, when someone first noticed them, and whether they were discussed before the original plan was approved. Avoid beginning with the assumption that somebody deliberately withheld information. Perhaps the warning existed but was buried in an unrelated document. Perhaps the team understood the risk but believed another department owned the decision. Perhaps no one recognized the consequence until new information became available. These explanations lead to different improvements. The purpose is to discover where understanding broke down, rather than retrospectively awarding blame to whoever happened to be closest to the problem.

For Oliver's event, the most useful finding might be that each department used a different definition of readiness. He could establish a common confirmation point for information affecting several teams: the final entrance arrangement,

equipment delivery, staffing instructions, and customer communication. Each item would have a person responsible for confirming its current status and identifying dependencies. This would not require converting every event into a bureaucratic expedition involving twenty-seven signatures. It would simply prevent local completion from being confused with overall readiness. Importantly, the next review should examine these shared requirements rather than asking each department to repeat that its own activities are proceeding beautifully. Otherwise, the organization will produce more reporting without gaining a more accurate picture.

It is tempting to address every silent meeting by requiring each person to speak. That can occasionally help reveal different perspectives, but compulsory participation isn't automatically useful. Employees who lack relevant knowledge may offer opinions merely to satisfy the format. Others may feel exposed when asked to discuss concerns in front of people whose decisions affect their work. A more appropriate approach depends on the information being sought. Technical assessments may be collected from those who understand the system, while operational consequences should be explored with people responsible for carrying out the work. Written input may help participants who need time to formulate an opinion. What matters is access to relevant knowledge, not achieving mathematical equality in the number of spoken sentences.

You should also resist the urge to treat every objection as proof that something must change. A team can raise concerns, examine them honestly, and still proceed with the original plan. Some risks are acceptable, some alternatives cost more than they save, and some constraints are outside

the manager's control. The important difference is that the decision has been made with those considerations visible. When employees see that disagreement doesn't automatically derail progress or trigger punishment, they have a clearer understanding of what speaking up can accomplish. When managers understand that listening doesn't require surrendering authority, they are less likely to experience every objection as a personal challenge. Both sides benefit from treating disagreement as information rather than an immediate contest.

A related problem appears when leaders seek confirmation from the wrong people. The most senior participant may understand the project's strategic purpose but know little about the practical conditions of implementation. The employee closest to the daily work may understand those conditions perfectly while lacking authority to change the plan. Asking only one of them produces an incomplete picture. You need to connect different forms of knowledge without pretending they are interchangeable. A strategic objective doesn't invalidate an operational limitation, and an operational limitation doesn't automatically determine the strategic decision. Good management involves understanding both and being clear about which questions require expertise, which require judgment, and which require formal authority.

Over time, a team's behavior around disagreement can become more informative than its general declarations about openness. Notice whether employees correct misunderstandings before they become expensive. Observe whether handovers include relevant limitations rather than only completed tasks. Pay attention to whether quieter specialists contribute when their knowledge is essential, and

whether decisions are reconsidered when genuinely new information appears. These aren't perfect measures of psychological safety. They are practical indicators of whether information can move through the organization without losing its meaning. They also help you avoid mistaking a lively discussion for a productive one. Twelve people arguing enthusiastically about something irrelevant are not necessarily communicating better than three people calmly identifying the one issue that matters.

There will still be meetings where nobody objects. Some will reflect genuine agreement, while others will conceal uncertainty or unresolved dependencies. You cannot eliminate that ambiguity entirely, and attempting to do so would consume more time than most organizations could afford. You can, however, stop making unsupported assumptions about what silence proves. Where consequences are significant, check the conditions needed for success. Where decisions affect different groups, examine how their responsibilities connect. Where communication patterns change, investigate observable circumstances before inventing explanations about people's motives. A manager doesn't need to extract everyone's private thoughts. A manager needs enough reliable information to understand the work.

The next time a meeting ends early and everyone appears satisfied, you're allowed to enjoy the unexpected gift of six additional minutes. Just don't confuse the pleasant absence of disagreement with evidence that every assumption has been tested. Silence may mean the team agrees. It may mean the participants need more information. Or it may mean everyone believes someone else has already checked the detail that will become spectacularly important on Friday

afternoon. The goal isn't to make meetings longer. It's to make the conclusions you draw from them considerably less imaginative.

Chapter 2 - Why Sensible People Decide That Speaking Up Isn't Worth the Trouble

Grace has worked at a hotel for four years. She knows the front desk operation, understands the booking system, and is usually the person colleagues approach when an unusual request arrives. During a meeting about a new staffing arrangement, she notices that the proposed schedule leaves the reception desk seriously understaffed during the busiest check-in period. She could explain the problem. She could even suggest a workable adjustment. Instead, she remains quiet. The last employee who questioned a staffing decision was described by the general manager as someone who "always finds reasons things won't work." Grace remembers that conversation perfectly. She also remembers that the employee spent the following month explaining why their attitude was supposedly unhelpful. Grace has no desire to become the next case study in constructive negativity. She writes "looks good" in the meeting chat and gets back to work.

From the organization's perspective, Grace has withheld valuable information. From her own perspective, she has avoided a predictable and unnecessary personal cost. This distinction matters because workplace silence is frequently described as a failure of courage, commitment, or communication skills. Those explanations are convenient, especially for managers who believe they've already provided sufficient opportunities to speak. Yet employees make decisions within environments that reward some behaviors and discourage others. An individual may

recognize that reporting a concern would help the organization while also believing it could damage their reputation, relationships, or future opportunities. When those interests conflict, silence may seem sensible. The employee isn't necessarily indifferent to the company. They may simply be unwilling to gamble their working life on a manager's promise that all opinions are welcome.

Speaking up carries several different costs, and not all of them involve direct punishment. There is the possibility of embarrassment: asking a question that colleagues consider obvious or raising a concern that turns out to be mistaken. There is the social cost of challenging someone influential, particularly when the group appears satisfied with a decision. There is also the practical inconvenience of becoming involved in additional meetings, explanations, and follow-up work. Finally, there may be genuine professional consequences, including unfair treatment, lost opportunities, or retaliation. These risks differ substantially in seriousness, and they shouldn't be treated as interchangeable. But even relatively small costs can influence behavior when employees encounter them repeatedly. A person doesn't need to fear dismissal to decide that another uncomfortable conversation is simply not worth having.

Status makes this calculation particularly complicated. A senior manager might regard disagreement as a normal feature of professional discussion because they possess sufficient authority to challenge decisions without seriously threatening their position. A junior employee participating in the same meeting may experience something very different. The people listening to their concerns might influence performance reviews, project assignments, promotions, or access to professional opportunities. Even when nobody