

## Discretionary Effort Is the Holy Grail in the Workplace, but How Do You Cultivate it?

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“Discretionary Effort is the work people choose to put in above what’s expected and typically when no one is watching” Steve Sharp.

People will always get to choose who they follow. Nathaniel Fink, in his book titled ‘One Bullet Away’ calls it moral authority versus legal authority. Just because someone is the leader on the organisational chart, doesn’t mean their team will automatically choose to follow them. Leaders must earn moral authority from their team members before they will ever choose to follow them and give their discretionary effort.

If you’ve been working in organisations for long enough, you would have experienced (either directly or indirectly) the scenario where team members lose faith and trust in their leader so one of the team members becomes the ‘surrogate’ leader. If you multiply that scenario across many teams in an organisation it’s a cultural and performance disaster waiting to happen. When workplaces become toxic, typically three things happen, people stop engaging, showing up (absenteeism), or they leave. In today’s global labour market, no organisation can afford this. So, what drives people to choose to give their discretionary effort?

A person’s willingness to give their discretionary effort will not happen unless they are engaged in their workplace. We know employee engagement drives greater organisational outcomes. In Gallup’s most recent meta-analysis, The Relationship Between Engagement at Work and Organisational Outcomes (2020), they concluded the following performance differences between organisations in the top quartile of engagement scores, to the organisations in the bottom quartile of engagement performance:

- 23% better profitability
- 43% less turnover
- 81% less absenteeism
- 66% better employee wellbeing (net thriving employees on the Cantril Self-Anchoring Striving Scale)
- 41% better quality (measures of defects)

So, what drives someone to choose to engage at work? A person’s sense of psychological safety is the root cause or, leading indicator, of whether they will choose to engage and therefore, give their discretionary effort in the workplace.

“Psychological Safety happens when people feel safe to speak up about an idea or concern, ask questions or admit a mistake without feeling like they will be punished, humiliated or embarrassed, it the belief that the work environment is safe from interpersonal risk taking”

Professor Amy Edmondson, Harvard Business School

We know this definitively through the volume of research that has been done over the past two decades. Most notably from Google’s now renowned Project Aristotle. Google set out to discover what the key drivers were in creating high performing teams. They concluded that “individuals on teams with higher psychological safety are less likely to leave Google, they’re more likely to harness the power of diverse ideas from their teammates, they bring in more revenue, and they’re rated as effective twice as often by executives.”.

Steve Sharp, a leadership consultant based in Brisbane, Queensland, is one of the leading voices in this conversation. Steve uses the pragmatic, actionable principles known as **SHARPEN your Environment** to support his clients’ understanding and develop psychologically safe workplace environments to drive engagement and the chance of cultivating people’s discretionary effort. By doing so, this also helps organisations minimise the risk of absenteeism, turnover and psychological injuries caused at work. As Sharp states, “it’s the Standard Operating Procedure for interactions and behaviours in the workplace, particularly for leaders.” SHARPEN is an acronym that stands for:

- Stand Up Speak Up
- Humility Defines Heroes
- Authenticity Always
- Recognition Drives Repetition

- Positivity Attracts
- Potential Effectiveness Demands
- Empathy Never Give Up, Ever

**STEVE SHARP**  
CULTURE CURATOR

**SHARPEN Your Environment**  
Steve applies 7 themes to topics relating to leadership, change and organizational culture

- Stand up! Speak up!** How psychological safety levels in teams predicts engagement and customer satisfaction.
- Humility defines heroes** How curiosity builds trust. Its not about you.
- Authenticity Always** How to being vulnerable changes the environment around you.
- Recognition drives repetition** How recognising great behaviour enforces its repetition
- Positivity attracts potential** How being productively positive creates calm and safety in the environment.
- Effectiveness demands empathy** How recognising other's emotional state in all interactions changes the outcomes of conversations and relationships
- Never give up. EVER.** How personal resilience is fundamental to todays leader's kit.

It is a set of guiding principles that anyone can apply to all aspects of life, but it is, however, critically relevant to leadership and creating a productively positive work environment. Sharp believes that the number one priority for any leader in any setting is to curate the work environment to maximize the time team members feel a sense of psychological safety. This means creating an environment where people feel a sense of belonging, predictability and trust, and also holding people to account when unacceptable behaviour occurs that threatens other team members' sense of psychological safety. Sharp emphasizes that achieving this consistently is the core work of leadership that will drive a competitive edge over time. In this article, we will discuss his SHARPEN top tips for creating a psychologically safe work environment that stimulate discretionary effort.

**Stand Up, Speak Up** is creating an environment where people are willing to share their ideas, concerns and opinions. It's an environment where people feel they can admit mistakes or share the fact that they are struggling with something at home and it's affecting them at work. Think of a time recently where you or a colleague have been in a meeting and had something to say, but chose not to say it. That will give you a tangible example of an environment where you did not feel a sense of psychological safety.

According to Sharp, creating psychological safety in teams either starts or ends with the leader's behaviour. To create an environment where people choose to **Stand Up, Speak Up**, leaders must demonstrate vulnerability, humility and authenticity to encourage their team members to do the same. By sharing their own failures and mistakes, and admitting when they don't know the answer, leaders can create a safe space for team members to do the same. This kind of environment fosters trust and encourages team members to take risks and share their ideas

freely. A leader that demonstrates their **Authenticity Always**

means that they are true to themselves, courageous and honest irrespective of the situation they face. Leadership authenticity is central in creating clarity, setting boundaries and holding people accountable to behaviours and outcomes that are expected.



At the same time, demonstrating productive positivity means creating an environment where failures are seen as learning opportunities. Instead of blaming or punishing individuals for failures, team members should be encouraged to learn from them and find ways to improve. By doing so, failures become opportunities for growth and development. Open communication is one of these aspects to creating a psychologically safe work environment. By asking 'what can we do?' rather than focussing on the negative breed productively positive mindsets. Team members should feel free to express their opinions and admit mistakes without fear of judgment or retaliation. For this to be effective, a leader's ability to acknowledge team members' emotional state with

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empathy creates a feeling of understanding and safety, 'my leader gets me.' This is why leadership Effectiveness Demands Empathy.

"Empathy has always been a critical skill for leaders, but it is taking on a new level of meaning and priority. Far from a soft approach it can drive significant business results."

Dr Tracey Brower, author of Happiness at Work

Leaders can also lead by listening to their team members and demonstrating that they are taking their input seriously. By doing so, leaders can create a sense of significance and show their team members that their contributions are valid and valued. Humility Defines Heroes because they put others' interests before their own. In essence, it's remaining curious and controlling the temptation to 'tell' people what to do or make quick judgements about a situation.

"We cannot hope to understand and work with people from different occupational, professional and national cultures if we do not know how to ask questions and build relationships that are based on mutual respect and the recognition that others know things that we may need to know in order to get a job done."

Edgar Schein Humble Inquiry.

This is even more critical in today's environment with the perceived 'gap' between the expectations different generations have on workplace environments and leadership. The lack of understanding between the older generation and the younger generation in today's society is growing. Our collective ability to hold our judgements and listen intently is more paramount today than it ever has been.

Sharp advocates that all organisations need to embed reverse mentoring programs at all leadership levels. First introduced by former GE CEO, Jack Welch, in the late 1990s, Reverse mentoring is pairing younger generation employees with older generation employees to share knowledge, skills, experience and generational drivers. When done well, it significantly helps break down the multi-generational tension and provide all levels and all people with the opportunity, time and space to understand the differences in workplace needs and desires and enable generationally diverse groups of people to shape workplaces that meet multiple levels of expectation.

In today's reality, it has become more difficult for organisations to find great people, motivate them and retain them. Creating workplace environments where people choose to give their discretionary effort must start with a collective sense of psychological safety. A sense of psychological safety starts or ends through the leaders of an organisation.

By following Steve's SHARPEN principles daily, consistently and persistently, leaders can create a work environment and culture where team members feel safe to take risks, share ideas, admit mistakes and be vulnerable with one another.

These environments drive motivation, a sense of belonging and accountability for individuals and teams alike. If you're interested in learning more about creating a psychologically safe work environment that will produce significant returns to your commercial performance, check out Steve Sharp's website or attend one of his workshops or seminars.

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