

6 ways to give your team space to speak up, take risks — and ultimately perform better

Why is it that some teams are bursting with great ideas and innovative solutions to the problems they face, while others silently slog along in the status quo?

Obviously, there are many factors at play. But a big one (maybe the biggest) is the extent to which you, as the team leader, give your direct reports freedom to think critically, disagree — with one another and with you — and try new things without fear. Even within a rigid organization, you can make your team

an oasis of candor and productive experimentation, especially if you follow these tips.



1. Establish with your direct reports that their contributions aren't just welcome — they're vital for team success.

If your direct reports have new ideas or objections, or see mistakes in the making, they'll just speak up, right? Not necessarily. In a well-known phenomenon researchers call employee silence, people typically take the safer route even when they see problems or have great ideas — for fear that they'll upset or show up the boss, that they'll be branded as a naysayer, or that you won't act on their input.

How do you help your team feel comfortable speaking up and understand that it's their job to do so? Start by setting a clear expectation — and include why their contributions matter for:

- **Your clients** (e.g., *"Our patients depend on us for the best-informed care, so it's never too late to share a treatment idea with me or the team. It's much better to share an idea that doesn't pan out than to stay silent about a good idea and regret it later"*)
- **Everyone's performance** (e.g., *"I'm excited to lead this project, but I certainly don't have all the answers. I need everyone's ideas in order for us to get a final product that we're all proud of"*)
- **Team collaboration** (e.g., *"No person or process is perfect, so speaking up is essential. If you have a concern, mention it — even if you don't have a solution in mind — to help the team understand what you're seeing. Together we can dig into possible solutions"*)

- **Personal development** (e.g., *“Sharing new ideas is a part of your job. Sure, some of them might not work, but the more you share, the more you can get feedback, refine your ideas, and improve your approach for next time”*)

2. Regularly ask your direct reports for their input — both in the moment and in more structured ways.

It’s easier and feels faster to push ahead with an idea or decision in the moment, especially if you’re strapped for time. But taking a few minutes to ask for your direct reports’ insights can help you and your team make better, more-informed choices and unite the team as co-owners of an idea or decision because they’ve had a say.

Look for opportunities during day-to-day work to ask your team for their insights in an open, curious tone that makes it clear you genuinely welcome their thinking. For example:

- *“I could use some fresh eyes on this. Which of these design options do you prefer and why?”*
- *“This is a tricky problem. Do you have any ideas for how we could fix it?”*

And when you offer your own opinion, label how strongly you feel about it so your direct reports don’t hear your casual idea as a done deal and figure it’s not worth contributing. For example:

- *“This is only an idea, but what if we tried X? What would be the pros and cons of that approach?”*
- *“I’m thinking we should do X, but before I decide, what am I missing? I want to hear any concerns the team has that I should take into consideration.”*

You can also solicit input in more structured ways at key points in your workflow. For example, devote a team meeting to gathering your direct reports’ ideas on upcoming team goals, do a project premortem to anticipate challenges, or hold a post-project debrief to learn for next time. Or, when you face a big decision that affects the whole team, host a team debate on the issue, and ask your direct reports to come prepared with a point of view and evidence to back it up.

Important: No matter how you ask for ideas, be honest with your direct reports about how you plan to incorporate their input — or why you decide not to. If you ask for their thinking but never show them how it makes a difference, eventually they’ll stop sharing.

3. Decide as a team when it is and is not OK for people to experiment.

Without trial and error, there can be no innovation — no iPhone, no supersonic jet, and no streamlined buying process that saves your team \$5,000. But nobody wants to make a catastrophic mistake that harms customers, the company, or their own professional life. That's why it's important to clarify with your direct reports when there's room to try something new and when the stakes are too high to risk failing.

In a team meeting, draw a horizontal line — your “water line” — on a whiteboard or in a shared document. Above this line, people can experiment, take risks, and still recover if things don't go well. Below the line, there's no room for failure. Have the group brainstorm their common work tasks and scenarios, then place each one above or below the line.

You can prompt the discussion with questions like:

- *“Where might our potential learning be greater than the cost of failure?”*
- *“Are there situations that would send an item above or below the line — like how much time or budget we have or how much pressure we're under to come up with a better way?”*
- *“Where do we need to stick with set processes and careful vetting because the stakes are high?”*

Move tasks above and below the line until everyone has a clear understanding of which items go where. For example, you may decide that the visual design of your company's blog falls above the line, so the team can play with new approaches with less oversight from you, while your company's annual report falls below it and requires set standards and detailed review.

4. Dedicate space and time for your direct reports to experiment in an appropriate area.

Once you determine which areas are ripe for experimentation (see No. 3), you can't just tell your direct reports “Go innovate!” and expect brilliance. Not if you also pack their schedules full of other work and are so heavy-handed with your guidance (e.g., “Make sure it works with our current systems, doesn't cost more money, and includes that graphic I like”) that they can't actually devise something novel.

They need freedom plus the time and resources to try new ideas, take risks, and discover better ways of working. To help them do that:

- **Work with your direct reports to choose areas above the “water line” for experimentation.** Look for tasks or scenarios that could improve performance (e.g., revisiting a production process or rewriting stale website copy) or a new area that could yield potential gain (e.g., prototyping a new feature to see how customers respond). Depending on the work, your direct reports may approach it as a team, in small groups, or individually.

- **Determine with each direct report where experimentation falls relative to their other priorities.** Should they spend 50 percent of their time on it or 10 percent? What should they stop or delay doing in order to make time? And detail how will you protect that time, for example, not peppering them with urgent requests? Too often, potential breakthroughs languish when “more important” things keep coming up.
- **Give them extra room to try, possibly fail, and learn from the experience.** This means your articulating a clear end goal, but being careful not to overprescribe how they get there — let them fill in the details. Reinforce that failure is a possibility, but it’s all right as long as they learn from it. You can also help normalize this kind of failure by talking openly about your own relevant mistakes, how you recovered, and what you learned from the experience. Finally, provide them with long or flexible deadlines (since new things typically take longer) and the resources they need, from budget to creativity aids like whiteboards, sticky notes, and craft materials.

5. Adjust your support to each direct report’s needs in a way that keeps them driving their work.

When you give your direct reports space to step forward with their thinking, it doesn’t necessarily mean that you step back and say, “Take it away — I’ll be in my office!” You still need to be there to provide essential guidance. The key is to do so strategically, depending on each person’s experience and skills, as well as the situation they’re facing.

When you assign a task, clarify the level of autonomy you want each direct report to have so they understand when they should race ahead on their own and when to seek your guidance. A skilled veteran may be able to run with a project, only seeking your input if needed, while a newer team member or a team member doing something for the first time might need your collaboration creating a plan.

If a direct report gets stuck and comes to you, consider the best way to help them move forward without taking control of their work. This could mean giving feedback, asking thought-provoking questions to tease out ideas (e.g., “*What do you think is the crux of this issue and why?*”), offering to be a practice partner as they test-drive a possible solution, or something else.

Keep in mind that a direct report who feels pressure or is trying something new may want you to take over, or you may be tempted to take over to save them. Don’t. Instead, you might say something like, “*Pat, I’m happy to discuss potential photo options, but ultimately it’s up to you to pick what goes in the layout.*”

For more, see 9 types of help managers give — and when to use each.

6. Reinforce that you expect everyone's best contributions — and speak up when you do (and don't) get them.

The quickest way to make your team mute is to encourage people to voice their views or take a risk, then lambast them with, "I disagree!" or "I can't believe you did that." But this doesn't mean that every idea is brilliant or every failure wonderful — you still need to uphold performance standards.

To reinforce your team's culture of risk-taking and gently address unhelpful behavior as needed:

- **Respond first by thanking everyone who shares an idea or concern, regardless of its quality.** You might start with a simple *"Thanks for sharing that"* or *"I appreciate your insight"* to encourage the person to speak up again in the future. Then, if their contribution is particularly helpful, explain why (e.g., *"That's a valuable customer perspective I hadn't considered"*).
- **Recognize direct reports who learn from taking calculated risks, regardless of whether they succeed.** For example, you might say in a team meeting, *"I want to recognize Amos for trying a new onboarding approach. There were a few kinks, but we got really helpful client feedback, and she has great revisions in mind."*
- **Give redirecting feedback when direct reports shut down one another's contributions.** For example, if one direct report says of another's idea, *"That won't work because users will hate it,"* you might respond, *"Carl, I appreciate your concern for our users, but let's let Desiree finish her thought so we can fully consider her idea."*
- **Address failures to learn quickly.** If you notice a direct report repeating the same mistakes without revising their approach, start a conversation to help them identify ways to improve in the future. For more, see [Direct report tries but underperforms](#).