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# Leaders: Working at the Heart of the Team 2023

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Clever Endeavour Games

Carolina Mastretta  
Co-Founder & Studio Lead  
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Senior Producer  
Xbox Game Studios Publishing

Roger Collum  
Vice President, Total War  
Creative Assembly

#GDC23

# Agenda

- Intro
- Roger
- Erika
- Carolina
- Richard

Shout it out



# EMPATHETIC LEADERSHIP

# Hej hej

- I'm Roger
- Vice President of Total War
- 17 years of industry experience
- Epic, DICE, and Creative Assembly

# WHY BE EMPATHETIC?

- To understand your team better
- To connect with your team
- Communicate more effectively
- Builds trust
- Invites collaboration

HOW DO YOU LEAD WITH EMPATHY?

# LEADERSHIP IS A SKILL

- You can learn it
- Hone, active practice, don't be passive
- Treat it as a craft
- Find a mentor
- Be a mentor
- Get a coach



# BE AUTHENTIC

- No corporate speak, talk like a regular person
- Be yourself

# BE VULNERABLE

- Show anxiety when it's appropriate
- Endless confidence isn't reassuring
- You lose trust if your team thinks you don't understand

# BE ACCOUNTABLE

- Own your mistakes
- Humility
- No excuses
- Role Model
- Psychological Safety

# ASK FOR FEEDBACK

- Feedback is a gift
- Be open to tough feedback
- Model your response to the way you want others to respond to your feedback

# GIVE FEEDBACK

- Tough and fair feedback is also gift
- Don't sugar coat hard conversations, be honest
- Nothing more empathetic you can do than telling someone where their at

# WORK AT THE RIGHT ALTITUDE

- You can't be in the weeds if that's not your role
- Understand the altitude of the people you lead
- Empowerment – Connection to the vision
  - Empower in the right way
  - Promote autonomy = job satisfaction

# ASSUME GOOD INTENT

- Everyone's different
- Multiple sides to all story
- Fight your inclination to pattern match and judge

# PERCEPTION IS REALITY

- Schrödinger's cat
  - You will have situations in which you must assume two opposing things to be true at the same time
  - When dealing with conflict sometimes two opposing things need to be true in order to take care of people
- Judgement is required here



# ACKNOWLEDGE CULTURE

- Culture is slow to change
- Culture starts from the day of a company's founding
- Very old orgs today have pervasive parts of their culture decades old
- If it needs to change, be mindful this isn't an overnight endeavour
  - You need to create advocates and culture carriers
- Being a change agent is hard
- Be intentional with what you want your culture to be
  - Do not be wishy-washy

# GIVE THE TEAM SPACE

- Don't insist on going to the pub every Thursday with your team
- Give your team a place they can blow off steam without you
- Be cautious of too much space
  - Toxicity and uncertainty loves an information vacuum
- Boundaries – Don't fall for the 'family' trap. You're a team.

# TALENT IS NEVER MORE IMPORTANT THAN TOXICITY


- You have to demonstrate this to your team
- You have to have zero tolerance against damaging behaviour
- You have to coach folks on how to work well with others
- If that fails you have to make tough decisions for the greater good

# YOU'RE BIOLOGY

- Remember you're human
- You will make good decisions and bad decisions
- Good leadership is how you own those decisions and pivot when you have the correct information
- Be honest with your team about this

# BANANAS

- Hear your team
- Give your team a tool to make sure you hear

The background is a dark navy blue. On the left, there are two overlapping geometric shapes: a blue parallelogram and a light green parallelogram. Below these, a circular inset shows a detailed, high-contrast image of a circuit board. In the top right corner, there is a faint, grey, 3D-rendered pattern of interlocking cubes or a circuit trace.

# Leaders Working at the Heart of the Team (Publishing Edition)

Erika Mariko Olsen (they/she)  
オルセン・えりか・真里子  
Sr. Producer, Xbox Game Studios Publishing



# Agenda

In-House vs Publishing: Roles & Goals, Similarities & Differences

Leading & Inspiring Others Indirectly



# Brief Bio

Former Music Major

10 years in the games industry, involved with roughly 20 titles

Producer (in-house), Riot Games

Producer (publishing), Google Stadia, Humble Bundle, Xbox Game Studios Publishing





# In-House vs Publishing: TLDR

At a very high and general level you can think of them as:

## In-House

- The folks who build the game.

## Publishing

- The folks who finance and sell the game.



# In-House vs Publishing: Producer Role

## In-House Producer

- Leads team(s) to create the game using methods such as Agile, Scrum, Kanban, etc. and tools such as Jira, Shotgrid, Notion, etc.

## Publishing Producer

- Interfaces with In-House Producer + relevant game leads (e.g. Design Director).
- Interfaces with and manages vendors (e.g. QA, Localization, Porting, User Research).
- Reviews game milestones, provides feedback on documentation (e.g. GDD) and playable builds, approves/rejects milestones.



# In-House vs Publishing: Other Roles

Other roles that you may see at a Publisher

- Business Development
- Brand Manager
- Marketing Manager
- QA Manager
- Release Manager
- Localization Manager
- User Research
- Market Research
- Visual Design
- Finance
- Legal
- ... and more!



# In-House vs Publishing: Goals

For the most part, Goals are the same whether you're In-House or Publishing.

- Make a high quality game
- Ship the game on schedule
- Make (much) more money than you spent



# Working at the Heart of 2+ Companies





# Leading & Inspiring Others Indirectly

The Publishing Producer doesn't get to regularly interface with the game development team, but it is still in their best interest that that team be happy and motivated.

- Make a high quality game
- Ship the game on schedule
- Make (much) more money than you spent



# Leading & Inspiring Others Indirectly

- Make a high quality game
  - Equip the In-House Producer with positive feedback to share back with their team, especially after successful milestone reviews. Try to include specific call-outs.
  - When providing critiques, state the problem but don't prescribe a solution.
- Ship the game on schedule
- Make (much) more money than you spent



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  - Share best publishing practices before the milestone schedule is agreed upon.
  - Provide as much visibility as possible into dependencies to avoid surprises.
- Make (much) more money than you spent





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  - When providing critiques, state the problem but don't prescribe a solution.
- Ship the game on schedule
  - Share best publishing practices before the milestone schedule is agreed upon.
  - Provide as much visibility as possible into dependencies to avoid surprises.
- Make (much) more money than you spent
  - (Directly related to quality of game and not overspending time/budget.)



# Leading & Inspiring Others Indirectly

- Equip the In-House Producer with positive feedback to share back with their team, especially after successful milestone reviews. Try to include specific call-outs.
- When providing critiques, state the problem but don't prescribe a solution.
- Share best publishing practices before the milestone schedule is agreed upon.
- Provide as much visibility as possible into dependencies to avoid surprises.
- Establish a relationship of psychological safety with your partners.
- Continuously encourage a no-crunch culture.



Leadership is an Emotionally Intelligent Role



# Thank you!

Erika Mariko Olsen (they/she)

オルセン・えりか・真里子

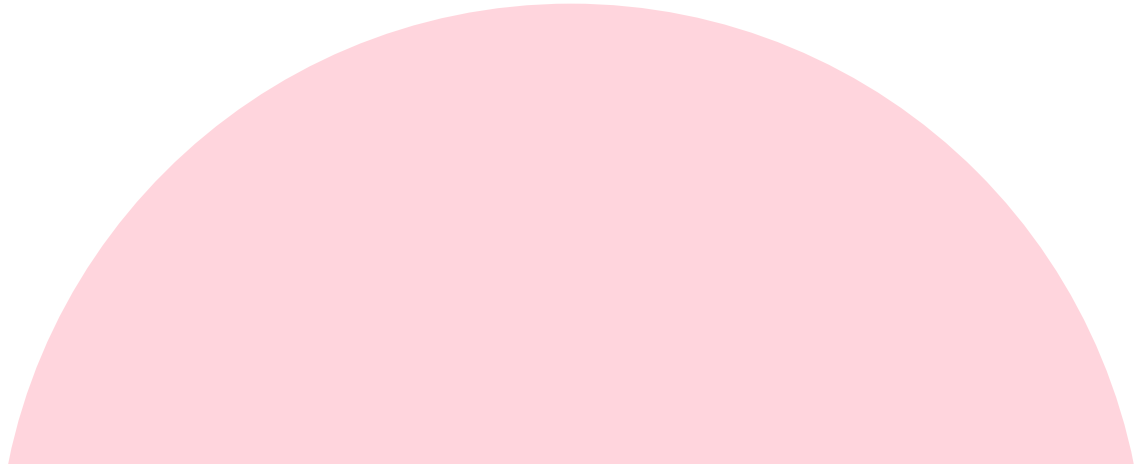
Sr. Producer, Xbox Game Studios Publishing

**LinkedIn:**

[www.linkedin.com/in/erikamolsen/](https://www.linkedin.com/in/erikamolsen/)

# **Building Trust**

**And why it matters**



# Hello!

- I'm Caro Mastretta
- Mexican living in Vancouver, BC.
- Previously Game Designer @ Relic
- Studio Lead at Original Fire Games.
- I'm passionate about building teams and helping people do their best work!



**Games are a miracle of human  
participation.**



**They cannot be made without:**

**TRUST**



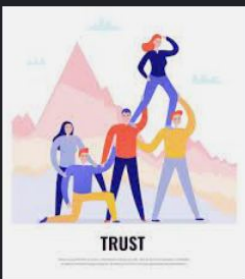


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How we **build** it

How we **sustain** it

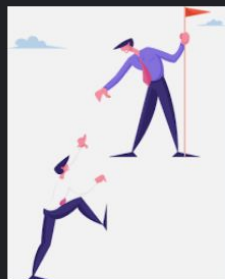
How we **repair** it



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freepik.com



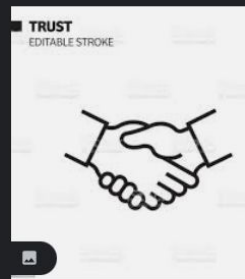
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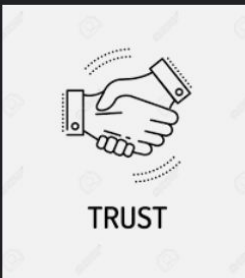
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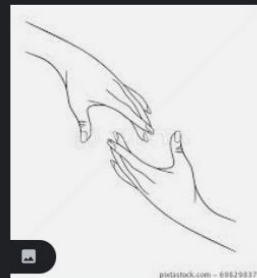
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Trust nobody? No thanks | New Scienti...  
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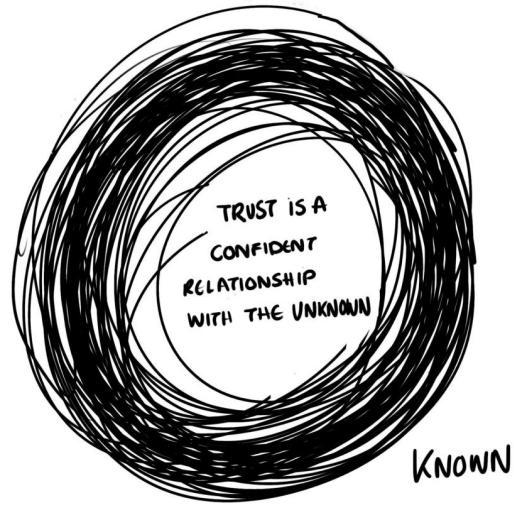


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istockphoto.com

# So what *is* Trust?

- The word suffers from definitional vagueness.
- But we know trust is essential to navigate risk, to cope with uncertainty.
  - All essentials in Game Dev!
- It is one of the central foundations of a healthy team.
- But if it's not something you can dictate, teach, assume, what does that mean to our teams?

# Building Trust



Rachel Botsman

# Building Trust

- Trust is an **emergent** part of culture in a team, an ebb and flow that shifts as teams and individual members tackle new challenges, work with new people and face changes, wins and failures.
- With principles & practices, it **can** be built, sustained and nourished!

Building trust is an organizational skill.



We can build it through  
conversations, by taking risks and embracing vulnerability.



# Three Principles

How we work





# Three Principles

- 1 – Conversation
  - Hold space for the right conversations – these are the birthplace of change & trust.
  - What kinds of conversations are you having? Some ideas:
    - How do we fail?
    - How do we make decisions?
    - Why does X keep happening?
    - How are we discovering the best problems to solve?

# Three Principles

- 2 - Accountability
  - Accountability happens when responsibility is met with **trust**, and errors are met with **safety**.
  - Blame happens when errors are met with punishment or shame. .
  - Developing accountability skills takes courage and the willingness to learn new ways of thinking and acting.
    - Think about how you can model **safe** accountability in your teams.

# Three Principles

- 3 - Autonomy & Risk
  - There is a lot of risk in game dev
    - i.e A hypothesis for a feature, a marketing strategy
  - Motivation to take risks can come from agreements on “safe to try” actions.
  - Everyone faces a dilemma:
    - I need to know that I can trust you with the work
    - I need to know that I can take risks and feel safe in my work
  - Are your actions displaying trust or distrust?
    - Micro-management? Resistance to delegate?
    - Delegation with reviews?

Developing a culture of accountability, supported by healthy conversations, builds the team's confidence to take risks, and an underlying foundation of trust.



# Three Practices

How we understand and evolve



# Practices

- 1 - Being Known & Understood
  - Regular team questionnaires are fantastic tools for this
    - Questions about you (team member)
      - i.e How does someone earn a gold star with you?
      - What's something people might misunderstand about you?
    - Questions about how you relate to others.
      - How do you like to receive feedback?
      - What's the best way to communicate with you?

# Practices

- 2 - Confidence Checks
  - Use a tool to create space for talking safely about doubts and fears. Rate confidence based on:
    - Are you clear and aligned with our priorities?
    - Do you feel the work you are doing is relevant and impactful towards our goals?
    - Are you clear on what are the most important problems to solve or features to build?

# Practices

- 3 - Learn & Change
  - There are plenty of ways to do retrospectives, regardless, usually the outcomes are:
    - Learnings
    - Actions
  - Retrospectives with thorough follow up is what emboldens the team's trust in the retrospective.
    - Tracking change
    - Seeing that my opinion mattered



# Invitations



Failures, conflict, disagreements, missed deadlines, failed  
features:

These are all invitations towards improvement.



Our role as leaders is to learn to see the invitations behind it all  
and to hold space for conversations on how to improve.



The more the team is welcome and accountable for influencing how they work, this grows their ability to see themselves as beholders of agency.



**Thank you!**

# Resources

- Email me to get our Trust Toolkit with Principles & Practices:
  - [caro@originalfiregames.com](mailto:caro@originalfiregames.com)

## References / Reads:

- [How to make your organization as fast and agile as a Formula 1 team](#)
- [Brave New Work](#)
- [Rachel Botsman - Trust Researcher](#)
- [Difficult Conversations](#)
- [Performance at the Limit: Business Lessons from Formula 1® Motor Racing](#)
- [Moving From Blame to Accountability](#)







- **Running into a huge roadblock and direction shift in a project**

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- **Employees not bringing up company-wide issues until it's too late**

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- **Not letting go of an employee early enough or staying with partners for too long**

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- **Hiring people who don't fit your culture**

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- Hiring people who don't fit your culture





**ARMORED**  
leadership



**DARING**  
leadership

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**Brené Brown**

PhD, MSW

*dare*  
*to*  
*lead*

BRAVE WORK.  
TOUGH CONVERSATIONS.  
WHOLE HEARTS.

DARING GREATLY AND RISING STRONG AT WORK

**ARMORED**

**VS.**

**DARING**

**ARMORED**

**VS.**

**DARING**

**SHAME**

**FEAR**

**ARMOR**

**ARMORED**

**VS.**

**DARING**



**VULNERABILITY**

**HUMAN**

**EMOTION**

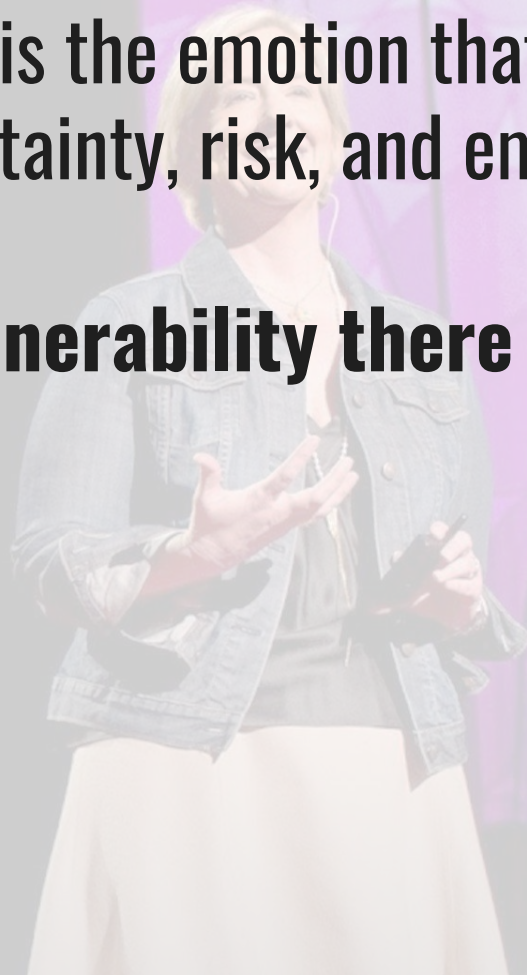


**“Vulnerability is the emotion that we experience during times of uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.**



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**...Without vulnerability there is no creativity or innovation.**







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**...Without vulnerability there is no creativity or innovation.**

**Why? Because there is nothing more uncertain than the creative process.”**

A woman with short blonde hair, wearing a denim jacket over a black top and a white skirt, is standing on a stage. She is gesturing with her hands while speaking. The background is a vibrant purple with abstract, geometric shapes. The text is overlaid on the image in a light gray, sans-serif font.

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**GAMEDEV**



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**GAMEDEV → UNCERTAINTY**





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**GAMEDEV → UNCERTAINTY → VULNERABILITY**

**ARMORED**

**VS.**

**DARING**

- #1 -

**Taking too long to part  
ways with employees or  
partners**

# ARMORED

#1 - Taking too long to part ways with employees or partners

**FEAR**

# ARMORED

➤ Avoiding conflict

#1 - Taking too long to part ways with employees or partners

# ARMORED

- Avoiding conflict
- Holding on to feedback

#1 - Taking too long to part ways with employees or partners

**SHAME**



# ARMORED

- Avoiding conflict
- Holding on to feedback
- Culture of passiveness

#1 - Taking too long to part ways with employees or partners



**“More than half [of the leaders in the data] talked about a cultural norm of “nice and polite” that’s leveraged as an excuse to *avoid tough conversations.*”**

# ARMORED

- Avoiding conflict
- Holding on to feedback
- Culture of passiveness

#1 - Taking too long to part ways with employees or partners

# ARMORED

- Avoiding conflict
- Holding on to feedback
- Culture of passiveness
- Blaming ourselves for things that are out of our control

#1 - Taking too long to part ways with employees or partners

# ARMORED

- Avoiding conflict
- Holding on to feedback
- Culture of passiveness
- Blaming ourselves for things that are out of our control
- Allowing problematic behaviour to continue

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# DARING

- Giving regular, concise feedback

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# DARING

- Giving regular, concise feedback
- Being assertive

#1 - Taking too long to part ways with employees or partners



**VULNERABLE**

**VULNERABLE**

uncertain outcomes

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# DARING

- Giving regular, concise feedback
- Being assertive
- Expressing what we need

#1 - Taking too long to part ways with employees or partners

# ARMORED

- Avoiding conflict
- Holding on to feedback
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# DARING

- Giving regular, concise feedback
- Being assertive
- Expressing what we need
- Asking for time-specific, measurable change

#1 - Taking too long to part ways with employees or partners

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- Blaming ourselves for things that are out of our control
- Allowing problematic behaviour to continue

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- Giving regular, concise feedback
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- Asking for time-specific, measurable change
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- Asking them what they need to feel supported

**#1 - Taking too long to part ways with employees or partners**

**- #2 -**

**Running into a huge  
roadblock and direction  
shift in a project**



# ARMORED

➤ Pretending

#2 - Running into a huge roadblock and direction shift in a project

# ARMORED

- Pretending
- Culture of toxic positivity

#2 - Running into a huge roadblock and direction shift in a project

# ARMORED

- Pretending
- Culture of toxic positivity
- Keeping an appearance of control

#2 - Running into a huge roadblock and direction shift in a project

# ARMORED

- Pretending
- Culture of toxic positivity
- Keeping an appearance of control
- Doing it yourself

#2 - Running into a huge roadblock and direction shift in a project

# FEAR

**FEAR**

**SHAME**

# FEAR

# SHAME

unrealistic expectations

**SHAME**



**FEAR**

**SHAME**

**ARMOR**

# ARMORED

- Pretending
- Culture of toxic positivity
- Keeping an appearance of control
- Leading with compliance and control
- Doing it yourself

# DARING

#2 - Running into a huge roadblock and direction shift in a project

# ARMORED

- Pretending
- Culture of toxic positivity
- Keeping an appearance of control
- Leading with compliance and control
- Doing it yourself

# DARING

- Acknowledging, naming, and normalizing collective fear and uncertainty

#2 - Running into a huge roadblock and direction shift in a project

**VULNERABLE**  
opening up

# ARMORED

- Pretending
- Culture of toxic positivity
- Keeping an appearance of control
- Leading with compliance and control
- Doing it yourself

# DARING

- Acknowledging, naming, and normalizing collective fear and uncertainty
- Expressing your fears and concerns

#2 - Running into a huge roadblock and direction shift in a project

**VULNERABLE**

**HUMAN EMOTION**

# ARMORED

- Pretending
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- Doing it yourself

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# DARING

- Acknowledging, naming, and normalizing collective fear and uncertainty
- Expressing your fears and concerns
- Encouraging the team to rally around the challenges

#2 - Running into a huge roadblock and direction shift in a project

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- Acknowledging, naming, and normalizing collective fear and uncertainty
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- Encouraging the team to rally around the challenges
- Leading from a place of shared commitment

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**#2 - Running into a huge roadblock and direction shift in a project**

- #3 -

Receiving feedback too  
late (or not at all)

# FEAR

**FEAR**

**SHAME**

# ARMORED

#3 - Receiving feedback too late (or not at all)

# ARMORED

➞ Being a *knower* and being *right*

#3 - Receiving feedback too late (or not at all)



# ARMORED

- Being a *knower* and being *right*
- Designing in a black box

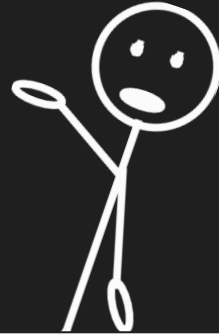
#3 - Receiving feedback too late (or not at all)

# ~~ARMORED~~

- ~~Being a *knower* and being *right*~~
- ~~Designing in a black box~~



# ARMORED



#3 - Receiving feedback too late (or not at all)

# ARMORED

- Being a *knower* and being *right*
- Designing in a black box

#3 - Receiving feedback too late (or not at all)

# ARMORED

- Being a *knower* and being *right*
- Designing in a black box
- Putting role power before good ideas

#3 - Receiving feedback too late (or not at all)

**SHAME**

# ARMORED

- Being a *knower* and being *right*
- Designing in a black box
- Putting role power before good ideas
- Resisting existing feedback that hits deep

#3 - Receiving feedback too late (or not at all)

# ARMORED

- Being a *knower* and being *right*
- Designing in a black box
- Putting role power before good ideas
- Resisting existing feedback that hits deep

# DARING

#3 - Receiving feedback too late (or not at all)



# ARMORED

- Being a *knower* and being *right*
- Designing in a black box
- Putting role power before good ideas
- Resisting existing feedback that hits deep

# DARING

- Being a *learner* and *getting it right*

#3 - Receiving feedback too late (or not at all)

# ARMORED

- Being a *knower* and being *right*
- Designing in a black box
- Putting role power before good ideas
- Resisting existing feedback that hits deep

# DARING

- Being a *learner* and *getting it right*
- Scheduling regular feedback sessions and planning focused time to work with it

#3 - Receiving feedback too late (or not at all)

**VULNERABILITY**

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- Seeking management-specific feedback

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**TAKEAWAYS**



# ~~TAKEAWAYS~~ HOMEWORK

**What is your #1 challenge at work right now?**

What is your #1 challenge at work right now?

Write out what an ARMORED and a DARING approach would look like for this challenge.

# ARMORED

1. driving perfectionism and fostering fear of failure
2. working from scarcity and squandering opportunities for joy and recognition
3. numbing
4. propagating the false dichotomy of the victim or viking, crush or be crushed
5. being a knower and being right
6. hiding behind cynicism
7. using criticism as self-protection
8. using power \*over\*
9. hustling for our worth
10. leading for compliance and control
11. weaponizing fear and uncertainty
12. rewarding exhaustion as a status symbol and attaching productivity to self-worth
13. tolerating discrimination, echo chambers, and a “fitting in” culture
14. collecting gold stars
15. zigzagging and avoiding
16. leading from hurt

# DARING

1. modeling and encouraging healthy striving, empathy, and self-compassion
2. practicing gratitude and celebrating milestones and victories
3. setting boundaries and finding real comfort
4. practicing integration—strong back, soft front, wild heart
5. being a learner and getting it right
6. modeling clarity, kindness, and hope
7. making contributions and taking risks
8. using power *with*, power *to*, and power *within*
9. knowing our value
10. cultivating commitment and shared purpose
11. acknowledging, naming, and normalizing collective fear and uncertainty
12. modeling and supporting rest, play, and recovery
13. cultivating a culture of belonging, inclusivity, and diverse perspectives
14. giving gold stars
15. straight talking and straight action
16. leading from heart

- Running into a huge roadblock and direction shift in a project
- Employees not bringing up company-wide issues until it's too late
- Not letting go of an employee early enough or staying with partners for too long
- Receiving feedback too late (or not at all)
- Employees feeling uncertain about the project and their futures
- Hiring people who don't fit your culture

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**TAKE AWAY**



**TAKE AWAY**

**the real one**

**ARMORED**  
leadership



**DARING**  
leadership

# ARMORED leadership



# DARING leadership

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March 20-24, 2023  
San Francisco, CA

# Bonus Round

Grant Shonkwiler  
Leadership Coach

#GDC23





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# D.O.N.'T. F.U.C.K. U.P.

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Leadership Coach

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# Leadership Don't's

D: Doubt yourself

O: Offload mistakes

N: Nag the team

T: Talk too much

# Leadership Don't's

F: Forget why you are here

U: Use your job title

C: Coddle your team

K: Kill collaboration



# Leadership Don't's

U: Use excuses

P: Push your team to the breaking point

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# DO R.E.L.A.X.

Grant Shonkwiler  
Leadership Coach

#GDC23



# Leadership Do's

R: Respect your team

E: Educate and explain

L: Listen, Listen, LISTEN

A: Ask Questions

X: Xpect Xcellence (Trust but verify)

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# QA

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