

CHAPTER 2

The Permission to Challenge Assumptions

An organisation cannot adapt if reality is allowed to speak only after a decision has failed.

Most organisations say they value new thinking. They invite ideas, encourage debate and ask people to challenge the status quo.

The real test begins when the challenge concerns a senior decision, a successful legacy model or an assumption on which current plans depend.

At that moment, the organisation reveals whether challenge is genuinely part of how it learns or merely part of how it describes itself.

The assumptions that disappear from view

Every organisation operates through assumptions. Customers will behave in a certain way. A process needs a particular control. A market will reward a familiar model. A technology programme will solve an operating problem. A structure that worked before will work again.

Assumptions are not a weakness. Action would be impossible without them. The risk begins when they stop being recognised as assumptions and become treated as facts.

The most powerful assumptions are often the ones the organisation has stopped noticing.

Success can make this worse. When a model has worked for years, questioning it can sound unnecessarily negative. Experience becomes evidence that the future will resemble the past. The organisation protects what made it successful while the conditions around it quietly change.

What silence really means

A meeting can end with apparent agreement while many participants still see unresolved risks. They may stay silent because the decision feels settled, the hierarchy is clear or the cost of being wrong publicly seems higher than the cost of saying nothing.

Leaders may then read silence as support. In reality, they have learned only that people did not speak.

Silence often looks like agreement—until reality provides the feedback.

The organisation loses twice. It loses the information that was available before the decision, and it later spends time explaining why nobody raised the issue earlier.

Safety within challenge

Permission to challenge is sometimes confused with unlimited debate or freedom from accountability. It is neither. The purpose is not to make every decision comfortable. It is to make relevant information discussable before commitment becomes irreversible.

Psychological safety is not freedom from challenge. It is safety within challenge.

A constructive challenge should be specific. What assumption are we making? What evidence supports it? What has changed? What would we expect to observe if the assumption were wrong? What perspective is missing?

This moves the conversation away from personalities and towards the quality of the thinking. Disagreement becomes a way to examine reality, not a contest to defeat another person.

How leaders respond

People learn whether challenge is safe by watching what happens to the first person who tries it. A leader may formally invite dissent, but a defensive reaction, a dismissive joke or a loss of access can communicate the opposite more powerfully than any stated value.

Leaders do not need to agree with every challenge. They need to make it safe to examine one.

This does not weaken authority. Leaders remain responsible for decisions. But authority becomes more reliable when it can absorb information that complicates the preferred answer.

The most credible response may sometimes be: “I still choose this direction, but the challenge has changed how we will test it.”

Changing your mind when reality changes is not inconsistency. It is responsibility.

Challenge as an organisational capability

An adaptive organisation does not depend on a few courageous individuals repeatedly taking personal risk. It builds challenge into normal work.

Assumptions are written down. Alternative interpretations are invited. Decisions include indicators that could prove them wrong. Reviews ask not only whether execution followed the plan, but whether the plan still fits reality.

An organisation does not become adaptive by inviting ideas. It becomes adaptive by changing how it reacts to inconvenient ones.

When people are punished for revealing reality, the organisation eventually operates without it. The questions disappear, the information becomes filtered and confidence grows precisely when it should be tested.

The quality of organisational thinking is limited by the questions people are afraid to ask.

Permission to challenge assumptions is therefore not a cultural accessory to Adaptive Thinking. It is a necessary operating condition. Without it, the organisation can connect only the perspectives that confirm what it already believes.