

# Polaris Corporate Risk Management

*Leading with Empathy, Accountability, Resilience*



**Laura Bolger**

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Harvard Business School Professor Amy Edmondson has [found](#) that a “psychologically safe work environment” – an environment in which teams feel free “to take risks, to express their ideas and concerns, [ask] questions, and to admit mistakes... without fear of negative consequences” – promotes team engagement and motivation. Simply, a culture of constant improvement starts with empathy; employees must feel that their perspectives are heard and understood by their managers. Under this paradigm, mistakes are not met with admonishment, but encouragement – they are necessary steps toward improvement. Empathetic instruction emphasizes potential, and that potential motivates employees to greater heights.

Laura Bolger, Managing Director of Investigations & Intelligence, Polaris Corporate Risk Management, lives by this approach. “Culture is often seen as corollary to a workplace’s activity,” Laura notes, “or as a by-product of your workflow, business goals, and performance standards. I disagree: in my experience, how you do the work is as important as the end product itself.” Laura has found that the best leaders “model empathy, accountability, resilience,” and that high standards of quality follow naturally.”

While her approach has improved outcomes for Polaris’ clients, Laura’s commitment to this ethos is personal, as well as professional. Her philosophy is the product of two – seemingly contradictory – early life experiences: her parents’ experiences leading an off-Broadway theatre company, and her time playing competitive soc-

cer. “These experiences exposed me to different models of leadership,” explains Laura. “I spent countless childhood weekends at my parents’ rehearsals and performances. I had a front-row seat to their craft and talent – and to their discipline. I don’t remember the sets or costumes as much as I remember their command over the many logistical challenges of staging a show.”

Even as a child, Laura respected how this careful alchemy of decisions could manifest something beyond the capacity of any individual contributor. The experience lent Laura a unique eye for leadership strategy – a skill that followed her to college, where she competed on several high-level soccer teams. “I heard parents shout criticisms from the bleachers, and saw how they affected players’ psychologies. I was lucky that my sideline support – my father, a former collegiate athlete – understood the pressure I was facing,” she says. “Rather than criticizing my technique, my father related to me, telling me stories of his own time as a college athlete, and the mistakes he made. He didn’t list my faults, but reminded me of my ambitions. There was no criticism – only encouragement.”

These lessons informed Laura’s current leadership at Polaris. “On a personal level,” she notes, “leading with empathy feels intuitive and straightforward – even cliché. So many workplaces claim to do the same, though with varying degrees of success and sincerity. But my approach is based on research like Professor Edmondson’s, as well as compassion.” While Laura acknowledges that an employee’s psychological safety does not guarantee their success, she contends that an empathetic approach helps them progress. “Empathy,” says Laura, “ensures reliable improvement. I want employees to imagine the quality of work they could be achieving in time, once they’ve refined their abilities. That can’t happen if they linger on past mistakes.”

But what do you do when an employee does grow overwhelmed? At Polaris – where employees are constantly managing high-pressure projects – it’s easy to get discouraged. Laura understands this feeling – both

professionally and personally. “As a mother,” says Laura, “it’s easy to feel like you’re always a step behind.” Just as Laura’s parents informed her initial leadership, Laura’s current approach is informed by her status as a working mom – though Laura emphasizes that “all moms, full-time job or not, are working moms.” All moms, says Laura, “are experts at balancing and addressing many needs at once. The key is to celebrate progress whenever you can.” By emphasizing progression – and not binary, point-in-time assessments of success – Laura flips the script on traditional narratives of corporate achievement. “Instead of asking ‘What did I get done?’” says Laura, “you can ask yourself, ‘What did I move forward? What did I progress?’ The reality is that there will always be more to do – but that also means that there’s always somewhere to start.”

At Polaris, the team’s immediate success starts with Laura, and how she holds herself accountable. “As a manager, I owe my team proactive and effective communication,” says Laura. Clarity is central to her role, as she defines each project’s precise, unique scope of work. This scope dictates Polaris’ searches, schedule, and form. “Any ambiguity trickles down,” Laura explains. “If I don’t fulfill my responsibilities, my team won’t have the understanding or flexibility they need to address a client’s request.” Early transparency helps Laura articulate a client’s needs to her team – likely during their weekly team meetings, which offer Laura space to personally address her team’s current stresses, looming deadlines, and project concerns, as well as beneficial investigative strategies. “It is my responsibility to make sure that my team is supported as they balance their workload,” Laura says, “I need to be accountable; to do everything I can to set them up for success.”

“Accountability also demands reliability,” says Laura. “Team members should be able to rely on each other – and me – for consistent, dependable support. Every report is a product of collaboration, and successful partnerships require transparency, communication, and diligence.” This is most evident in Polaris’ robust quality control process, in which employees re-

view a colleague’s work in detail prior to delivery. The reviewer corrects clarity issues and cross-checks supporting documents to resolve questions, make suggestions, and streamline reports. While this process helps deliver consistently high-quality reporting, Laura’s primary motivation for instituting this process was to ensure that each team member is accountable for the others – herself included.

The process of drafting, progressing, fact-checking, and delivering Polaris reports can feel exhaustive and exhausting. To prevent burnout and frustration, Laura promotes resilience – at the individual level, and across whole teams. Teams must be equipped to sustain questions, criticisms, and strategy changes. If, for example, an employee fears they’ll miss a deadline, it’s up to Laura to plot a more efficient, resilient solution. “As a team leader, I see the concerns of our employees as an opportunity to demonstrate our flexibility and adaptability,” says Laura. “We have a team of diverse perspectives that – with the right workflow – can meet any challenge. I encourage candid dialogue because I trust my team to rearrange itself for any challenge,” she adds.

“At Polaris,” says Laura, “the quality of each employee’s work product is equal to the support that they receive.” By centering empathy, transparency, and resilience, Laura and her team can always find a path forward – however complex a project might be.

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*Laura’s job is to define expectations and focuses with the Client and, in doing so, prime her team for success. By centering empathy, transparency, and resilience, Laura instills professional grit and competence in her team, and helps their investigative skills grow with each successive engagement.*

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