6 ways to give your team space to speak up, take risks, and excel

> *"To do their best work, people need space. They might need intellectual elbow room to see things differently than their boss or colleagues. Often, what they need most is space to experiment, take risks, and recover from the inevitable setbacks along the way." — Liz Wiseman*

Why do some teams think boldly and find innovative solutions, while others slog along in the status quo? One major factor is the environment their leaders create. Multiplier leaders give their teams the freedom to think critically, try new things, and learn from their mistakes — without the risk of rebuke or damaging failures.

Try these tips to help make your team an oasis of candor and productive experimentation.

1. Establish with your team that you expect their best ideas and efforts.

If your direct reports have concerns or new ideas, they'll speak up, right? Not necessarily. People often hold back and play it safe at work, even when they see problems or have great insights — for fear that they'll upset the boss, that they'll be branded as a naysayer, or that their leaders won't act on their input.

How can you help your team understand that it's their job to step up — and know that when they do, you'll have their backs? Start by setting a clear expectation, using language like this, that explains why their contributions matter for:

- **Your clients:** *"Our patients depend on us for the best-informed care, so it's never too late to share a suggestion with me or the team. It's much better to share an idea that doesn't pan out than to stay silent."*
- **Everyone's performance:** *"This project is challenging. We'll need everyone's best thinking and work in order for us to get a final product that we're all proud of."*
- **Teamwork:** *"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 fix in mind — to help the team understand what you're seeing. Together we can dig into possible solutions."*
- **Personal growth:** *"Sharing new ideas is a part of your job. If we try an idea and it doesn't work, that's OK. We can still learn and evolve from it."*

Multiplier in action: Vice Principal Dr. Anne Marie De Barros Miller explains the system she uses to prompt her team of teachers to express their ideas and take the lead in driving them forward.

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

Diminishers often think it's easier and faster to dominate discussions and assert their own ideas or decisions. But Multipliers take the opposite approach — they dispense their views sparingly and seek insights from their team in order to make better, more-informed decisions and to unite the group as co-owners of the work.

Look for opportunities in the daily workflow to ask your direct reports 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 options do you prefer and why?"*
- *"This is a tricky problem. How could we fix it so it doesn't recur?"*
- *"I need to decide on the proposal. What do you see as the pros and cons of accepting it?"*

You can also ask for input in more structured ways at key points. For example, you can host meetings to gather people's ideas for how to meet upcoming goals or to debrief after projects to share learning for next time.

When you face a key decision, you might run the Multipliers [Make a Debate experiment](). Present team members with clear options, then ask them to come prepared with an opening position and data to back it up. After people support their positions, ask them to switch and argue in support of another option. If people seem uncomfortable disagreeing, help them see that it's valuable to question others' ideas (e.g.,
"I view dissent as a good thing, as long as we take the time to examine everyone's position fairly. We'll get a better grasp of the issue if we consider each position from multiple angles"
).

And no matter how you ask for input, let your team members know how you plan to incorporate it — 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. As a team, decide when it is and is not OK for people to experiment.

Without trial and error, there can be no innovation — but no one wants to make a catastrophic mistake that harms customers, the company, or their reputation.

To give your direct reports the confidence to take appropriate risks, clarify when there's room to try new things and when the stakes are too high to risk failing by doing the Multipliers [Make Space to Take Risks experiment]() with your team:

> **In a team meeting, draw a horizontal line — your "waterline" — 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 common work tasks and scenarios.** Place each one above or below the line.

Shift tasks above and below the line based on the team's discussion, until everyone has a clear understanding of which items belong where and why. For example, you may decide that the visual design of your company's blog falls above the line so the team has the opportunity to play with new approaches with less oversight, while the design of your annual report falls below it and requires set standards and detailed review.
Record the key themes that emerge in each category. For example, maybe it's OK to fail if the potential learning is greater than the cost or if you have the time or resources to recover. But it's not OK to fail if it violates your company's values, damages your brand, or could hurt people's standing.

4. Give your direct reports the time and freedom to experiment, possibly fail, and learn from the experience.

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. Especially if you're so heavy-handed with your guidance (e.g., "Make sure it works with our current systems, is finished by the end of the month, and includes that graphic I like") that they can't actually devise something new.

People need space to imagine novel ways of working. To provide it:

- **Work with your direct reports to pick an area above the "waterline" with a clear objective for experimentation, then let them fill in the blanks.** For example, maybe you determine it's time to revisit a production process to make it more efficient. Let your team members own decisions about what tweaks to try and how to adjust based on the results of their experiments (with your input as requested).
- **Be open that failure is a possibility — but that it's OK as long as they learn from it.** One of the best ways to invite risk-taking is to share stories about your own relevant mistakes, including how you recovered and what you learned from the experience (try the Multipliers [Talk Up Your Mistakes experiment](#)). You can also make it clear that you don't expect perfection — just improvement. For example,
"I realize that you're trying this for the first time. Chances are it won't go perfectly, but that's OK. You'll do your best and learn a lot for next time."
- **Provide them with a longer or more flexible deadline and any additional resources they need.** New things typically take longer or require more cycles of trial and error. Work with your direct reports to determine realistic time frames and what else they need to be successful.

5. Contribute essential framing and guidance, without taking over.

Giving your team space to take initiative doesn't mean that you just step back and say, "Take it away — I'll be in my office!" You still need to provide support and — this is key — do so in a way that encourages others' best thinking and contributions, rather than asserts your own.

To strike this balance:

> **Liz Wiseman pro tip:** Give the three "whats" so people know what they're in charge of. ([transcript](#))
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- **Set clear work standards in advance — including what they're in charge of.** When you want people to take more control of their work, you have to help them understand exactly what they control. From the outset, clarify with your direct reports what success looks like, what "done" looks like, and any boundaries they should work within. Recap it in writing so they and you can refer back to it.
- **If someone gets stuck, find a way to help them move forward without your taking control.** This could mean giving feedback, asking thought-provoking, open-ended 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, referring them to a peer for advice, or something else. For more, see [8 ways to help your team members without taking over — and when to use each](#).
- **Remind the person that they own the work.** You might draw from the Multipliers [Give It Back experiment](#) and say something like, *"Those are potential options, but ultimately it's your call"* or *"I'm here if you have more questions — and you're still the lead on this."*

If your direct reports feel pressure or are struggling with something new, they may ask you to take over. Resist. Not only will you rob them of a precious learning opportunity but you could also shut down their intelligence — why should they bother engaging their brains to solve tough problems if they know you'll jump in and handle it?

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

The quickest way to shut people down is to encourage them to voice their views or to take a risk and then respond with, "I disagree!" or "That won't work." 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 address unhelpful behavior as needed:

- **Thank everyone who shares an idea or concern, regardless of its quality.** You might start with a simple *"Thanks for sharing that"* or *"I'm glad you expressed your point of view"* to encourage your direct reports to speak up again in the future. If their contribution is helpful, explain why (e.g., *"That's a valuable customer perspective I hadn't considered"*). If not, gently redirect their energy in a more productive direction (e.g., *"That idea doesn't seem feasible, given our tight budget — how could we modify it to cut the cost?"*).
- **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 acknowledge Amos for trying a new onboarding approach. There were a few kinks, but we got really helpful client feedback, and he has great revisions in mind."*
- **Give redirecting feedback when direct reports shut down one another's contributions.** For example, if one person interrupts another person with "That won't work — users will hate it," you might respond, *"Carl, I appreciate your concern for our users, but let's let Denise finish her thought so we can fully consider her idea."*
- **Help people learn from mistakes.** If you notice a direct report repeating the same mistake, start a conversation to help them identify ways to improve in the future. For example, *"It seems like you're not making headway on X. If that is true, could you help me understand the situation? What have you learned so far? Would it help to talk through some ideas for adjusting your approach?"*

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