Dr. Durell Cooper

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DR. DURELL COOPER: So the first thing I kind of wanted to start with is to sort of really set the stage, if you will, the theme of this conference is dream big. You know, we're in — here in Houston, Texas, and as an SMU alum, you know everything is bigger in Texas, right? But what happens, right? When is that dream actually deferred? That's really what we want to focus on and talk about. Because as many of you know, and as Simon even shared earlier, a lot of us have these dreams and these plans, but for some reason, they may be getting stifled at the organization's. If they weren't, we wouldn't be here having this session today.

So what happens to a dream deferred? And I also wanted to infuse a little bit of art into this presentation as well. So what we're looking at here is a poem "Harlem" by the wonderful late poet, Langston Hughes. I'm not going to read the entire thing. But if you also know the play "A Raisin in the Sun," then this poem probably looks familiar. But I just want you to hold this question as we're going through this session today. What happens to a dream deferred? And then also think about how many of your dreams are currently being deferred at your organizations and/or future organizations.

So psychological safety. Just by show of hands, how many of you are familiar with this term psychological safety? So quite a few of you have heard it, right? It's not the entire room, but it's quite a few. Now, why would we talk about psychological safety on this topic of audience diversification and effective strategies for it, right? Well, it's quite simple, really. And some of you have probably heard this phrase before, but culture eats strategy for breakfast.

It's very difficult for us to ask audiences to come to spaces and feel safe when some of you as employees are going into work every day and don't feel safe in those environments, right? So first, we have to fix our own house, as they say. So how do we do that, right? And also, why again, is it so important? So as we look on the screen here, this pyramid might look familiar to some of you, it — on the left, what you're looking at is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, right? And really kind of getting to the base of who we are as humans, right?

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What do we need in order to be — you know, to establish wellbeing in our lives? So on the left is the typical Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. On the right, is another chart for psychological safety, and really kind of showing the correlation between those two things. So you can kind of see like what the base foundation of workplace psychology really is. And the other thing I just want you to know, as you are looking at sort of this chart on the right, and sort of, you know, going through it, think about how many of those things you can check off at your current place of work, and feel like it is an adequate or sufficient level to be able to reach self-actualization in your current job and what it is that you're doing at work within your organizations.

Now, the other thing behind psychological safety, it's not just about, you know, wellbeing and coming into work, and you know, being able to be happy, although that's a really big part of it. It's ultimately what that happiness then leads to. And what we really want to talk about is how psychological — psychological safety directly correlates to overall, one, productivity, but also the bottom dollar in the revenue of the organizations. And to be able to do that, I have this video here that I want to show you. It's an interview with Ed Catmull, who is the head of Disney Animation. He's going to talk very briefly through the merger of Disney and Pixar and how they incorporated psychological safety techniques to, again, impact the bottom dollar of the organization. So again, this isn't just about feel-good terminology, feel good stories, it actually directly impacts what the organization can produce effectively, which again, is the primer for what we're going to go into next. So let's see if these plays.

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ED CATMULL: Bob Iger, when he became chairman, called up Steve, and they formed an instant and deep bond with each other. I mean, it was a very good friendship that they had between each other. And all this led to Pixar being acquired by Disney. Now, we put up mechanisms to protect the culture at Disney, because the people — excuse me, protect the culture of Pixar. Because the people at Pixar were nervous that a big company would come in and change too many things.

At Disney Animation, it was the opposite. They knew they weren't succeeding, and they wanted us to come in. So there might have been some natural things through there. One of them is you might have said, well, you're — you'll be spread too thin, so you should shut down Disney Animation. Or another line of reasoning would be the that for efficiency of scale, you should combine the two studios.

So John and I took a different approach. And that approach was, we're going to keep these two studios completely separate. They're not allowed to do any production work for each other whatsoever. And we're going to apply the principles and the philosophy to a different group of people who at that time were failing. So we explained the principles, and there were a lot of things having to

do with the way that our brain trust works, that is the way they think about the early development of story, the way we thought about process, and the way we make it safe to fail and make mistakes.

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That is, those are all things that sound good when you talk about them, but they take a while for people to figure out. Because safety is something that can only be earned. You can't tell people to trust each other, you have to earn their trust. And it took around two to four years for everything to finally click and come together. Every film that we've made since he's been there, there have been six films, have been critically well reviewed. But it was at *Tangled*, where they hit a huge financial success. But they did it on their own. And it wasn't as if Pixar rescued them, because Pixar couldn't do any work for them.

So they made the changes. They changed the culture. And then they did *Wreck It Ralph*, which was a very different kind of film and very successful. And then just within the last few weeks, *Frozen* passed *Toy Story 3* to become the highest grossing animated film in history for worldwide gross. It's now actually for all films, live action, animated. It's the sixth highest grossing film in history. So here's the key takeaway. It's largely the same people who were there when they were failing. And my view is, and is — and I believe this very strongly, is that most people are creative. Most people want to do well. And the issue is not, how do you make them be more creative, it's how do we remove the barriers and the —

DURELL: Amazing. Thank you so much, Ed Catmull. Just — I'm just curious. You know, after watching that video, what might be a highlight for someone of, you know, the benefits of psychological safety as evidenced by Ed Catmull at Disney when they employed it at their company? What's one thing that you sort of like take away from that video? It can be anybody.

SPEAKER: Job security.

DURELL: Job security. Yes, absolutely. One of the first things that he said was, you know, you're not going to lose your job. That was the first thing Disney knew when the merger was happening. So job security was huge. Just knowing that you could fail, and you still would not lose your job. That was huge. What's — what's something else? In the back with the red shirt.

SPEAKER: Trust.

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DURELL: Trust. Absolutely, trust was huge. And one thing that Ed said in this video too, which I think is really important for people to take away. Ed said, you know, trust is not given. It has to be earned. It has to be earned. And you know, it's just something for you to all contemplate individually, how many of you feel like you've earned that trust at your organization. And then just one last thing that I want to highlight before we move on, just due to time, it's also the ability to be able to fail forward. Failing forward, right? Without some punitive action being attached to it. The ability to fail forward.

So I just wanted to show this very quickly, again, just to raise additional awareness of what this could potentially look like, or what it does not look like. So something for you to think about, again, as you apply this to your individual organizations. Now, again, for some people, you might go, oh yeah, we're great, this is good for us. And then others might see where there are gaps actually in your organization. So on the left, what we're looking at is like a circle of psychological danger, or also think about it for the educators in the room as more of like a fixed mindset, right?

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So again, a fear of making mistakes, blaming others, or you know, the proverbial kicking the can down the road at the organizations. People become less likely to be able to share different ideas and different views, and then this kind of breeds like a common knowledge effect, sort of like loop, circle, right? Where there's no new information really being infused in the organization. Now, on the other side of that, a psychologically safe environment, again, for the educators in the room, think about this more of like a growth mindset at the organization.

People have comfort, admitting mistakes. There's learning from failure. Again, this idea of being able to fail forward. Everyone openly feels like they can share their ideas, regardless of stature or rank at the organizations. And then ultimately, what it leads to is better innovation and decision making. And the other thing sort of around this, like, ability to be able to make mistakes that I really want to highlight. It's not just, oh, you can — it's not just that you can make the mistake, and you know, there's no sort of like negative action, you know, or punitive action that happens at the organization.

It's also this idea of mistakes being celebrated, right? Or, you know, taking a big risk, and it failing, and it's being celebrated at the organization. So thinking about how it's actually treated, right? So the dare to take the risk is as equally as celebrated as the success of whatever that risk was, right? So that's — that's the mindset shift that we're actually talking about here. So ultimately, again, you know, looking at it, you know, with this pyramid sort of idea behind it, you know, this psychological safety, again, is really the bedrock that you need to build a healthy organization, to where, you know, it's not

just surviving what we're going through industry wide, it's a thriving in what we're doing industry wide.

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And again, as Donna is about to take you through more of the strategy with audience development, what is going to take is some risk, some innovation, and in that risk and innovation, there has to be a culture of support around those risk takers at these organizations as they share these dreams with their colleagues. Again, you have to think about the vulnerability that it takes to think outside of the box. And again, how is that vulnerability or how is that thinking outside of the box being supported with their colleagues.

And so last, like just some key points, and then I'll transition it back over to Donna. Creating the — the foundation of EDIA is incredibly important to this sort of like building of psychological safety at organizations. Encouraging thoughtful collaboration and risk taking and belonging at the organizations. Cultivating an ecosystem of trust in the organizations. And again, remember, trust is not given, it has to be earned. Fostering an environment where employees can actually dream big. You know, like we say, dream big, and then there's organizations where you can't actually do that, or it's not celebrated, right?

The idea is actually, let's be more conservative in our thinking. So how can you cultivate an environment where dreaming big actually becomes the norm, so it then doesn't have to be the title of the conference itself, right? Building a company culture where both innovative ideas and failures are equally valued and celebrated. And lastly, it's just thinking about when psychological safety is integrated into the company culture, audience development strategies become, one, authentic and, two, respected, right? Authentic and respected.

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