

The price of **voice.**

What happens to challenge when people start protecting themselves, and what leaders can do about it.

Courage is individual. The conditions for courage are collective.

THE LEADERSHIP PROBLEM

When the work becomes socially risky

Teams do not need to be free of tension to perform. They need to be able to stay in productive contact with it.

A disagreement, challenge, mistake or unwelcome piece of information can be useful to the work and uncomfortable for the people involved at the same time. The difficulty begins when the discomfort is experienced as social threat: a risk to status, belonging, competence, reputation or relationship.

At that point, attention shifts from **what does the work need?** to **what do I need to do to protect myself here?**

Protective responses are not evidence that someone is weak, difficult or disengaged. They are ways people respond when a situation feels risky. In organisations, those responses change what information reaches the room, how directly it travels, and whether disagreement improves the work or damages the relationship.

The leadership task is not to eliminate human threat responses. It is to create conditions in which fewer ordinary work disagreements have to be treated as threats.

Fight. Flight. Freeze. Fawn. Flock.

A practical language for common protective responses under perceived threat. They are not five rigid neurological states, and they are not a way to diagnose people.

Response	What it looks like	What it does to the work
Fight	Push harder. Argue. Attack. Become positional. Make the person the problem.	Challenge is expressed, but it can become destructive.
Flight	Withdraw. Avoid. Delay. Leave the issue alone or leave the conversation.	The issue stays unresolved, or it travels elsewhere.
Freeze	Go quiet. Blank. Withhold. Struggle to respond in the moment.	Silence gets mistaken for agreement.
Fawn	Appease. Defer. Over-agree. Give the answer that appears safest.	Agreement becomes artificial harmony.
Flock	Seek safer people. Compare stories. Look for reassurance and confirmation.	Tension moves sideways instead of through the conversation.

A note on the evidence. Fight, flight and freeze have a long history in stress research. Workplace research has documented coping responses to destructive leadership that include assertive challenge, seeking social support, withdrawal and leaving. Tend-and-befriend research provides a separate evidence base for affiliative responses to stress. Fawn and flock are useful applied labels, but they do not have the same standing as one unified, established five-part model.

CONNECTION × VOICE

What happens to tension

The Productive Friction Matrix describes the team pattern. The protective-response lens helps explain the behaviour that appears inside it.



When you speak first, you change the task

Every team has hierarchy. Some of it is formal: role, title and decision authority. Some of it is informal: expertise, reputation, tenure, confidence or control of scarce information.

Status is useful. But it also changes the social calculation around disagreement. Research on employee voice shows that people hold taken-for-granted beliefs about when speaking up is risky. Research on leader inclusiveness shows leaders can counteract some of that by explicitly inviting and appreciating contribution.

A leader opens a discussion with “I think Option A is clearly the right answer.” Anyone who sees it differently now has two jobs: contribute their thinking, and disagree with authority. The work only required the first.

Good leaders do not demand courage where better leadership could reduce the need for it.

THE FIRST RESPONSE

Leaders teach the team what happens when voice is used

The most consequential leadership behaviour is not the invitation to speak. It is the response after somebody does.

A leader can say “I want challenge” and then teach the opposite through a raised eyebrow, an immediate rebuttal, a long defence of intent, a joke at the speaker's expense, or by quietly excluding the person later. Teams learn from those moments, and they learn fast.

THE FIRST RESPONSE MOVES THE ROOM TOWARD SELF-PROTECTION

Defend · withdraw · appease · go quiet · find safer people

A SIMPLE PRACTICE

Go last

- Ask before telling when independent thinking matters.
- Let others form and voice their view before your expertise, confidence or authority anchors the conversation.
- Invite the strongest disagreement, risk or missing perspective.
- Notice whose voice has not yet entered the work.
- Use authority to create room, not fill it.
- Respond with curiosity when challenge arrives, so the first person who disagrees does not teach everyone else that silence would have been safer.

PRACTICAL LEADER RESPONSES

- Thank the person before evaluating the content.
- Ask: “What are you seeing that I might be missing?”
- Separate intent from impact. Explain less, understand more.
- Keep the issue on the work or behaviour, not the person's character.
- Make it clear what happens next, so voice does not disappear into a void.
- Repair quickly when your own response closes the room.

OR TOWARD PRODUCTIVE CONTACT

Stay curious · clarify · test · disagree · update · repair

Conditions before courage

Courage matters. People still have responsibility for what they contribute, what they avoid, and whether they speak when something important needs saying.

But a team should not require heroics every time someone disagrees.

Courage is individual. The conditions for courage are collective, and leadership shapes them: whether the standard is clear, whether the relationship can carry difference, whether people's judgement counts, and whether challenge can actually change the answer.

The objective is not to remove tension. Tension is often where different expertise, judgement and perspective become visible. The task is to stop useful tension being converted unnecessarily into social threat, and to help the team harness it.

IN SHORT

Create the room. Use the room. Protect the person who speaks.

Connection protects the relationship. Voice keeps the truth in the room. Learning keeps the team open to being changed by it.

SELECTED REFERENCES

Detert, J. R. & Edmondson, A. C. (2011). Implicit voice theories: Taken-for-granted rules of self-censorship at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 54(3).

Nembhard, I. M. & Edmondson, A. C. (2006). Making it safe: The effects of leader inclusiveness and professional status on psychological safety and improvement efforts in health care teams. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 27, 941–966.

Taylor, S. E. et al. (2000). Biobehavioral responses to stress in females: Tend-and-befriend, not fight-or-flight. *Psychological Review*, 107, 411–429.

Webster, V., Brough, P. & Daly, K. (2016). Fight, flight or freeze: Common responses for follower coping with toxic leadership. *Stress and Health*, 32, 346–354.

Carly Adamson

Director and Registered Psychologist
HumanMetrics Pty Ltd · ABN 17 665 952 358
carly@humanmetrics.com.au ·
humanmetrics.com.au

An applied leadership lens informed by the research above. It is general information, not legal advice or a risk assessment. © HumanMetrics Pty Ltd 2026.