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# Creating a Culture that Thrives

## Fostering Respect, Trust, and Psychological Safety in the Workplace

By Lesley Page,  
Sheila Boysen,  
and Terry Arya

Recent social movements such as #MeToo or #TimesUp reflect the need for organizations to pay close attention to the culture created among leadership and employees. An organization's culture, reflected in its values, mission, and goals, can create an environment in which employees are not comfortable expressing their views or opinions. When this happens, there is a risk that lapses in appropriate conduct and communication occur. The current case study used survey research to explore these topics more deeply, considering both the spoken and unspoken norms of organizational life around communication, trust, respect, and psychological safety in the workplace. The study indicates that not only do employees feel culture can be influenced by both leaders and employees, but that clear demonstrations of purpose and value are of equal importance, as is accountability, accessibility, and availability of leadership.

Organizational culture is a powerful force faced by leaders, followers, and teams. Schein (2017) defines culture as the values, norms, and rules of behavior that govern organizational life. There are two pertinent aspects of culture: (1) content (values that drive the organization's mission and purpose) and (2) structure (the landscape as to how culture emerges or manifests itself). These forces of culture are so prevailing they influence patterns of beliefs, values, assumptions, and behavioral norms. In other words, organizational culture represents the expectations and rules by which an organization functions (Muscalu, 2014).

Organizational culture is always present but can be highlighted as new employees join an organization. As a newcomer, the powerful pull of culture is prominent (Nahavandi, 2015). Culture drives the formal and informal ways that work is done (individual versus team-based), how communication is conveyed (e.g., face to face versus email) and methods to share power (flat versus hierarchical power distribution). At times, the expectations and norms associated with these aspects of organizational life are observable and overtly communicated as part of the onboarding process. In contrast, some aspects of organizational culture only can be found in the unspoken agreement between employees about “how things are done around here.” Whether formal or informal, the reach of organizational culture can be a very powerful force (Muscalu, 2014).

According to Neagu and Nicula (2012), three fundamental components of culture include:

- » **Basic postulates** which refer to the elements that guide employees in terms of how they perceive, think, and feel.
- » **Values and norms** which influence problem-solving and decision-making in a way that reflect the meaning and purpose of the organization as well as the vision of its leaders.
- » **Cultural products** which include the observed artifacts of the organization (e.g., posted mission statement or promise to serve customers) or communications (e.g., newsletters, company memos, etc.).

## The Leader's Role in Organizational Culture

It is difficult to untangle the connection between leadership and culture as the two directly influence each other. Leaders emerge in organizations, groups, or teams in order to foster a vision, share values, and reach goals (Nahavandi, 2015). Ultimately, the organizational culture reflects the values and norms established by the leader and teaches new employees to think in a similar manner. This is a very powerful connection and can directly influence organizational performance (Neagu & Nicula, 2012; Nahavandi, 2015; Warrick, 2017).

Specifically, leaders can directly influence the way work is conducted and norms related to power distribution, engagement, and workplace respect. This influences the organizational culture which emerges; that which is conveyed to employees through hiring, onboarding, and training practices. The interconnectivity between culture and leadership places pressure on leaders to create and cultivate a culture which supports their organizational values. According to Pater (2015), there are three key factors needed to create this type of stellar culture: inspiring, involving, and internalizing. Together these three "I"s implicate the leader's ability to create an environment which inspires the best in others, shares power, and is inclusive, and allows each employee to see themselves in the culture (i.e. asking the question, *How does my role contribute to the organization's mission?*).

Hurst and Hurst (2016) discuss leadership connectivity as a driving indicator of organizational culture and its ability to change. Leadership connectivity is focused on relationship-oriented behaviors, those that foster the leader-follower bond. This bond creates a strong sense of inspiration and willingness to listen to each other, involve and analyze different points of view, and share in a group vision. Leadership connectivity results in (1) an open mind to try new ideas and approaches, (2) stronger persistence, and (3) a willingness to perform key activities.

As organizational demands become more complex, the culture of the company can be lost or miscommunicated along the way. Leaders can help ensure the culture of the organization remains intact, across sub- and micro-cultures, to create a sense of purpose, vision and trust (Schein, 2017). Norms and values provide employees with a sense of safety on the job, providing focus and clarity as to behavioral expectations, decision making and problem resolution. Culture can drive effectiveness by ensuring there are clear standards for acceptable performance and interpersonal dynamics. Costanza, Blacksmith, Coats, Severt, and DeCosta (2015) describe organizational culture as a resource for companies to adapt to their changing environments. Organizational survival is particularly important as current events related to organizational trust, psychological safety, and employee well-being indicate that many organizations struggle to create a culture that fosters employee engagement and respect.

### Steps for Leaders to Enhance Culture

#### *Organizational Readiness*

Changing an organizational culture involves individual and organizational commitment. Individual efforts will only go so far if the organization is not also ready to adapt its work culture. An organization's leadership team should reflect on their mindset to determine if the organization is ready to enhance work culture. Organizational readiness factors include the need for the executive team to enable and participate in cultural change and the development of organizational leadership, understanding that work will emerge as change efforts continue, requiring the ability to work across boundaries such as functions, alliances, agencies, and suppliers (McGuire & Palus, 2008).

To change organizational culture, all people, systems, and practices need to be engaged in the transformation process. A critical first step involves senior leaders acknowledging their role within the culture; fully engaged in advancing the leadership culture and leading by example (McGuire & Palus, 2008). As senior

management's support is pivotal to work culture change, it is important to further assess the traits that top executives need to spearhead the initiative.

#### *Leader Readiness*

In addition to organizations being ready to enhance work culture and create psychological safety in the workplace, the leaders spearheading the change must have the characteristics needed for enhancing work culture. According to Gillam and Siriwardena (2013), change leaders must be effective at management tasks such as planning, briefing, controlling, evaluating, motivating, organizing, communicating, and leading by example. In addition, specific leadership competencies needed for enhancing work culture include intelligence, action-orientation, self-assurance, integrity, high energy, goal orientation, and good communication skills (Gillam & Siriwardena, 2013).

The change leader must be reflective, review the situation periodically, reassess, and openly communicate. According to Gillam and Siriwardena (2013), leaders must first be willing to lead, manage, and change themselves before they can lead and manage work culture change. Fortunately, leadership skills can be learned and the related competencies developed over the course of an individual's career. In addition to embodying overall characteristics of successful change leaders, leaders must also draw upon their own unique strengths to successfully advance a work culture that thrives.

The emergence of recent social movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp reflect the extent to which issues around creating a positive organizational culture exist. There is a breakdown of the trust and respect that has been described as necessary for organizations to thrive. This enhances the need for cooperative leadership styles which manage conflict associated with culture change in positive and productive ways. There are many examples in the media of organizations (and the leaders within them) that have lost their way when it comes to creating a culture that fosters employee engagement, respect, and

trust. As a result, many organizations are revisiting the values and mission driving the organization and its culture.

### *Psychological Safety*

As previously discussed, culture resides in both the spoken and unspoken norms of organizational life. Workplace bullying, sexual harassment, and an overall distrust among colleagues are some of the factors compromising the psychological safety that leaders aim to create at work. Hellebrand (2018) discusses the need for “no fear” when it comes to stopping the emergence of negative cultures. Violence and workplace bullying can be mitigated through a specific code of conduct, clear expectations, and holding leaders accountable. Ensuring that organizational culture supports employee performance and engagement is no small task.

Research shows that leader behavior can directly enhance perceptions of psychological safety at work (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Edmondson (2004) found that leaders who show accessibility, openness, and availability enhance the feeling of psychological safety among their subordinates. There are several different ways that leaders can create an environment of psychological safety where positive follower behaviors, such as voicing new ideas and openness to taking strategic risks, are encouraged. One of the most important strategies for leaders to embody is to encourage employees to voice their ideas. Leaders must encourage employees to speak up often while communicating that this behavior is appreciated, respected, and not met with negative consequences. When a leader displays openness to hearing employees’ ideas and concerns while actively listening to new ideas that are brought forth, employees will feel comfortable, and in return, be more open and willing to share creative ideas to meet challenges. When leaders make their accessibility to employees clear in established policies, they communicate that it is both safe and expected for workers to approach them openly with thoughts and ideas.

Edmondson’s (2004) theory about leadership characteristics of accessibility,

availability and openness, aligns with other studies that connect the presence of increased trust and psychological safety to leadership behaviors related to genuine caring and concern about the employee (Burke, Sims, Lazzara, & Salas, 2007; Carmeli & Gittell, 2009; Puccinelli & Tickle-Degnen, 2005). Additionally, Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) found that when employees felt that their managers encouraged them to give input and share their ideas, they felt a sense of psychological safety. Employees appreciated their opinion and voice being heard and felt comfortable to express themselves. When that trust is lacking, employees may feel that they are being monitored and judged, which will hold them back from sharing their opinions and ideas (Edmondson, 2004).

Other researchers have expressed similar views. May, Gilson, and Harter (2004) state that trusting relationships can be characterized by the expression of care and concern for others (McAllister, 1995). This care and concern play an important role in encouraging feelings of psychological safety. Additionally, Kahn (1990, p. 708) found that “interpersonal relationships promoted psychological safety when they were supportive and trusting.” The results of this study conclude that employees were more open to sharing concepts and ideas about innovation in design and other important input when they trusted their managers. Lastly, Madjar and Ortiz-Walters (2009) found that a culture of trust can prove to be a predictor of psychological safety.

The concept of employee voice comes from Hirschman’s (1970) research and concludes that when employees are faced with dissatisfying conditions at work, they tend to voice their concerns about their dissatisfaction or leave the organization. Morrison and Milliken’s (2011, p. 17) review of employee voice highlights three common threads running through literature:

One important commonality is the idea of voice being an act of verbal expression, where a message is conveyed from a sender to a

recipient. Second, voice is defined as discretionary behavior. Individuals choose whether or not to engage in this behavior at any particular moment in time, a choice that is affected by a variety of factors. A third commonality is the notion of voice being constructive in its intent. The objective is to bring about improvement and positive change, not simply to vent or complain.

When subordinates feel that their managers treat them with dignity and respect throughout everyday interactions, subordinates are more likely to use voice behaviors, such as feeling comfortable speaking up and voicing their opinions. These voice behaviors are encouraged because of the employee’s perception of psychological safety that comes from feeling that their leaders are taking their needs into account (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter & Ng, 2001). When employees feel their leaders are willing to take the time to co-create meaningful and long-term professional relationships it contributes to a sense of belonging at work (Brockner, Siegel, Daly, Tyler & Martin, 1997). This interaction and development of collegial and professional relationships diminish feelings of uncertainty which helps to increase psychological safety and potentially lead to increased trust in the organization’s leadership.

The purpose of the current research is to explore how workplace culture is perceived by leaders and employees, how culture can be impacted and changed to increase employee involvement, and how employees’ feelings about psychological safety may influence their workplace. Implications related to the need for cultural reform will be discussed. Additionally, best practices to create a culture that thrives will be shared.

### **Methodology**

#### *Purpose*

The purpose of this study was to consider the research question: in what ways does work culture lead to employees feeling psychologically safe? This is a pressing

issue faced by many organizations. The research conducted helps to determine the components of work culture that should be retained, eliminated, or newly added to increase perceptions of trust, respect, and psychological safety for employees.

### Research Design

The current research used a case study to explore the research question within one organization. A 21-item survey was issued to employees of a medium-sized nonprofit company in the Midwest United States. The authors of this paper and the company's leadership created the survey instrument. To ensure content validity, the survey was shared with one additional senior manager at the company to verify the survey questions were written effectively to elicit meaningful data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013).

The survey allowed participants to rate components of the company's existing work culture, provide feedback about the work culture, and share insights regarding their feelings of psychological safety. Participants responded to these survey questions with the assurance of confidentiality. Demographic data was collected from survey participants, including age and rank within the company. The survey contained both scaled and open-ended questions.

The qualitative, open-ended questions allowed participants to express their feelings and ideas. Ten of the survey questions were qualitative and focused on how participants feel about their work culture and psychological safety at work.

Eleven of the survey questions were quantitative and included questions about the extent to which employees and leaders can impact organizational culture as well as to what extent employees know the mission, vision, and values of the organization. These quantitative questions incorporated a three-point Likert-type response scale with "to no extent," "to some extent," and "to a large extent" as response options.

### Setting and Participants

The company included in the research is a private, nonprofit organization

Table 1. Extent that Employees and Leaders Impact Culture

<b>To what extent can employees impact an organization's culture?</b>	<b>Number of Response(s)</b>	<b>Response Ratio</b>
To No Extent	1	<1%
To Some Extent	23	15.9%
To a Large Extent	74	51.3%
No Responses	46	31.9%
<b>To what extent can those in leadership roles (supervisors, managers, senior leaders, etc.) impact an organization's culture?</b>	<b>Number of Response(s)</b>	<b>Response Ratio</b>
To No Extent	0	0.0%
To Some Extent	6	4.1%
To a Large Extent	92	63.8%
No Responses	46	31.9%

that provides managerial services to organizations. In addition to departments focusing on specific products and services, the company also has divisions including administration, finance, human resources, information technology, marketing, office services, and maintenance. With approximately 250 employees, the gender split breaks down to 76% female employees, the average employee age is 50.5, and the average employee tenure is 8.3 years. The company mission is to serve the managerial needs of its members and clients.

The survey was distributed to approximately 200 current employees who work at the company's headquarters. The participants represented all levels of employees, including top management.

### Procedures

Before conducting the study, the researchers obtained written approval from the company's chief human resources officer, obtained the required National Institutes of Health (NIH) certification in protecting human participants, and obtained Institutional Review Board approval. The survey was uniquely created for the company and distributed online to employees in April 2018. Constant Contact was used as the online survey platform.

There were two steps in the survey process. Employees first received an email with a link to the confidential survey and information pertaining to informed consent. Next, a reminder email was sent to employees regarding participating

in the survey approximately one week before the survey ended.

### Results

The survey response rate was 72%, with 144 of 200 employees responding. The highest percent of survey responses were received by professionals with no managerial duties. The majority of survey respondents were between ages 45 to 64.

### Impacting Company Culture

A majority of respondents feel that employees can impact culture to a large extent, supporting the idea that employees play a direct role supporting the values and norms of the company (Table 1). In addition, almost 2/3 of respondents stated leadership can impact culture to a large extent as well. These findings relate to the standards that employees feel are conveyed by leadership and their role in fostering leadership connectivity.

Respondents had a strong knowledge of the mission, vision, and values of the company (Table 2). Of those who responded, 93% know the company's mission statement, 94% are aware of the vision of the company and 97% are familiar with the core values.

According to employees, freedom to speak at work without fear of repercussions was the top factor in defining psychological safety at work, as shown in Table 3. Displaying mutual respect for one another, having no fear of retaliation, and

Table 2. *Company Mission, Vision, and Values*

<i>Do you know your company's mission statement?</i>	<b>Number of Response(s)</b>	<b>Response Ratio</b>
Yes	90	62.5%
No	4	2.7%
Unsure	3	2.0%
No Responses	47	32.6%
<i>Do you know the vision of your company?</i>	<b>Number of Response(s)</b>	<b>Response Ratio</b>
Yes	91	63.1%
No	0	0.0%
Unsure	6	4.1%
No Responses	47	32.6%
<i>Do you know the core values of your company?</i>	<b>Number of Response(s)</b>	<b>Response Ratio</b>
Yes	93	64.5%
No	1	<1%
Unsure	3	2.0%
No Responses	47	32.6%

Table 3. *How Employees Define Psychological Safety at Work*

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>
Freedom to Speak	15
Mutual Respect	10
No Fear of Retaliation	9
No Bullying	8
No Manipulation	6
Providing a Safe Environment	6
No Discrimination	4
Employee Recognition	3
Leadership Support	3
Listen to Employees	3
Good Communication	2
Inclusive Environment	2
Respect for Privacy	2

Table 4. *What Steps Could Others Take to Make You Feel More Comfortable at Work?*

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>
Respectful Speech	14
Good Communication	10
Acceptance	9
Mutual Respect	6
Non-Preferential Treatment	5
Employee Recognition	4
Value Opinions	4
Constructive Criticism	3
Listen to Employees	3
Decrease Micro Management	2
Honesty	2
Kindness	2
Value Contributions	2

Table 5. *What steps can supervisors take to create a psychologically safe workplace for employees?*

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>
Good Communication	23
Respect	17
Value Opinions	17
Listen	14
Non-Preferential Treatment	14
Constructive Criticism	7
Continuing Education	6
Provide Support	5
Acceptance	4
Care	4
Positivity	4
Self-Awareness	4
Solicit Feedback	4

Table 6. *What steps can senior leaders take to create a psychologically safe workplace for employees?*

<b>Topic</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>
Top-Down Approach (often cited as leading by example)	11
Listen	10
Non-Preferential Treatment	9
Employee Recognition	7
Provide Support	7
Value Opinions	7
Solicit Feedback	6
Good Communication	5
Self-awareness	4
Engage	3
Mutual Respect	3
Set Expectations	3
Trust	3

no bullying were also highly rated responses.

While a majority of the company employees feel psychologically safe at work, *Table 4* showcases that good, and respectful, communication would help co-workers feel even more comfortable.

The theme of good communication and respect were often cited when discussing the role of managers in creating psychological safety at work, as shown in *Table 5*. Valuing the opinions heard and listening, were also high on the list of actions supervisors can take.

In *Table 6*, the top-down approach (often cited as leading by example), is described as one way that senior leaders can have an impact on the psychological safety of all employees. Listening and non-preferential treatment were also mentioned frequently.

The results support the idea that whether formal or informal, the reach of organizational culture can create powerful energy within an organization. Survey results indicate that organizations have the opportunity to further focus on building empowerment, recognition, role modeling, communications, and integrity of leadership in order to strengthen the psychological safety and effectiveness of the work culture. Survey responses also underscore the importance leaders play in creating and maintaining the work culture, an important element of leadership connectivity. Leaders can help ensure the culture of the organization remains intact to create a sense of purpose, vision and trust.

## Discussion

Organizational culture is a powerful mechanism which can impact employee engagement and satisfaction. Recent social movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp indicate that organizational culture can fall short of expectations, often driven by a lack of leadership and organizational vision. The consequences on employee morale can be devastating for both the individual employee and the organization at large.

This research aimed to uncover employee-driven ideas that reinforce positive communication, build a basis of trust, and help foster a sense of psychological safety in the workplace. Together, these factors can help create a culture based on positivity and productivity, both of which are found in today's most admired organizations.

## Overall Research Findings

Survey results indicate that employees feel both staff (employees) and leadership are able to impact organizational culture. Trust, integrity, and respect were noted among the most important characteristics of organizational culture, which is consistent with research related to psychological safety and employee voice (Zhou & George, 2001). Trust and respect are the cornerstones identified as the basis from which a healthy and positive culture can thrive.

Specifically related to psychological safety, professional responsibility, shared vision/values and recognition are valued most highly by employees. This may not be surprising as professional responsibility encompasses a wide range of behaviors such as accountability, appropriateness, and ownership. If these are valued and incorporated in the culture, employees feel a stronger sense of comfort sharing ideas and supporting the organizational vision (Schein, 2017).

While most employees indicated they knew the company mission, values, and vision, only about 65% could identify how their role fit within the mission. There may be an opportunity to create a stronger employee-organizational connection if employees understood how their work supported that of the organization. Doing so could also impact accountability and ownership for organizational results as well as an opportunity for greater leadership connectivity (Hurst & Hurst, 2016).

Employee recognition is the most important way to boost employee morale, which aligns with results related to psychological safety as well. Strong communication skills and professional

treatment are also frequently mentioned in terms of building employee morale. Interestingly, characteristics that impact morale are also those which impact culture, voice, and safety which shows how these qualities of work life can be interconnected.

Freedom to speak, mutual respect, and no fear of retaliation were reported as the defining characteristics of psychological safety. Leading by example, trust, respect, and positive two-way relationships can each contribute to perceived safety at work and are tools leaders can use to help create a culture where everyone feels respected and valued. Respect and trust can be fostered through effective communication and language that is respectful, appropriate, and creates a sense of acceptance. Similar to what was mentioned above, seeing how one's role fits with the larger organizational mission can create a sense of belonging and acceptance as well.

## Implications

Working together, a climate of trust and security can develop within an organization. In line with research summarized earlier in the paper, it is important for leaders to demonstrate integrity and ensure words and actions are consistent. It is imperative that leaders set the tone and standards to lead by example because they are under the close watch of employees, board members, media, and others who want to experience their effective leadership, which directly impacts work culture. Actions set the standard, so leaders must set the standard high by consistently demonstrating excellence at emulating the proper actions. Leaders should reflect on how they are leading by example and periodically assess how well they are doing. A company's leadership team will enhance the work culture and further build trust, gain influence, and inspire others as they master their own model behavior.

There is no mistaking that trust and respect are also key underpinnings in a psychologically safe workplace. Undeniably, respect, and the way employees speak to each other are vital. Also, listening and valuing opinions is essential. Managers

must foster an environment of trust and respect in ways such as keeping commitments, upholding confidential matters, speaking in a professional manner, and soliciting input from others. It is not enough that leaders act this way. Leaders must also hold employees to the same standard by addressing situations that could potentially erode trust and respect. For example, if a manager is at a meeting and observes employees talking negatively about another employee, the manager should speak up and request that the situation be addressed appropriately and when the targeted employee can join the conversation. If a manager does not call out these types of negative behaviors, they risk contributing to an environment lacking in trust and respect.

Non-preferential treatment can be very powerful in establishing a productive and psychologically safe work culture. Leaders must be mindful of fairness and equity in all situations. For example, non-smokers of a company may feel it is unfair for smokers to take more frequent breaks. If a supervisor does not address this situation, the perceived preferential treatment could interfere with work culture efforts.

Empowering employees also is important in building a psychologically safe work culture. Company leadership should look for opportunities for employees to work together to maximize ideas, talents, and teamwork, allowing employees to impact work culture. Managers should engage their team to help them shine and become energized employees, which helps to contribute to an effective and psychologically safe work culture.

### Future Direction

A number of questions still remain about creating a positive work culture. For example, psychological safety is not always sufficient by itself to support the creation and maintenance of a productive and positive work culture. Without a clear and compelling shared goal, members of a team may lack motivation to engage in learning-oriented actions, which require both effort and thought. People are more likely to offer ideas, ask for help, and seek

or provide feedback if they believe that their effort makes a difference in achieving an outcome that they care about. Creating an environment of psychological safety may be counterproductive if managers and leaders feel that this is all that is needed to promote productive and motivational culture. It is important to continue to explore the other inputs that are required to contribute to the growth of positive and productive cultures.

To develop a consistently reliable and valid measure of psychological safety, future research must continue to collect data from a variety of team and organizational settings. More specifically, the effect of psychological safety in culturally diverse teams warrants further research. Additionally, this paper addresses research from one specific organization. This research can be expanded to other industries, disciplines, and organizations to better understand the universal factors that contribute to the role of psychological safety, morale, and motivation within the cultures of varying types of organizations.

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- Lesley Page, PhD**, is an Associate Professor at Lewis University, currently serving as department chair. Prior to academia, she has over 20 years of corporate and consulting experience in human resources and organizational effectiveness across a wide range of industries such as retail, utilities, healthcare, and pharmaceuticals. Her professional experience has focused on employee and customer satisfaction measures as well as leadership coaching and development. She is a member of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, Academy of Management, and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. She holds an MA and PhD in Industrial/Organizational Psychology from DePaul University. She can be reached at [pagele@lewisu.edu](mailto:pagele@lewisu.edu).
- Sheila Boysen, PhD**, is an Associate Professor at Lewis University with a varied industry and professional background that includes supply chain and logistics, talent management, recruitment and selection, and executive coaching. Her doctoral studies at Benedictine University in Organization Development included extensive research on Coaching and Talent Management. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Marketing from the University of Illinois and an MBA from Northern Illinois. She completed her coach training education at the University of Texas at Dallas in the Executive, Professional, and Career Coaching program and received her Master Coach Certification from the International Coach Federation. She can be reached at [boysensh@lewisu.edu](mailto:boysensh@lewisu.edu).
- Terry Arya** is the chief marketing officer for Christian Brothers Services. She has a proven background in fully integrated marketing plans, business development, public relations, communications, social media, grant writing, fundraising, and business strategy. Prior, Arya owned a marketing firm. Earlier in her career, she was the Vice President of Development for Marklund, a service organization for infants, children, and adults with disabilities. Arya also spent ten years serving as the nationwide public relations director for a national healthcare finance association. Arya is a long-standing member of the American Marketing Association and United Way of Will County's Impact and Investment Committee. She also serves on the advisory board of Lewis University's Organizational Leadership Department as well as their Entrepreneurship Center. She can be reached at [Terry.Arya@cbsservices.org](mailto:Terry.Arya@cbsservices.org).
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