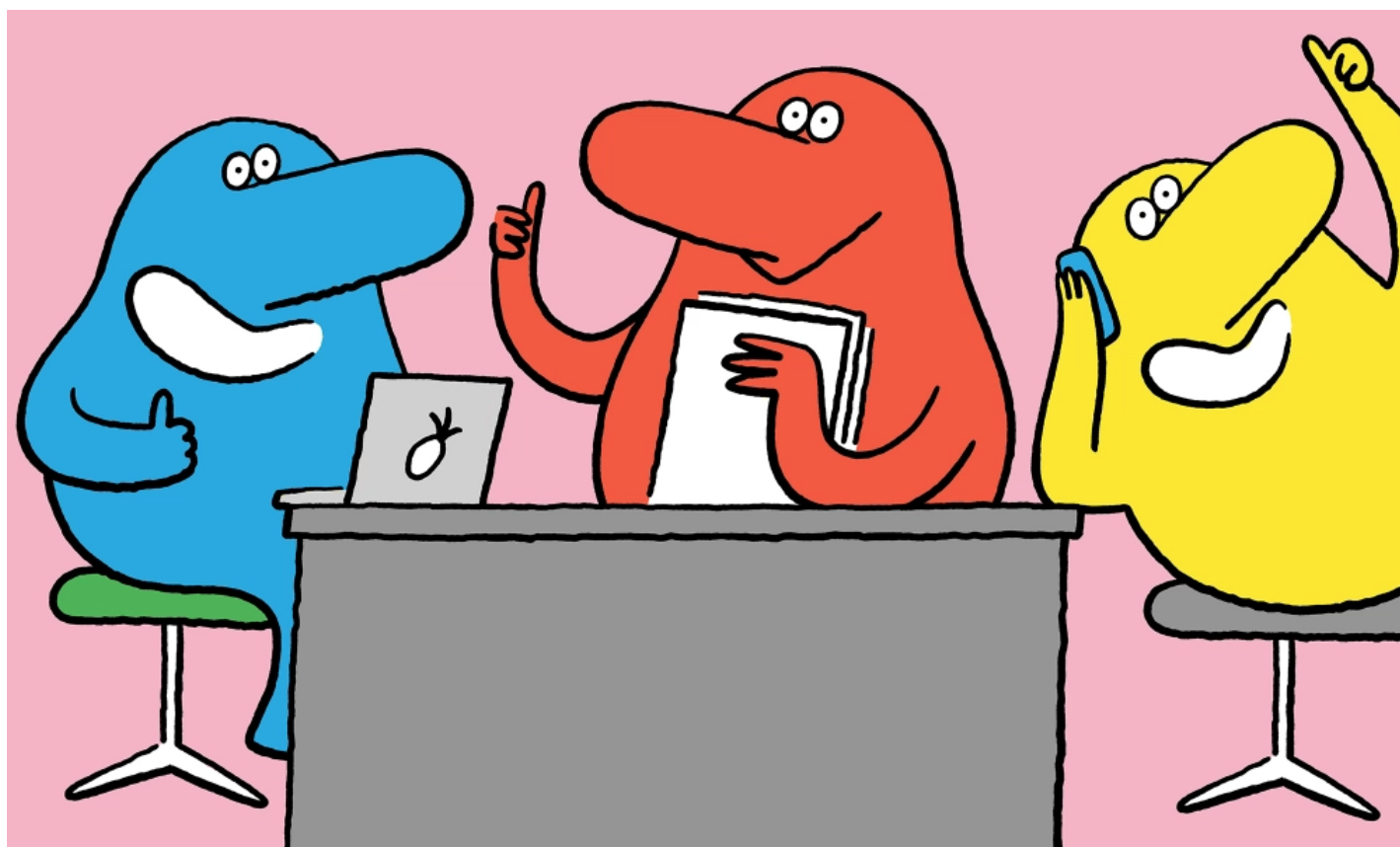




## BUSINESS

# 3 ways to create a work culture that brings out the best in people

Jul 6, 2021 / Chris White



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In partnership with **ÜKG**

*This post is part of TED's "How to Be a Better Human" series, each of which contains a piece of helpful advice from people in the TED community; browse through [all the posts here](#).*

**Do you remember that day in November 2018 when 20,000 employees walked out of Google to protest over the handling of sexual harassment claims at the company?**

The protest was dramatic, headline-grabbing and done as a clear signal that employees would no longer check their identities and values at the workplace door. It was also the exception rather than the rule. While certainly brave, Google employees felt safe enough to organize without fear of reprisals. Even if they did lose their jobs, they'd still be highly employable somewhere else. Not everyone has that luxury, and not everyone feels OK about speaking up at work.

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**When we feel psychologically unsafe or unvalued, we protest quietly and often unconsciously.**

Yet walkouts happen every day in the workplace; they're just not usually done with our feet. Instead, they're checkouts — invisible walkouts that happen with our hearts and our hands and our voices.

**But let's be honest: All of us have checked out at some point in our careers, haven't we?**

When we feel psychologically unsafe or unvalued, we protest quietly and often unconsciously. Maybe we stop trying as hard at work. Or maybe we act in ways that subtly undermine leadership or act against our organization's objectives just a little bit. We become disengaged or actively disengaged — at a cost of hundreds of billions of dollars a year to the global economy.

**So if you're a leader and want to avoid walkouts or checkouts before they become issues at your organization, there are three things you can do.**

## **1. Unblock communication**

**Walkouts and checkouts happen when we feel we're not being heard or not being respected or considered.** Just about all of us have had our ideas shot down or ignored in the workplace. When it happens, we tend to experience this as an identity threat. Some of us respond by closing down and shutting off when we feel that we don't belong or that we're unimportant. And we stop caring as much about our work and caring as much about the people around us.

When I was **a new manager**, I remember a time that I encountered this. I asked a colleague of mine with decades of work experience for a recommendation on a problem she brought to me. While she searched for an answer, we stood there in silence. After a long pause, she looked up and said to me, “I’ve never been asked what I think at work before now.” Her attitude was tragic, and it’s all too common.

**To avoid this pitfall, we need to continually invite people to speak up at work and make these invitations a routine part of how we engage with each other in the workplace.** This lays the important groundwork that’s needed for those times when people want to speak up on issues that might be hard for management to hear.

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**In that fragile moment when people have the courage to challenge us, leaders need to embrace them for it and be responsive.**

## **2. Be responsive**

**Backed into a corner by the scale and the intensity of the protests in 2018, Google CEO Sundar Pichai had a choice.** He could respond in a way that would close the door to people who were acting in line with their values, or he could choose to open it wider.

His public response was not defensive. He sent an email out to the whole company, saying he understood the anger and disappointment that many of them felt because he felt it too. And saying that he was fully committed to making progress on an issue that had persisted for far too long in society and at Google too. Pichai’s public response was admirable, but whether the protests were effective is still an open question.

**But invisible checkouts are much harder to notice and address than a 20,000 person walkout.** Instead, leaders must proactively work to unblock the organization. They need to ask questions, invite input and foster creative conflict. And in that fragile moment when people have the courage to challenge us, we need to embrace them for it and be responsive. Because it’s not enough just to hear people out — words without action breed cynicism and leave seeds for future walkouts and checkouts.

Now when leaders and employees are on the same page, action is a natural next step.

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Can we stay unified even in dissent? Or will we allow our relationships to become inauthentic and our identities to become diluted?

But here's the thing: We're not always going to agree. Sometimes employee activists will raise issues that leaders don't agree with, and in that fragile moment we will determine what kind of culture we will have. Will we engage in dialogue and debate? Can we stay unified even in dissent? Or will we choose to skate over our differences, allowing our relationships to become inauthentic and our identities to become diluted? Which will it be?

**At a minimum, we can have a dialogue.** We can try to resolve our differences and find some common ground that even if it's not ideal for any one party may be acceptable for all. At times, though, that's just too hard; common ground simply can't be found. In that difficult place, we have three choices.

First, if we feel we can't live with the resolution, we can choose to leave the company and find employers whose values are more closely aligned with our own. Second, we can choose to stay with the company. We can compartmentalize, keep doing a good job and look for a time to address the issue again in the future. Third, we can consider a tactic from Amazon's Jeff Bezos. He'll say, "Let's disagree and address the issue head on." He'll ask his team, "Look, I know we don't agree here but will you gamble with me on it? Can we disagree and still commit?" Now you can't do this every time. But if the reservoir of trust is deep enough, you can respectfully acknowledge your differences on important issues where you can't find consensus. You aren't walking out or checking out. You can continue to move forward on the work and agree to keep working on the issue as you go.

**Regardless of which choice you make, any of them are better than the alternative of checking out, which is a surefire path to organizational demise and professional misery.**

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When everyone can bring the entirety of their life experiences, we have so much more to offer each other.

### 3. Aim higher

**Doesn't it seem like we're setting a low bar if we're just trying to avoid checkouts and walkouts?** Shouldn't we strive for more? Shouldn't we aspire to invite people to bring **their whole selves** to work?

When everyone can bring the entirety of their life experiences, we have so much more to offer each other. We are more than the sum of our resumes.

Joan Bohan is a finance director at Disney Europe. She's also a mother, and her son Roman has dyslexia. Did you know that 1 in 10 people live with dyslexia? That's a huge population to serve for a company like Disney. So when Disney announced an internal contest for new and impactful business ideas, Joan applied. She'd heard about modifications that could make it easier for dyslexics to read — changes like different and larger fonts; wider spaces between letters; ruling between lines. Her idea was put into practice. And because Disney invited Joan to bring her whole self to work and all of her unique strengths, values, passions and experiences — not just her finance resume — they can now better serve millions of people with dyslexia.

**If this — unblocking communication, becoming responsive, aiming higher — all sounds good to you as a leader, where should you begin?**

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**Ari Weinzweig, CEO of Zingerman's Deli, likes to say that success doesn't mean you have no problems — it just means you have better problems.**

Here's a quick way for you to find out.

**On Monday morning, I'd like you to go to work, talk to 10 different people in your organization — in person or online — and ask them this question: “What don't we talk about around here that we really should be talking about?”**

You'll probably experience one of those awkward silences, and that's OK. They'll probably come to you later with an answer. But if no one has any answers, then your organization is

probably blocked. Still, by asking this question, you have signaled an openness to keep going and keep asking questions.

**Ari Weinzweig, CEO of Zingerman's Deli, likes to say that success doesn't mean you have no problems — it just means you have better problems.** My closing wish for you is that you earn your organization some better problems by unblocking communication, becoming responsive, and aiming higher.

As more and more people open up and start sharing more of themselves, their ideas and their unique offerings, over time you will have a new better problem — harnessing all of their energy and creativity.

*This post was adapted from **Chris White's TEDxAtlanta** Talk. You can **watch it here**.*

*And to get another take on organizations and how they can build (and rebuild) cultures of trust, watch Frances Frei's TED Talk now:*

Frances Frei  
How to build (and rebuild) trust

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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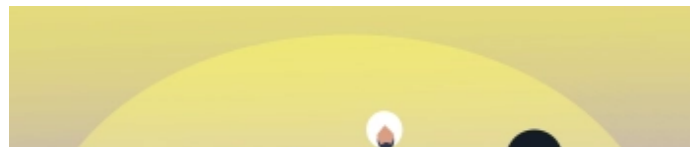
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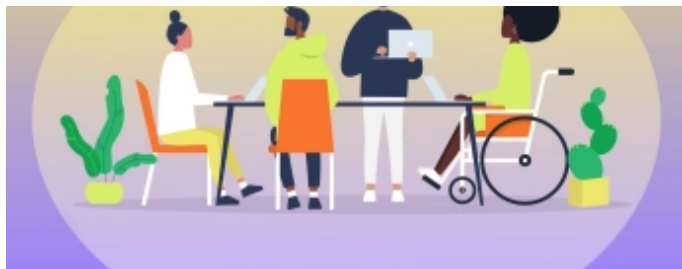
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