

Speech by Naomi Ellemers, Distinguished University Professor

Start of the Academic Year 2022-2023, 5 September 2022

1. Shared experiences:

Recently, I have been deeply moved by all the people who shared their stories with me. Like this one:

“I’d been aware for quite some time that there were problems because of a certain colleague and I wanted to deal with them. People tell me they trust my leadership style, so I thought I could handle the matter effectively. I know the rules and the people, it’s part of my position and responsibility to do that, and I understand how the organisation works. If I set a good example, it can inspire others to do the same. So I submitted a formal complaint, which was investigated by the Executive Board. I’d prepared myself well, sought advice, and coordinated with my manager. People thought it was a good idea for me to do this and wanted to support me. I was confident that I’d be successful and I really wanted to make a difference. But now I’m really disappointed in the organisation. It all took far too long. It ended up with legal proceedings, during which a lot of mistakes were made. The Executive Board never made a public statement and the perpetrator left with a pile of money. So no standard was set and it wasn’t possible to solve the problem properly. I feel let down, and I don’t trust these people any more. By wanting to solve the problem, I myself became the problem. It literally made me ill and I couldn’t work properly for a time. Ultimately, the situation only got worse for everyone. Colleagues know that I tried and they see that it didn’t work. What exactly had happened? I’m not allowed to say. But everyone knows that if I couldn’t do it, then who could? So now nobody is going to try to tackle these problems anymore.”

2. What's the problem?

Not only people who complain about social insecurity experience problems. People who wanted to solve these problems are also frustrated. Like confidential counsellors, deans, rectors, or HR staff - in all departments at all universities. They have shared very similar experiences with me.

The dozens of people I spoke to wanted to share their experiences. They were aware of the seriousness and urgency of the problem. They were unhappy with the current state of affairs. They were motivated to find a solution, and they saw this as a task that fitted in with their position in the organisation. Yet they did not succeed. They said that they did not really know what was going on. That they did not really understand what they could do about it. And they described the feelings of powerlessness when looking for solutions.

What is going on here?

3. Symptom relief

The similarities between all these experiences give a new perspective on this problem and what is needed to solve it. Because we can set up stricter rules of conduct, but what good will it do if nobody knows about them? We can send everyone on training courses, but what good is that if they avoid the awkward conversation in the workplace? And we can express our disgust when incidents come to light, but what use is that if we do not take social behaviour into account when making career decisions?

And how does it help to dwell on this issue today, and let Ellemers tell her story? These are all examples of symptom relief, which will have little effect if the underlying causes are not addressed.

4. Discomfort

After all, the problem with social safety is not only about undesirable behaviour on the shop floor. It is also about the discomfort we experience regarding this subject. As a result, we often look away from behavioural problems, justify them or take symbolic actions. But as long as we don't face and embrace that discomfort, we won't be able to see what's really going on, hear what people need, or discuss with each other how we can make that happen.

5. Costs

The same problems keep coming up again and again.

Do you know what that costs?

The focus on behaviour is not a side issue: When people use intimidation to silence others, or abuse their position to steal authorship, it touches the core of our work: a free exchange of information.

6. Why don't we do as was agreed?

When problems come to light, it often turns out that "everyone" knew, but no one intervened. How can that be? After all, there are rules that indicate what is not allowed and sanctions if people transcend these rules. Yet people often do not do what has been agreed. For example, because of group pressure, the reward structure or the way they are managed.

If only complaints and symptoms are dealt with, without these underlying processes being tackled, it's just a case of mopping up the works.

The desire to avoid discomfort thus leads to a negative spiral: the tendency to look away feeds ignorance, the tendency to justify maintains misunderstanding, and taking symbolic measures that have little effect increases feelings of powerlessness. In this way, nothing ever changes.

7. Causes and consequences of discomfort

With our colleagues, we have been researching these underlying processes and their unintended consequences for years. The experience of discomfort plays a central role in this. Our experiments with measurements of brain activity and changes in heart rate and blood pressure show when discomfort arises and what its consequences are.

We see that discomfort causes so much stress that people are unable to think of how they can solve the situation, and shut themselves off from information that could be of use to them.

This leads, among other things, to the integrity paradox: the discomfort about misconduct perpetuates problems. Because discomfort causes people to look away from wrongdoing, to blame victims or to take only symbolic action.

8. How to get into improvement mode?

Complaints and sanctions can help to monitor a bottom line. But they also put people on the defensive and in this way often do more harm than good. This will not get you into the improvement mode! I will try to explain briefly how this works. As they say in the popular Dutch TV show: "with a very simple song about a rather complicated subject. Here we go:"

9. A very simple song

Complaints are handled in strict confidence,
Preventing people to learn from past incidents.

When the main question is: who is to blame?

Obtaining proof can delay a change of game.

To do things differently, you should know where you stand:

where is the risk, what can we prevent?

Punishing misbehaviour seems resolute action,

but rewarding model behaviour, gets you more traction.

If you don't understand why things keep going wrong,

only look back to see how things are going,

hand out punishment without rewarding exemplary behaviour,

you can hardly prevent future misbehaviour.

10. Complaints and sanctions vs behavioral improvement

In short, the problem is not only that underlying structures and systems in the organisation provoke the same problems over and over again. The focus on complaints and sanctions also makes it more difficult to improve people's behaviour.

The emphasis on secrecy stands in the way of transparent standard-setting. The search for evidence directs your gaze to the past, and the focus on what is not allowed does not offer a clear vision of desired behaviour. So you keep driving around in the fog, steering via the rear-view mirror, en route to an unknown destination. That's not going to work.

The research into these processes also shows how you can get people to improve. These insights form the basis of the advisory report issued by the KNAW this summer.

The fact that we are discussing this subject so extensively today also gives hope, because finding a solution starts with talking and listening, as many of the people I spoke to pointed out. Such as this person:

"I know you're now only collecting information and you can't do anything for me;

you said that clearly at the beginning of the conversation. But I am glad I could tell you the whole story. That you just want to know what happened, without immediately passing judgment. That already helps. And maybe you can do something to make sure that other people don't have to go through this too."

This summer, I contacted the people who had shared their experiences with me to let them know that the advisory report had been completed. I was shocked to see how many of them had already left the university. They no longer had faith that improvement was possible, and felt they could not wait any longer for change to come about.

11. Underlying mechanisms.

On a day like today, it is very tempting to emphasize good intentions and show decisiveness by announcing symbolic activities. But this is of little use if they are not linked to important organizational goals, or if they are not embedded in daily routines.

Because if the preconditions for social safety are not in place, we will continue to invest in symptom relief, throwing away money and goodwill. Meanwhile, job satisfaction is spoiled, talent is wasted and scientific progress is hindered.

We cannot go on like this!

12. Science is people's work.

What is the university where we would like to work? It cannot be a place where core values such as independence, transparency and trust are under pressure due to abuses of power, speech bans or misplaced loyalties.

Because science is people's work. And only in a socially safe environment is it possible to do good science, by freely exchange knowledge and learning from each other.

This is something you have to organise. By giving greater priority to behaviour when allocating tasks, responsibilities and resources. By planning daily habits and regular processes in such a way that everyone feels safe. And by perfecting this step by step in consultation with each other.

13. Embrace the discomfort.

To be able to move from good intentions to good behaviour, we first have to embrace the discomfort. You can only learn how to do better once you face the uncomfortable truth that the current provisions may have adverse effects. You can only assign tasks, responsibilities and budgets differently to organize a safe working environment once you dare to ask the uncomfortable question of what you would be willing to do differently. You can only get where you want to be once you dare to make the uncomfortable choice to assess potential and assign leadership positions differently.

This not only requires courage, but also an open attitude. Because you will have to take a close look at all kinds of daily processes and ingrained habits one by one. So that you can critically examine whether they provoke undesirable behaviour, and whether they are still in keeping with the times.

14. The university of the future.

Scientists with knowledge of behaviour, culture and organisations can help.

Their findings help to predict which initiatives are useful and which are likely to backfire.

Their understanding of underlying mechanisms helps to connect initiatives to daily operations and to make sure details of implementation are right.

And their research allows you to test and adjust measures until you are sure they are having the intended effects.

In case you wonder where the money will come from to do all that? At least you can use the money that is currently being wasted on pointless actions and problems that have gotten out of hand.

15. Get to work!

In this backpack I put everything needed to do things differently:

- a bundle of experiences,
- money to invest in good behaviour instead of dealing with complaints about bad behaviour,
- an analysis of underlying problems with recommendations for addressing them,
- a calendar with uncomfortable questions that anyone can ask at any time,
- and a blank book with a pen to shape the university of the future together.

This new academic year is a good time to get started, so I would say: time to get to work!