

Challenge the Crap Out of Each Other

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Sit in enough leadership meetings and you start counting arguments. Not fights, but rather arguments. Someone saying “I don’t agree with that, and here’s why.” Someone asking a leader to explain the reasoning behind a decision that’s already been made. Someone refusing to let a number go by unexamined.

I look for this in every leadership team I observe. It tells me more in ten minutes than a culture survey tells me in ten weeks. And what I find, most of the time, is nothing. People are on their laptops. People are nodding along. Okay. Okay. Okay. Whatever gets decided is fine.

That room isn’t aligned. That room doesn’t care.

The truth is, if nobody cares, it can’t be that important. The silence I hear isn’t a personality problem or a communication problem. The silence is a verdict the room has already reached about the work.

Challenge is the third pillar. Challenge is the one that does the demolition of the Lie Economy.

Important work catalyzes engagement. Curiosity follows engagement. Then comes challenge, and challenge is where it gets uncomfortable.

Curiosity asks. Challenge pushes. Curiosity says help me understand. Challenge says I don’t think you’re right.

In a Courage Economy the objective isn’t harmony, the objective is the truth. We are a maximally truth-seeking organization. And if that’s what we are, then there can be no resistance to an effort to find the truth.

The facade cannot survive being challenged

This is why challenge is the pillar that breaks the lie economy. The lie economy runs on things that are never examined. The half-truth that nobody follows up on. The status update that sounds like progress. The decision everyone privately doubts and publicly supports.

All of that requires one condition. Nobody pushes back.

It is very hard to maintain a facade when there are people in the room challenging the facade itself. Not just undermining it or sniping at it. But really challenging it out loud, in front of everyone, on the record.

And when challenge is not just permitted but rewarded, something changes in the room. People stop spending their energy protecting themselves and start spending it on the work.

That’s the whole game. In most organizations, an enormous share of your people’s best thinking goes into self-protection. Challenge is how you get it back.

Your organization is defaulting to comfort right now

What I’ve come to believe about human beings at work is that we have a powerful drive to build a comfort economy. We don’t want to feel discomfort. We don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings, and we very much don’t want our own feelings hurt. So, without anyone deciding it, we optimize for comfortability. And comfortability is the opposite of challenge.

Your organization will default to comfort unless you pay active attention to it. This is not a risk. It is the current state, right now, unless you are doing something about it.

Challenge is the mechanism by which you deny comfort the chance to become your operating system.

If you say “I think we should do this” and somebody says “I don’t agree, and here’s why” — that is the moment. It’s not the moment to take umbrage. It is the moment to reward it visibly so that everyone watching learns what this place actually values.

Culture is not complicated. Culture is the behavioral output of what you reward, what you punish, and what you tolerate. That’s it.

What you’re actually building

Challenge only works if there’s something worth challenging. Nobody takes the risk of putting themselves out there over the expense policy. People challenge when the work is important enough to be worth the risk.

Which is why all of this comes back to important work. Design difficult, meaningful work, and curiosity and challenge show up on their own.

In the middle of that struggle — the arguing, the pushing, the challenging the crap out of each other — trust starts to form because hard work reveals people.

Trust is an outcome, not an activity. You do not build it with trust falls and team-building exercises. You build it by doing hard, difficult things together and finding out who’s actually there with you.

Get that far, and you have the beginnings of a community. But it starts with someone being willing to say “I don’t agree with that.” And with a leader who says thank you.

So here’s my question for you. When was the last time someone disagreed with you in a meeting out loud, in front of the team? And what happened to them afterward? Be honest about that one. Your organization already knows the answer.