

# Risk-Taking Culture Is Lacking in the U.S. Workplace

By Michael Laff

Many employees can recall attending meetings where managers saluted the month's top performers. Very few, if any, have attended meetings where an executive praised a daring effort that failed.

Yet for industries that pride themselves on innovation and risk taking, such gestures should not be so rare, according to a recent survey of 690 employed Americans. BlessingWhite, a Princeton-based consultancy, asked employees whether they are encouraged to take risks. To little surprise, only 26 percent of employees said they are often encouraged to take risks. A startling 41 percent said they are never asked to do so.

Without determined encouragement from above, employees are unlikely to take risks if the consequences of failure are severe.

"Most organizations are not nuclear power plants, so the consequences of risk taking are not catastrophic," says Christopher Rice, CEO of BlessingWhite.

Reversing the culture to allow innovation or encouraging candor is a huge barrier for many organizations. Many risk takers and outspoken staff members are sanctioned or even fired for breaching the corporate norms. And many leaders would be hard pressed to cite an occasion where they praised an employee's willingness to take a chance.

A number of subtle strategies could be employed to signal that an uncertain outcome may prove beneficial in the long term. An executive could encourage an employee to discuss her point of view in advance of

a meeting even if the executive holds an opposing view. When teams meet to discuss adverse results, managers should speak in positive terms, Rice suggests, and acknowledge that a product or initiative did not meet expected goals while encouraging staff to keep trying.

With the high aversion to risk, it is a wonder there is any innovation in business at all.

"Thomas Edison once said, 'I did not fail; I just found 10,000 ways that did not work,'" Rice says. "Unfortunately, organizations view it as 10,000 failures."

The acceptance of risk taking is closely tied to speaking freely about office policies, another area where most organizations fare poorly. BlessingWhite recently asked employees whether it is safe to speak up about issues in the office. Even among organizations considered high performing, only 40 percent of respondents said it's safe to speak openly at their workplaces.

While coaching a senior executive at a large advertising company, Rice noted that one manager who frequently spoke up in team meetings was being targeted for dismissal by the chief executive because her tone of questioning was considered abrasive. Rice advised his client to offer coaching to the manager instead of terminating her. After six months of coaching, the manager was promoted to lead a division.

Women reported being asked to take risks less often than men. Similarly, 35- to 45-year-old staff members reported that they were encouraged to gamble more often than younger employees or older colleagues.

Rice views that gap between men and women as well as the gap among various age groups as a matter of perception rather than

## The BIG Number

# 41%

percent of employees report never being asked to take risks by their managers.

### >> Does your manager encourage you to look for new solutions or take risks?

Never .....	41%
Sometimes .....	33%
Often .....	26%

Source: BlessingWhite 2007

### Fascinating Facts

>> Risk taking tends to be encouraged most often among employees in the Northeastern United States and in metropolitan areas as well as those with higher household incomes and more education.

>> For those employees whose managers encourage risk taking, 50 percent receive praise when things work out well, 35 percent receive neither praise nor criticism, and 9 percent receive outright criticism for their efforts.

Source: BlessingWhite 2007

reality. He believes that as corporations have not succeeded in advancing women up the ranks, many women have turned conservative.

Technology companies were the only field that rated high among organizations that encouraged staff to take risks.

**Michael Laff** is senior associate editor of T+D; [mlaff@astd.org](mailto:mlaff@astd.org).





**YES!**

I want a subscription for only \$99 (USD), \$125 (USD) Canada/Mexico, or \$165 (USD) International to *T+D* magazine—12 monthly issues that keep me at the forefront of workplace learning and performance.

**Order Information**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Title: \_\_\_\_\_ Company: \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_ City: \_\_\_\_\_  
State/Province: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip/Postal Code: \_\_\_\_\_  
Country: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Fax: \_\_\_\_\_

**Check One:**     \$99 (USA)                       \$125 (Canada/Mexico)                       \$165 (International)  
 VISA                       MasterCard                       Amex                       Discover                       Check

Card Number: \_\_\_\_\_ Expiration Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

**Please fax this completed form to 1.703.683.9591  
or mail with a check payable to *T+D* at the address below.**

Orders are processed within three business days. If you have any questions,  
please contact us at [subscriberservice@astd.org](mailto:subscriberservice@astd.org)

**T+D**, P.O. Box 1567; Merrifield, Virginia, 22116-9812, USA

Phone: 703.683.8100 / Fax: 703.683.9591

Rates valid through 12/31/07. Subject to change thereafter.  
If at any time you are not satisfied with your *T+D* subscription, you may cancel and receive  
a refund on all unserved issues. Your subscription to *T+D* may be a tax deductible business expense.  
Please allow 6-8 weeks to receive your first issue.

010713.63250

