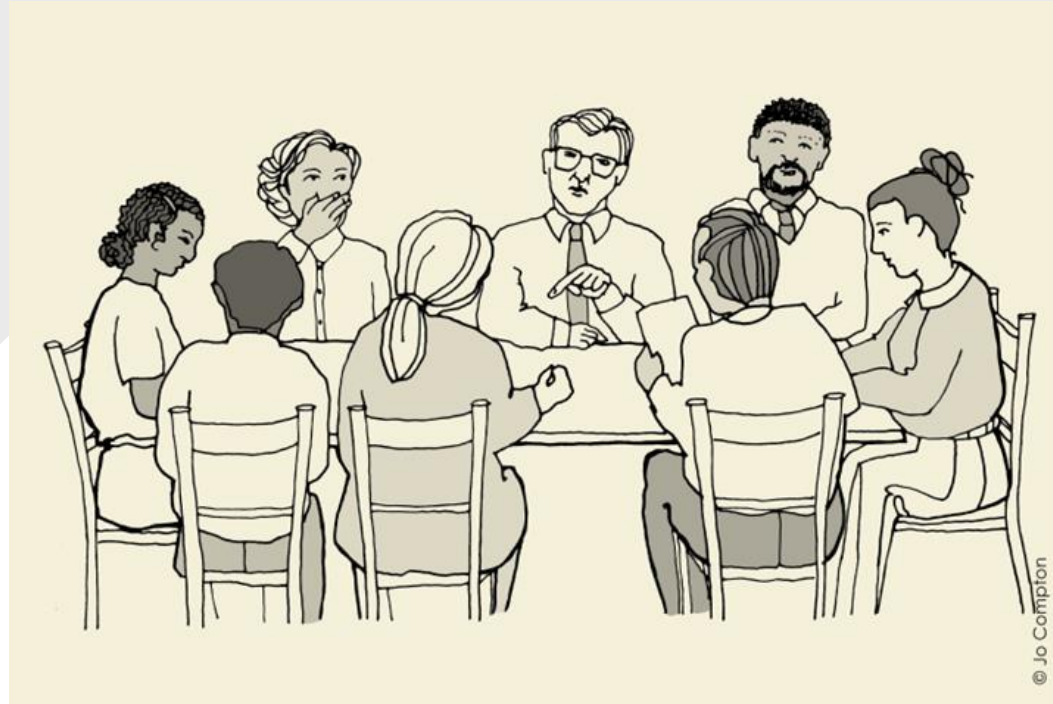# Leadership as conversation – some ideas


Florence Nightingale Foundation

Established Strategic Leaders

29th -30th June 2023

Three propositions to think about and test against some of the situations you face

1. Leadership is exercised when you pay attention to the conversational culture and notice who and what gets talked about and who and what struggles to be heard.

2. Helping people say more about what it takes to do their job, keeps everyone a bit safer.

3. Leaders who have inquiry skills and are curious, are usually better to work for.
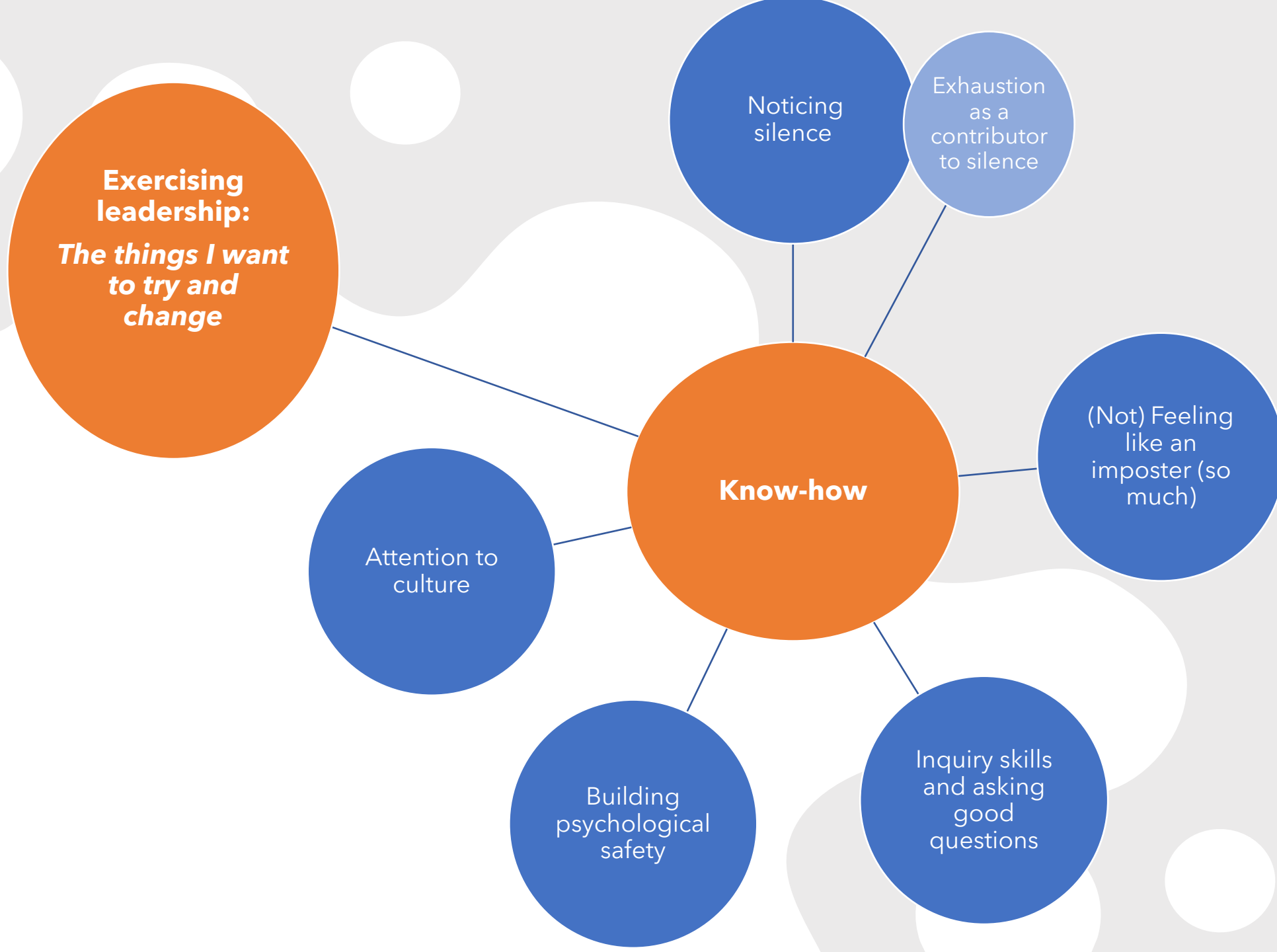
Working in five contexts?

1. Supporting and enabling own profession working day to day with patients.

2. Supporting and enabling working with other professions working day to day with patients.

3. Collaborating with others to manage day to day operations.

4. Influencing and informing other leaders in the organisation & wider system.

5. Influencing and informing with others to shape the policy context.

Context - pre-existing social norms, values and relationships into which our interventions 'land' and are taken up.

Each context has its work and conversational culture

The way we do things around here…the behaviours and assumptions that we think 'work' and should be taught to new people.

Work culture is a response to what must be hidden, ignored and denied.

The conversational culture patrols the boundaries and sanctions trespassers.

RESTRICTED AREA

**NO ENTRY UNLESS AUTHORIZED**

© Jo Compton

The fact of anxiety – it needs managing

Looking after people in distress, who may not recover, will evoke primary anxiety, which will need to be contained by the way we do things around here.

Some of how we organise will be useful and some of it will cause harm.

Containing anxiety in institutions

Isabel Menzies Lyth

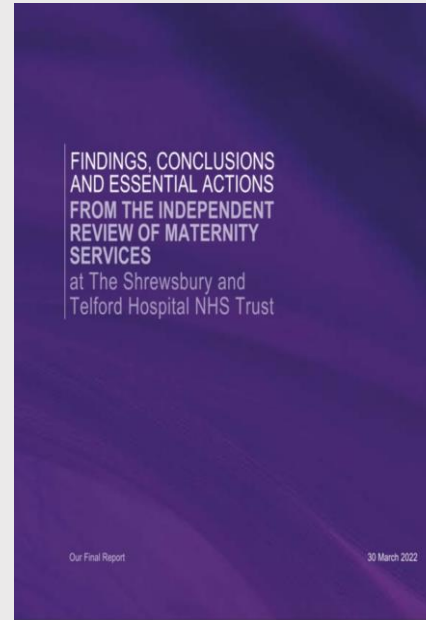Selected essays Volume 1
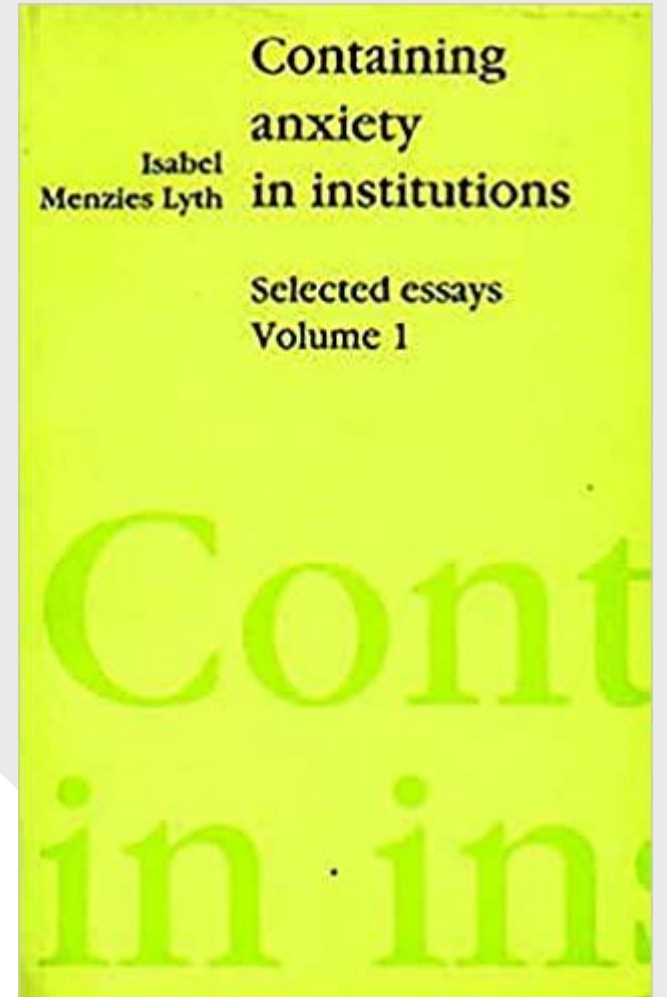
Always about changing the culture
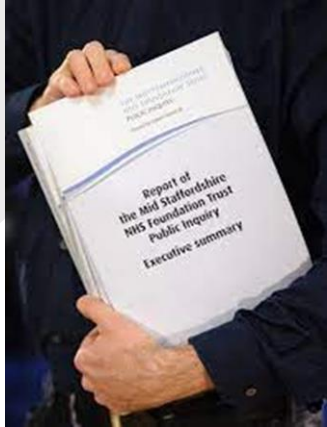
…the word 'hindsight' occurs at least 123 times in the transcript of the oral hearings…and 'benefit of hindsight' 378 times

(Francis, 2013, p.24)

FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND ESSENTIAL ACTIONS FROM THE INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF MATERNITY SERVICES at The Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust

Our Final Report   30 March 2022

The families who have contributed to this review want answers to understand the events surrounding their maternity experiences, and their voices to be heard, to prevent recurrence as much as possible. **They are concerned by the perception that clinical teams have failed to learn lessons from serious events in the past** (p. vi).
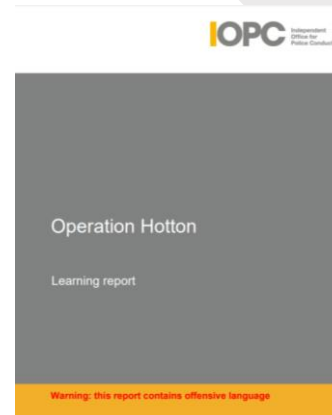

Culture change in the NHS
Applying the lessons of the Francis Inquiries

The Public Inquiry described how the misalignment of goals, actions and behaviours led tragically to terrible failures of patient safety. In response, the review into patient safety led by international expert Professor Don Berwick called for the NHS to embrace a culture of learning. **All the evidence shows that a culture of learning – particularly learning from mistakes – is critical to improving patient safety, and this has been central to the system's response to the Inquiry** (p.6).

IOPC Independent Office for Police Conduct

Operation Hotton

Learning report

Warning: this report contains offensive language

The recommendations we are making to the MPS focus on the cultural issues identified and are aimed at ensuring those who work for the force feel safe with their colleagues, and the communities they police, feel safe with those who protect them.

(IOPC, 2022, p. 3)

7

Conversation as the main inquiry tool and to get things done

inquiry — conversations — instrumental

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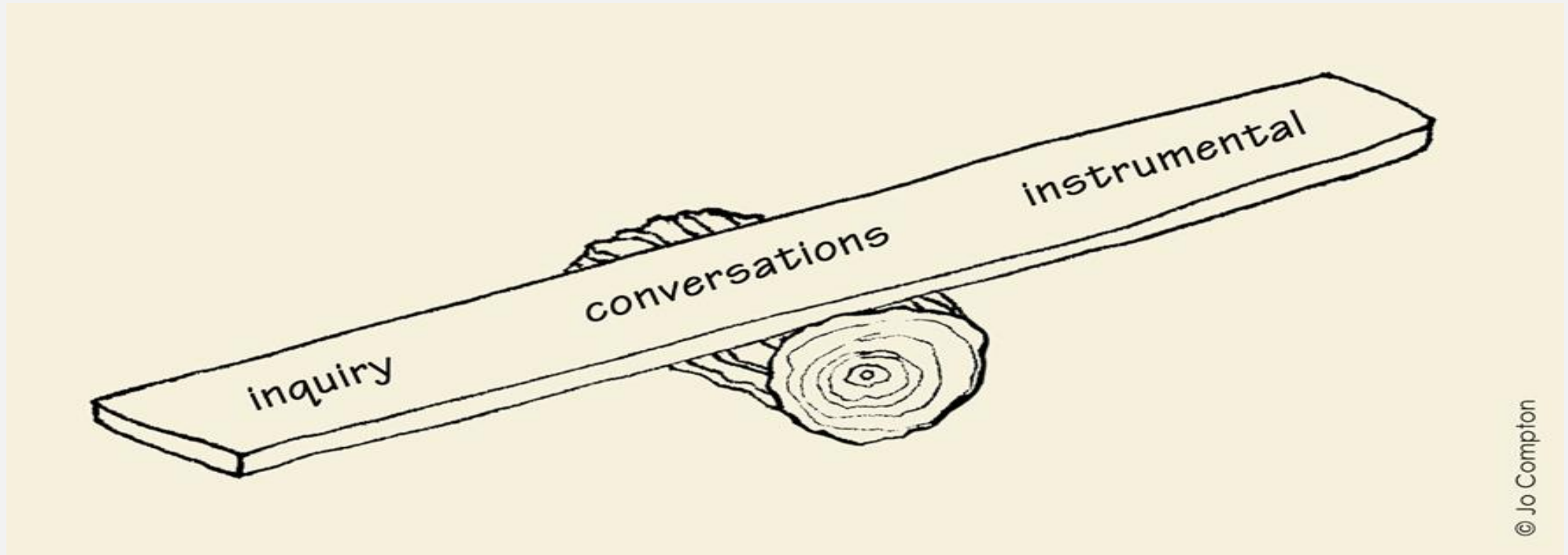
Refs: Schein, E. (2013) *Humble inquiry. The gentle art of asking instead of telling.* Berrett-Koehler Publishers: Oakland.

Schein, E. (2018) *Humble leadership. The power of relationships, openness, and trust.* Berrett-Koehler: San Francisco

Both probably required in each context

Management

We have done this before - this is what to do and how to do it
'Tame problems'
Just need to execute the procedure well
Instrumental talk – get it done (please)

Leadership

Not sure what to do here as I am not sure what is going on
Complexity and unintended consequences
Uncertainty
Inquiry – what do I need to understand/ what am I not getting?
Relationships, talking, learning

Is it safe enough to speak?

The belief that the work environment is safe for interpersonal risk taking...[feeling] able speak up with relevant ideas, questions, or concerns.

Psychological safety is present when colleagues trust and respect each other and feel able – even obligated - to be candid (Edmonson, p.8).
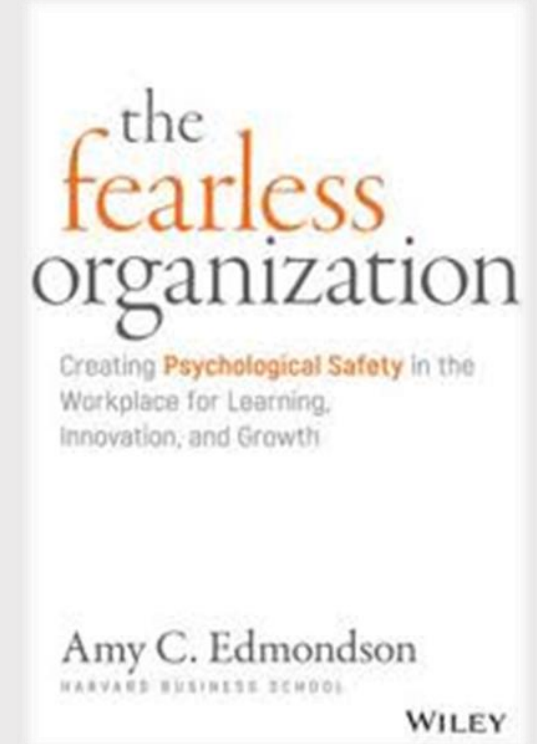
Edmonson, A. (2019) *The fearless organisation. Creating psychological safety in the workplace for learning, innovation, and growth*. New Jersey: Wiley.

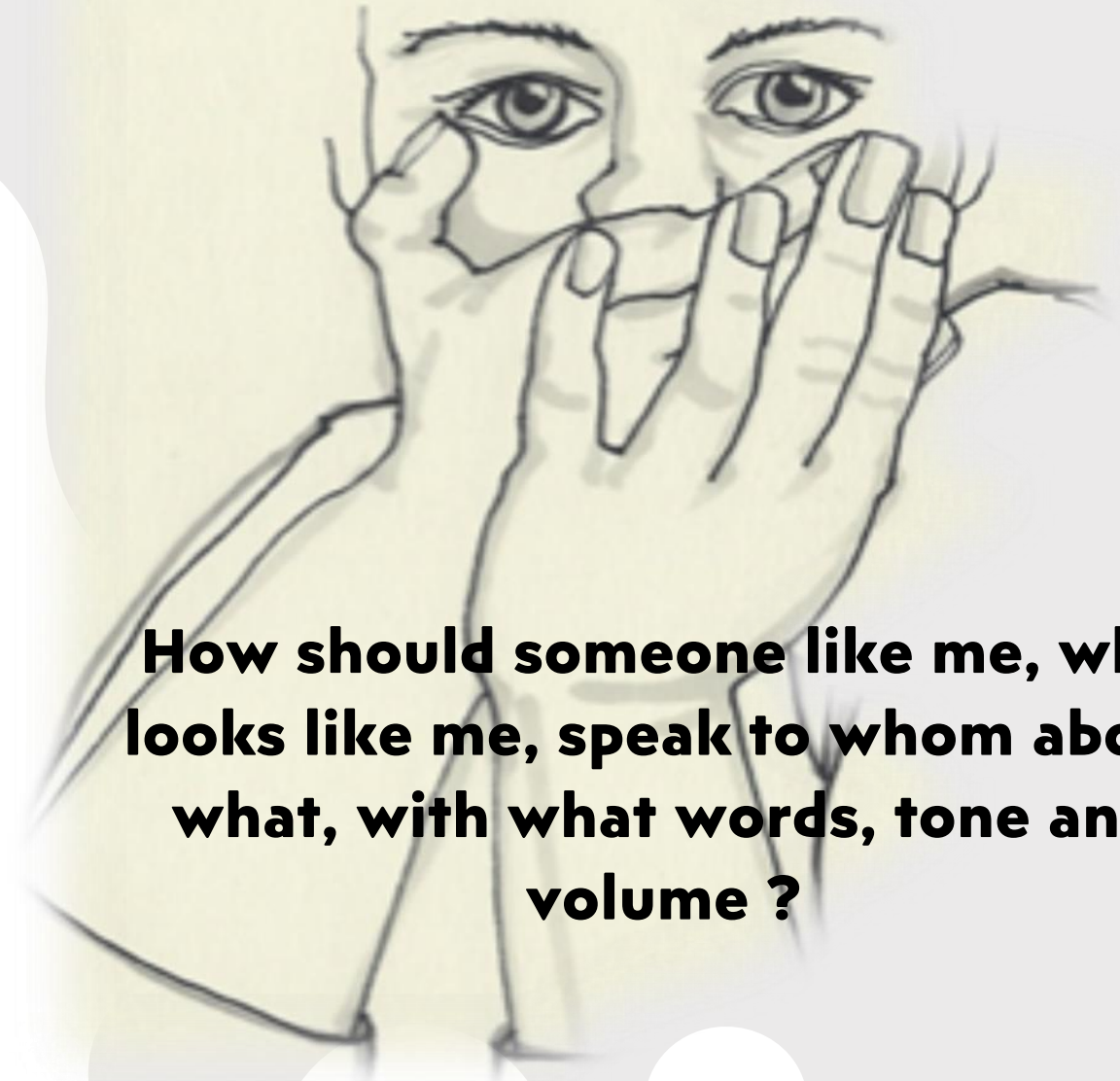Woodward, S. (2023) *Patient safety now*. New York: Routledge.

Why would we want people to silently ask these question?

Do I belong?

Can I ask a question?

Can I share my know how?

Can I ask a 'why' question?

Woodward, S. (2023) *Patient safety now*. New York: Routledge.

How should someone like me, who looks like me, speak to whom about what, with what words, tone and volume ?

Making it safer to speak and learn – setting the conversational culture…

Keep it in the room today (the boundary I will hold on confidentiality).

Forgive – we can all get it wrong and be clumsy in how we talk (not perfection let me model that for you…)

Thinking together helps, so speak (its what you paid for).

Ok to ask 'why' (and my reaction will encourage you when it is me you question)

I'm usually right and I embrace the possibility I may not be (let me show you).

I will bring our conversation back to our shared question - e.g., *is the way we talk to each other the best we can do to keep people safer and to work efficiently together and with others?*

If you are the boss – this can help

Pay attention to who is not speaking and the issues that are absent.

Invite contributions.

Be less outcome/my way focused.

Do not just reward the compliant – value the 'constructively awkward'.

Model an inquiry approach.

Some things have their own time.

Model open questions.

Have a book of good questions

If we had a greater sense of psychological safety, what would we talk about; who would benefit?

What would make it safer to talk this through?

Say something more about what leads you to believe this to be the case? I want to understand.

What prevents you/us from bringing this (difficult) issue up?

What makes us so sure about this intervention/way of thinking?

Where are we/you less certain about this intervention/way of thinking?

Who or what is missing from our conversation?

What could we be turning a deaf ear, blind eye to as we talk about this issue?

What am I/we not understanding?

Investigating the conversational culture

What are the incentives in the system to keep things simple?

How do we remind people of their place?

How do I remind people of their place?

How do we silence people?
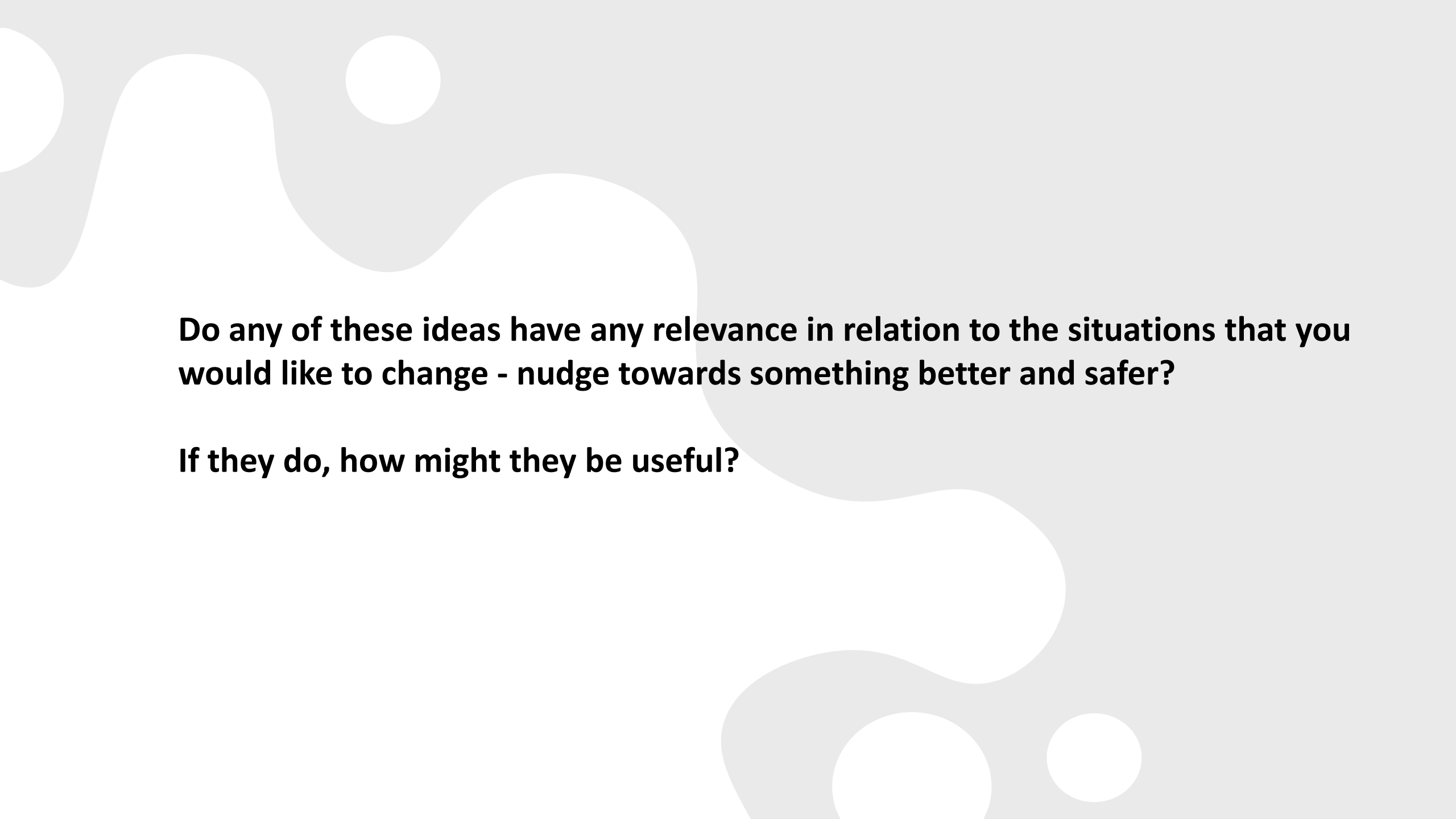
Why do I sometimes silence people?

What can silence me?

How much do I care about silencing people, if I get the job done?

What would make me pay more attention to our conversational culture?

What small changes could I make to nudge us towards a bit more talking?

As a senior leader, as a NED, why do I ignore poor behaviour?

Do any of these ideas have any relevance in relation to the situations that you would like to change - nudge towards something better and safer?

If they do, how might they be useful?

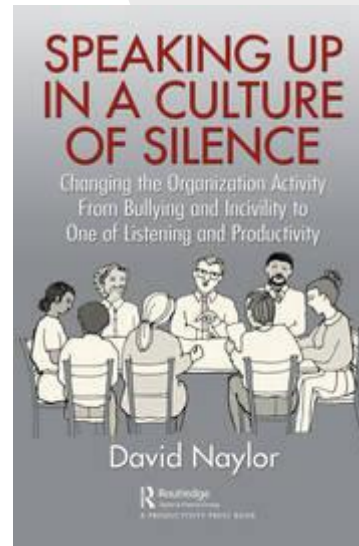## If all else fails be the last one thinking in the room

To think is to be in role.

Without thinking there is no useful talking.

Your inner voice is private – it does not belong to your boss or employer.

Listening to your inner voice is a prelude to action.

What you are feeling may not just be about you.

SPEAKING UP IN A CULTURE OF SILENCE

Changing the Organization Activity From Bullying and Incivility to One of Listening and Productivity

David Naylor

david@davidnaylorconsulting.com

Leadership is being prepared to 'read' silences

Too much knowledge and the refusal to become aware...

Acquiescent silence – there is nothing I can do here.
Defensive silence – I'm too scared to speak.
Pro-social silence – we are a close-knit team.
Power silence – I have no need to speak.
A noisy silence – I will complain and not reveal my real anxieties.
Exhausted silence – I'm done.

Always an intervention

What can silence me?
**What helps me resist being silenced?**

Schlant, E. (1999) *The language of silence*. London: Routledge.
Jack, D. (1991) *Silencing the self. Women and depression*. London: Harvard University Press.

Why I can go quiet

We are hard-wired to notice hierarchy in the room. We rapidly recognise who is in charge and moderate our behaviour accordingly to 'fit in'. We are susceptible to obedience in a group or team meeting. We are susceptible to conformity – to go along with what is accepted as the correct way of thinking and behaving around here.

See: Sapolsky, R. (2017) *Behave. The biology of humans at our best and worst.* London: Vintage.
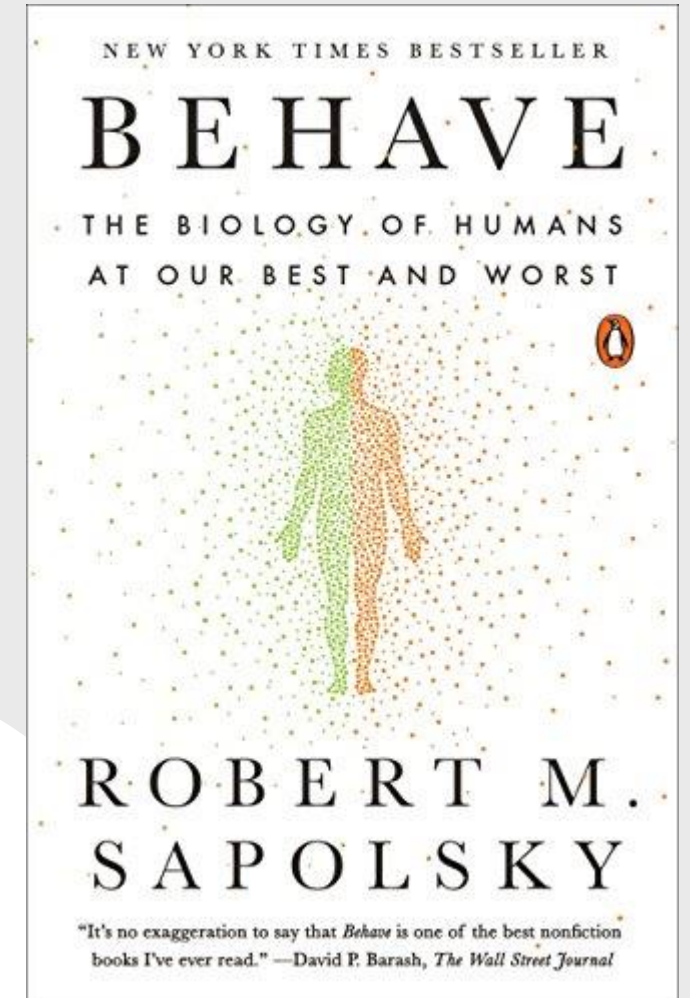
The fact of self-silencing – internalising the conversational culture

Most of the time I'm telling myself to shut up because I worry that what I'm about to say is either already blindingly obvious or extremely stupid. (It REALLY IS as basic as not wanting to look a plonker.) What does the fear of looking a plonker mean for me? It means that I am left making a value judgement about whether or not to speak up

Plonker - someone who is foolish or useless

Investigating the conversational culture – make the familiar strange

What are this lot (and maybe me) busily ignoring?

How do they help each other speak?

How do they silence each other?

How is permission given to speak?

How is difference managed?

Who has power and how are they using it?

What are the rituals that shape their meetings and conversations?

Now exhaustion – a hidden cost of achievement

'…burnout can also be regarded as a social form of depression, a systemic dysfunction that is directly related to the work environment and one's role and position in it. The individual is thus not responsible for falling prey to the condition but can be considered a victim of it alienating work environment and broader psychophysically damaging sociocultural development beyond their control' (p.216).

Schaffner, A. (2017) Exhaustion – a history. New York: Columbia Press.
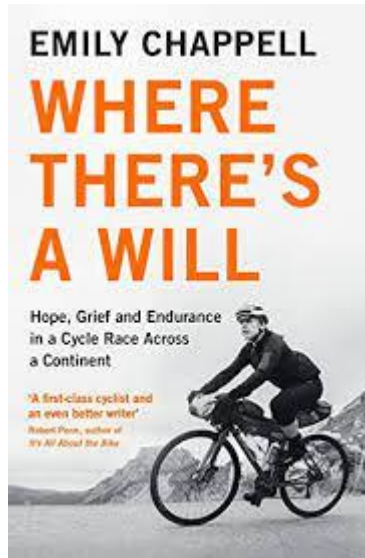
Chappell, E. (2020) *Where there's a will. Hope, grief and endurance in a cycle race across the continent*. London: Profile Books.

Why is exhaustion important to talk about?

Limits are not a social construction – how they are understood as if they are.

Talk of limits can be silent and silenced in organisations.

An effort model does not help people stay in role.

Exhausted people face a polarity – the fact of personal limits; need to rest; and need/wish to stay in role.

Requiring more effort is to wantonly risk further damage to the very capabilities we value in that person and which are required to keep working.

Current approaches can force people to find ways of covertly doing less and avoiding work; leaving hidden gaps in services which makes it less safe for everyone.

Inviting the exhausted into a conversation…

- What choices do we offer people when they cannot do anymore?
    - What is useful about our approach?
    - What is the downside?
    - What and who are we ignoring?

- What is our own experience of exhaustion?
    - How does this inform our current approach?

- What aspect of this experience do we tend to silence?
    - Why is that?

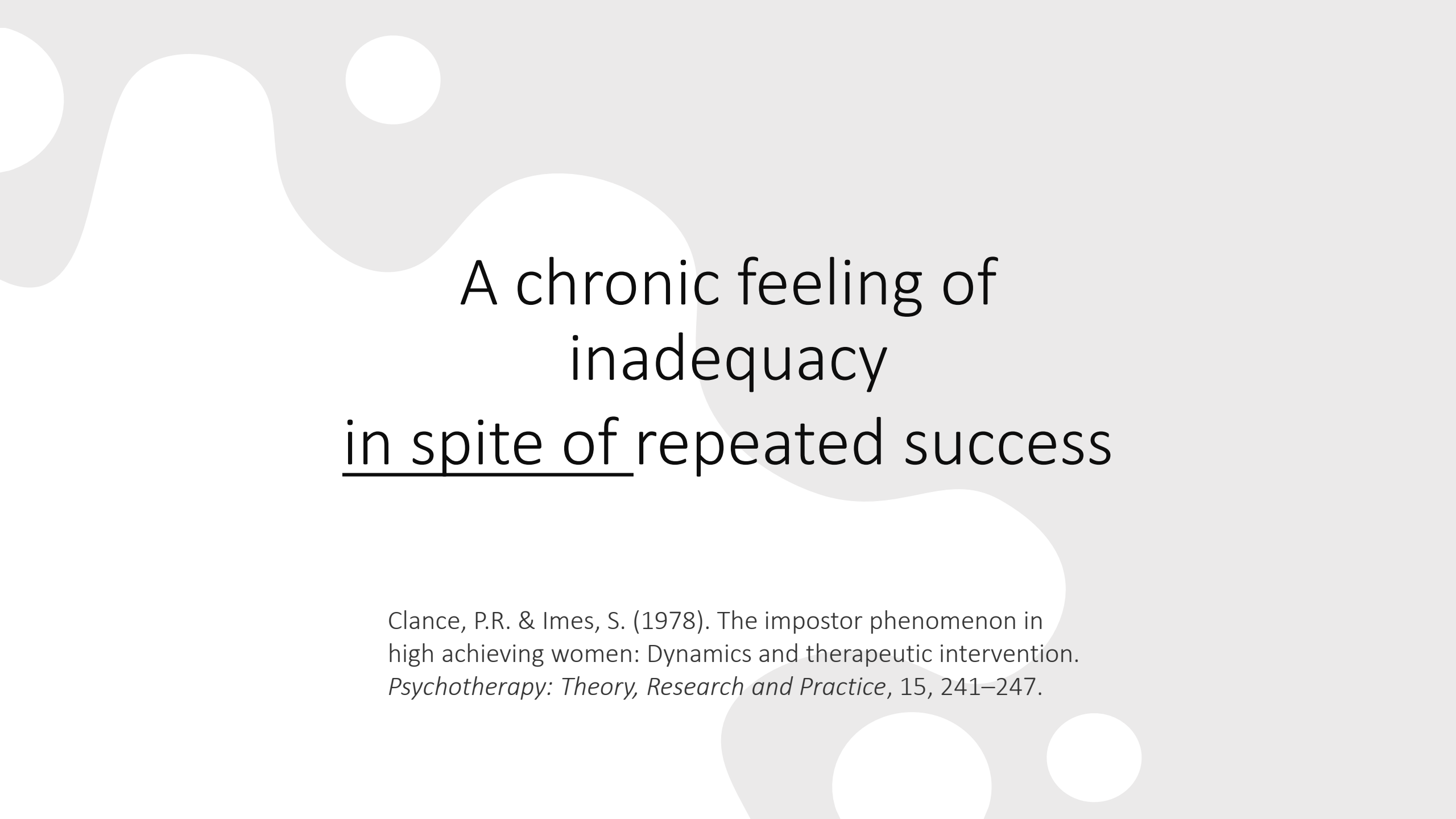- What small changes could improve things, keep people safer?

Chappell, E. (2020) *Where there's a will. Hope, grief and endurance in a cycle race across the continent*. London: Profile Books.

A chronic feeling of inadequacy
in spite of repeated success

Clance, P.R. & Imes, S. (1978). The impostor phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 15, 241–247.

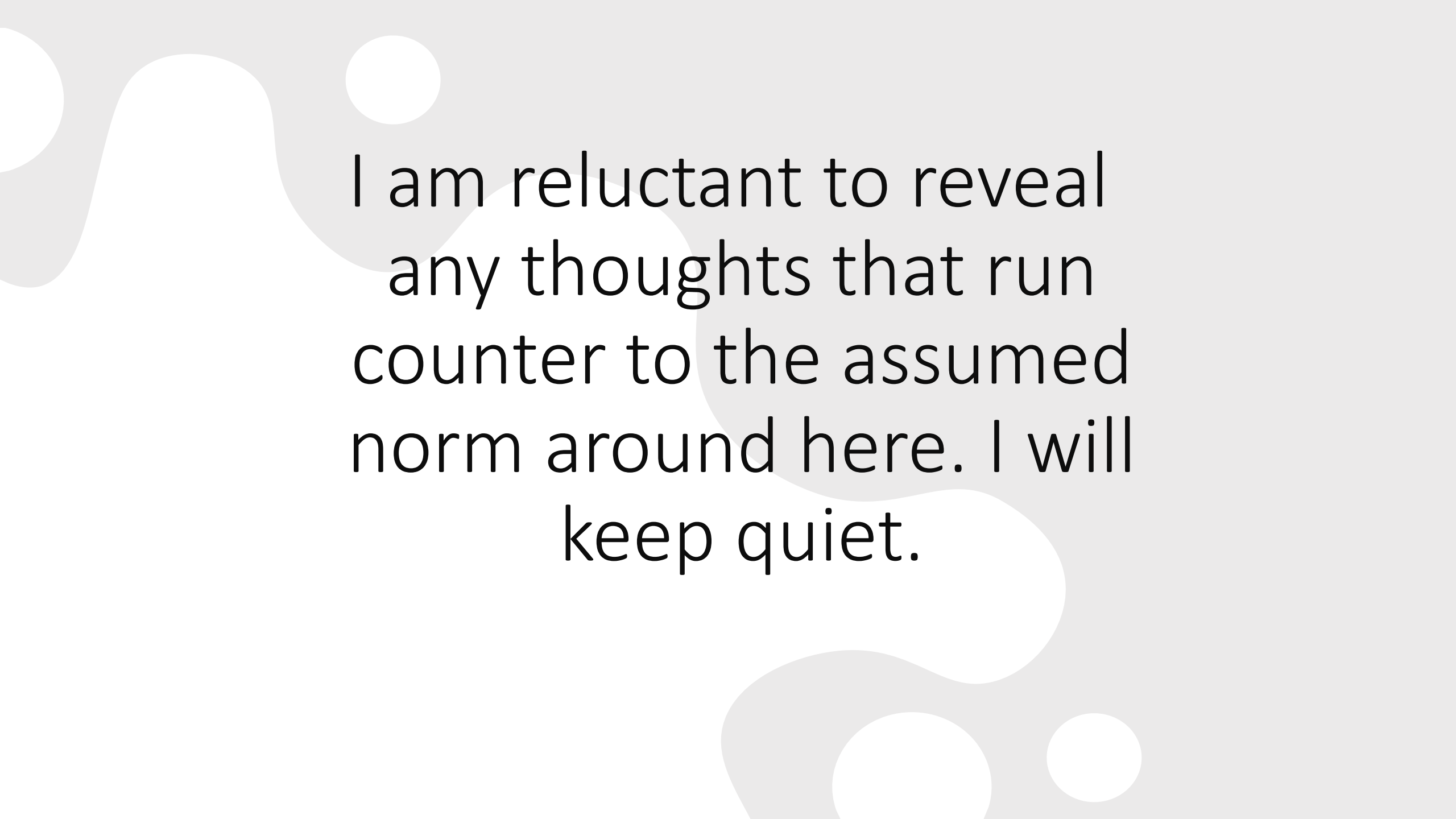# UNMASKING

The Coach's Guide to Impostor Syndrome

TARA HALLIDAY

Most of the time I'm telling myself to shut up because I worry that what I'm about to say is either already blindingly obvious or extremely stupid. (It REALLY IS as basic as not wanting to look a plonker.) What does the fear of looking a plonker mean for me? It means that I am left making a value judgement about whether or not to speak up

someone who is foolish or useless.

1. Do you secretly worry that others will find out that you're not as bright and capable as they think you are?

2. Do you sometimes shy away from challenges because of nagging self-doubt?

3. Do you tend to chalk your accomplishments up to being a "fluke," "no big deal" or the fact that people just "like" you?

4. Do you hate making a mistake, being less than fully prepared or not doing things perfectly?

5. Do you tend to feel crushed by even constructive criticism, seeing it as evidence of your "ineptness?"

6. When you do succeed, do you think, "Phew, I fooled 'em this time but I may not be so lucky next time."

7. Do you believe that other people (students, colleagues, competitors) are smarter and more capable than you are?

8. Do you live in fear of being found out, discovered, unmasked?

Dr. Valerie Young, 2008

https://impostorsyndrome.com/

I am reluctant to reveal any thoughts that run counter to the assumed norm around here. I will keep quiet.

'Impostor syndrome' is a pseudo-medical name for a class problem
Nathalie Olah

Let's stop using this shifty term. It just encourages people to blame themselves for deep structural unfairness

When we think about "impostor syndrome", there are several underlying biases we should address: the unquestioned deference towards the displays of confidence...not to mention the painting of confidence-verging-on-egoism as "normal" and "sane", while everyone else is painted as deficient.

Olah, N. (2019) 'Imposter syndrome? It's a matter of class, not health', *Guardian* (Opinion section), 17th October , p. 4.

A lack of respect for ignorance, doubt, stubbornness, denial, disagreement…

O'Brien, J. (1987). *Embracing ignorance, error and fallibility. Competencies for leadership of effective services.* Georgia USA: Response Systems Associates.

An aspect of culture – how we do our talking

How should someone like me, speak to whom, about what, when, with what tone, language and volume?

© Jo Compton

What can help

Talk about it – this is how I feel

Know about it – this is what we know

Know what triggers me

Record achievements – go appreciative - oh **** I'm not useless. Now what?

Perfection impossible – think 'good enough'

Say 'good job' – to self and others

Be sceptical about feeling quite so stupid

Self-doubt may be useful - complexity can take us beyond what we know

Pay attention to hours worked - a clue to 'more effort needed' trap

What can help

- Attention to who is not speaking
- Do this in the service of who and what is not present
- Attention to how one silences oneself and others
- Separate out facilitating from (my) outcomes
- Do not over reward compliance and agreement
- Balance instrumental and inquiry conversations
- Separate out complicated from complex
- Separate out the ideas from the person – it's the ideas stupid
- Good open questions