

Power, safety and the courage to disagree



In senior teams, disagreement is rarely absent. It is often deferred, diluted or redirected. Most boards and executive committees are made up of intelligent, experienced people. The issue is not capability. It is dynamic.

Power shapes behaviour more than value statements do.

Hierarchy amplifies social risk. The more senior the room, the higher the perceived cost of getting it wrong, asking a naïve question or challenging prevailing thinking. Research by Harvard's Amy Edmondson shows that when the interpersonal risk of speaking up increases, learning behaviour decreases. In executive environments, hierarchy often amplifies that risk rather than reduces it.

As status rises, advocacy tends to increase, and curiosity tends to decrease. Chris Argyris identified this pattern in senior leaders: highly skilled at defending a position, less practised at genuine inquiry. Leaders arrive prepared to represent a view rather than explore one.

Over time, this creates a subtle pattern. Debate happens, but within safe boundaries. Dissent is softened. Concerns are raised offline rather than in the room. Alignment appears strong, but it is sometimes performative rather than tested.

The result is polite harmony.

Polite harmony feels efficient. Meetings run smoothly. Decisions appear unanimous. But the absence of visible friction is not the same as the presence of robust challenge. When difficult conversations are postponed or diluted, conversational debt accumulates. Like financial debt, it compounds. Issues carried forward unresolved rarely shrink. They resurface later in stalled execution, strained relationships or strategic drift.

Google's Project Aristotle reinforced what Edmondson's earlier research suggested: psychological safety is the strongest predictor of team effectiveness. In senior environments, psychological safety does not mean comfort. It means confidence that candour will not result in social or political penalty.



Without that safety, risk goes unchallenged. Assumptions harden. Groupthink becomes more likely. In governance terms, this is not a cultural concern. It is a risk oversight issue.

The most effective boards understand this tension.

They do not eliminate disagreement.

They design for it.

They distinguish between productive tension and destructive conflict. Productive tension focuses on ideas, data, and implications. It sharpens thinking and strengthens decisions. Destructive conflict is personal or territorial. It erodes trust.

The role of the Chair or CEO is pivotal. Power is always present in the room. The question is whether it is used to close debate quickly or to create space for it.

Leaders signal safety in small but consequential ways:

- Inviting challenge before moving to a decision.
- Publicly appreciating dissenting views.
- Separating critique of ideas from judgement of individuals.
- Naming when alignment feels too easy.

These behaviours shape the climate of the top team, and that climate cascades quickly.

When senior leaders demonstrate that disagreement is not career-limiting, candour increases. When they default to advocacy and defensiveness, silence grows.

The courage to disagree is not a personality trait. It is a climate outcome.

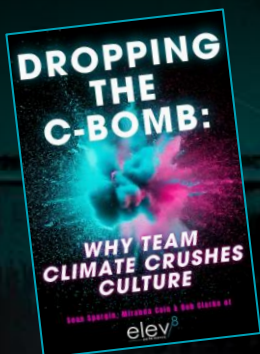
Boards that treat power dynamics as a performance variable, rather than a personality issue, surface risk earlier, make more informed decisions and reduce the likelihood of strategic blind spots.

The question for any executive team is simple:



Is harmony in your meetings a sign of alignment or avoidance?

The answer will say more about your performance trajectory than any strategy document.



Want to read more?

Click here to grab a copy of our new book, 'Dropping the C-bomb: Why Team Climate Crushes Culture'.